FILTH, LIMINALITY, AND ABJECTION IN CHARLES DICKENS'S *BLEAK HOUSE*

BY ROBERT E. LOUGY

I have avoided sexuality, but filth is unavoidable and asks to be treated humanely. —Sigmund Freud in a 6 September 1899 letter to Wilhelm Fleiss

And Oppenheimer said, It is merde. I will use the French. J. Robert Oppenheimer. It is merde. He meant something that eludes naming is automatically relegated, he is saying, to the status of shit. You can’t name it. It’s too big or evil or outside your experience. It’s also shit because it’s garbage, it’s waste material. —Don DeLillo

Writing of Engels’s *The Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844*, Steven Marcus points out that middle-class consciousness around the 1840s and 1850s underwent a rather drastic change, disturbed in large part, as Marcus puts it, by the fact that “millions of English men, women, and children were living in shit.” We can, however, read a surprisingly large number of Victorian novels written during this period without once encountering those conditions recorded by Friedrich Engels, Henry Mayhew, Edwin Chadwick, and others. When Nicholas Higgins takes off his boots, for example, before entering the Hale household in Elizabeth Gaskell’s *North and South* (1854), a novel that draws extensively upon Gaskell’s own firsthand familiarity with Manchester, the same city that provides the material for Engels’s essay, we may suspect that he does so because he has been tromping through those streets that Mayhew and Engels write of, but the novel does not tell us so. On the other hand, we cannot read much of Dickens without becoming aware of the general foulness and smelliness of the world he describes, and thus readers have paid attention to what he has to say, turning their attention not only towards his excremental vision but also towards the ways in which he is situated within the age’s larger concerns with matters of sanitation and disease. Since this essay is concerned

with bad smells and other unpleasant things, I would like to map out briefly the distinctions between the directions of my inquiry and those of earlier ones, beginning with two studies which, although pursuing questions in some respects quite different from my own, nevertheless raise a number of issues that I too hope to examine.

Arguing that it was in “the reforming text as much as in the novel that the nineteenth-century city was produced as the locus of fear, disgust and fascination,” Peter Stallybrass and Allon White in their essay, “The City: the Sewer, the Gaze and the Contaminating Touch,” range over a number of writers, including Mayhew, Chadwick, Engels, and Freud as well as various parliamentary reports, examining the ways in which the double impulses of disgust and desire are registered in what they identify as the “transcodings of psychic desire, concepts of the body and structuring of social formation across the city’s topography.” Theoretically grounding their essay largely upon Bakhtin’s inquiries into the nature of the grotesque and the carnivalesque, Stallybrass and White are not primarily concerned with the question of abjection or with Bleak House, but they are interested, as am I, in the instability of the boundaries between the named and unnamed. They note of Mayhew’s “London Labour,” for example, that it covers “not all forms of labour but those forms which, lying on the margins of the nameable . . . characteristically embody the carnivalized picturesque.” Similarly, remarking on Engels and Dickens’ Little Dorrit, they observe how “the representation of filth which traverses their work is unstable, sliding between social, moral and psychic domains.”

Drawing upon Norman O. Brown’s Life Against Death: The Psychoanalytical Meaning of History (1959) and its examination of Freud’s inquiry into the psychoanalytical significance of excrement in the general neurosis called human culture, Michael Steig’s “Dickens’s Excremental Vision” is concerned more with the un-speakable than the unnamable, locating in Bleak House and, to a lesser extent in A Christmas Carol, a sustained excremental vision that brilliantly exposes the diseased state of a constipated body politic. As Steig observes, “the imagery of anality, and its structural ramifications in the multiple progressions from blockage to actual or potential explosion, represents a level of unity deeper than any previously brought to light.” Such images, he notes, present us with a vivid and intense vision of “the psychological and physical
consequences of industrial and urban progress, and the forcefulness of the sense of disgust and indignation conveyed in the novel. Steig's essay moves in several directions akin to my own: Freud, for example, figures prominently in both, and Steig looks at some of the same cityscapes and episodes as I do, such as Tom-All-Alone's and Krook's spontaneous combustion. However, our essays approach the question of waste from rather different theoretical perspectives. Steig does a marvelous job in reminding us of the continuing power of Dickens's art and of how it so often surprises us by anticipating some of our own age's most pressing concerns or anxieties regarding civilization and its discontents; but since his 1970 essay precedes Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror* and her work on abjection by a decade, he does not address those questions involving the relationship between filth, the feminine, and the symbolic order raised by Kristeva, whereas it is precisely such questions, among others, that drive the directions of my inquiry.

In addition to Marcus's important essay on Engels, other readers have also turned their attention to questions involving disease and sanitation reform in the nineteenth century and to the ways in which Dickens's fiction figures into such inquiries. The value of these studies arises in part from their ability to situate themselves within a broad framework of sociological and economic concerns that enable us, for instance, to modify or clarify our reading of literary texts or to better understand Dickens's shifting or ambiguous relationship to various cultural sites such as plagues, urban ghettos, and diseased bodies. I am persuaded that although the cultures which they interrogate are quite different from Dickens's culture, Mary Douglas, Robert Hertz, and David Howes, in their anthropological investigations of olfaction, liminality, and exclusion, can nevertheless help bring the often disturbing richness and depth of Dickens's fiction into sharper relief.

What I hope to do, then, is to consider the significance of filth in *Bleak House*, especially its presence in the form of excrement, mud, ooze, and corpses—namely, those sites of cultural panic...

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1. Excrement, mud, ooze, and corpses provoked panic. This anxiety, flowing from the peak of the social pyramid, sharpened intolerance of stench.

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identified by Alain Corbin. The directions of my inquiry will be
dreecfold: first, I want to look at how such sites figure into
Dickens's interrogation of liminality, the ways in which we find the
boundaries, thresholds, and margins of the novel violated or
threatened by that which remains, to draw upon the epigraph from
DeLillo, the unnamed, that which eludes naming. Secondly, I will
consider how these sites share, among other things, an intimate
connection with the sense of smell and thus with death and sex, as
I am convinced, along with Hans J. Rindisbacher, that "no discursive
evaluation has been capable of severing the link of this sense
[of smell] with its most archaic origins in sexuality and death." 8
And, finally, I will be examining the ways in which the abject as
Kristeva has spoken of it, particularly its relationship to sexual
difference and the feminine, is implicated in all of this. In speaking
of George Eliot, Douglas, an anthropologist, notes that ambiguous
species "provoke essayists to elegant reflections," and ambiguous
species, I am arguing, provoke Dickens to elegant reflections in
Bleak House as well, albeit on rather inelegant subjects. 9 These
three avenues of inquiry, identified sequentially but interwoven
throughout the essay, find their common center in a scene in
chapter 16, of Bleak House ("Tom-all-Alone's") in which Jo shows
a disguised Lady Dedlock the site of Nemo's grave in the pauper's
burial ground. And while towards the end of this paper I will
examine the scene in chapter 59 in which Esther comes upon her
dead mother in this same burial ground, much of this essay will be
looking at this earlier scene and the three participants in it,
including Nemo himself.

To paraphrase Freud's memorable formulation, I am suggesting
that if we wish to talk about Bleak House, filth is unavoidable, but
in this case sexuality cannot be avoided either. Drawing upon
Douglas's work as well as the insights provided by Freudian theory,
Kristeva has pointed out that filth is not a quality in itself, but
rather is that which has been "jettisoned" beyond certain bound-
daries or margins; and, as she notes, fiction invariably figures into
such an inquiry. She writes, "It does not unfold without a share of
fiction, the nucleus of which, drawn from actuality and the
subjective experience of the one who writes, is projected upon
data from the life of other cultures." 10 Although Dickens is writing
about England in Bleak House, Kristeva's remarks about alterity
are still pertinent, for Dickens's focus is on the unfamiliar and the
strange. "Whatever becomes too familiar," suggests Jacques Derrida,
“can always be suspected of jealousy keeping a secret, of standing
guard over the unexpected,” and Dickens’s fiction often asks us to
look behind the familiar to discover the secret, the unexpected.11
In his final prefatory remarks to Bleak House, for example,
Dickens tells us that “I have purposely dwelt upon the romantic
side of familiar things,” thereby alerting us to the fact that his
novel will be situated at the site of Freud’s uncanny, the unfamiliar
in the familiar, “das Unheimliche” in “das Heimliche.” Although
the uncanny possesses “a secret nature,” Freud tells us, it is “in
reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and
old—established in the mind and which has become alienated
from it only through the process of repression.”12 In Bleak House,
boundaries and borders bleed into one another and signifiers are
invested with both the presence and elusiveness of odors them-
selves, and as Robin Lydenberg has reminded us recently, the
uncanny is intimately connected with the loss or collapse of
boundaries: “what is most intimately known and familiar,” she
writes, “is always already divided within by something potentially
alien and threatening,” and “such a blurring of boundaries is
characteristic of those phenomena that give rise to uncanny fear.”13
Like Freud, I hope to treat the subject of filth humanely; but
however we treat it, Bleak House makes it impossible for us to
ignore it, for from its opening pages, it rubs our noses in this
quotidian muck:

Dogs, indistinguishable in mire. Horses, scarcely better; splashed
to their very blinkers. Foot passengers, jostling one another’s
umbrellas, in a general infection of ill temper, and losing their
foot-hold at street-corners, where ten of thousands of other foot
passengers have been slipping and sliding since the day broke (if
this day ever broke), adding new deposits to the crust upon crust
of mud. (B, 49)

Snagsby walks through Tom-all-Alone’s, negotiating “the middle of
a villainous street, undrained, unventilated, deep in black mud and
corrupt water,” confronting “such smells and sights that he, who
has lived in London all his life, can scarce believe his senses” (B,
364). Things in Bleak House are variously slimy, sticky, runny—
oozing through the crevasses and cracks of a decaying world whose
surface has been pockmarked by escaping gases and the viscous
liquids of putrefaction. The steps leading to the burial ground
where Esther’s father lies buried and her mother lies dead are

Robert E. Lougy
“drenched in a fearful wet of such a place, which oozed and splashed down everything” \((B, 868)\). Whatever physical distinctions might exist between mud, ooze, and excrement become blurred in the panic-driven semantic coding of the nineteenth century, as each becomes associated, like corpses, with disease and bad smells.\(^{14}\)

And of all our senses, the sense of smell tends to make us the most uncomfortable. As Corbin notes, Kant excluded the sense of smell from his aesthetics, and Freud speaks of it as the least refined, the most animal-like of our senses, linking it directly to anality and repression.\(^{15}\) As early as 1897, Freud argues in one of his letters that “something organic plays a part in repression,” suggesting that repression might very well be linked to the change played by sensations of smell:

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\text{upright walking, nose raised from the ground, at the same time a number of formerly interesting sensations attached to the earth becoming repulsive—by a process still unknown to me. [He turns up his nose = he regards himself as something particularly noble.]
Now, the zones which no longer produce a release of sexuality in normal and mature human beings must be the region of the anus and of the mouth and throat.}
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Repression takes place, he suggests, because we cannot tolerate certain smells or memories:

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\text{To put it crudely, the memory actually stinks just as in the present the object stinks, and in the same manner as we turn away our sense organ [the head and nose] in disgust, the preconscious and the sense of consciousness turn away from the memory. This is repression.}\(^{16}\)
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Even in these early letters, however, Freud has already identified the dialectical nature of smell, speaking of its double impulses of disgust and desire. Desire is still there, linked to smell—what he identifies as “a number of formerly interesting sensations”—but it has been repressed; like Freud’s unnamed gentleman, we have turned our noses away from it, acting as if we are “something particularly noble.”

But smells still get through, especially those of death, excrement, and sex, and they permeate \textit{Bleak House}, filling our nostrils, lingering on our lips and tongues. At Chesney Wold, for example,
“the little church in the park is mouldy; the oaken pulpit breaks out into a cold sweat; and there is a general smell and taste as of the ancient Dedlocks in their graves” (B, 56). Some texts are more haunted by death than others, returning as if caught up in the grip of some monster from the land of Freud’s uncanny to sites or scenes of death and the dead, and Bleak House is one of the most death-haunted novels in British literature. “They dies everywheres,” Jo notes, “they dies in their lodgings . . . and they dies down in Tom-all-Alone’s in heaps. They dies more than they lives, according to what I see” (B, 488). But Bleak House is also a comic novel, structured in fact around an extended joke about death—“Jarndyce and Jarndyce,” we hear, “has passed into a joke. That is the only good that has ever come of it. It has been a death to many, but it is a joke in the profession” (B, 52). The joke, Freud tells us in Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious, is often violent and abusive, evidence of that human perversity or profanity that makes us want to blaspheme the sacred or violate the taboo—to make love in a confessional booth, for example, or, as in the case of Flannery O’Connor’s Wise Blood, to steal a mummified god from its display case.17

Such a joke is found early in the novel when a nervous surgeon warns the men gathered around Nemo’s body that Krook’s cat must not be left alone in the room with the corpse:

“Don’t leave the cat there!” says the surgeon: “that won’t do!” Mr. Krook therefore drives her out before him; and she goes furtively downstairs, winding her lithe tail and licking her lips. (B, 194)

Any doubts we may have as to why the cat is chased from the room are dispelled when we hear of her “licking her lips.” If Nemo’s corpse is regarded in a medical light by the surgeon, it is viewed in a culinary light by the cat, and during the course of the novel, it will inhabit even more sites, as its status or condition as corpse changes. I would like to consider the figure of Nemo’s dead body in the section that follows, not so much as Esther’s father or Lady Dedlock’s lover—although it matters, of course, that he was both, but precisely as corpse or cadaver.

II.

No, as in true theatre, without makeup or masks, refuse and corpses show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live.
Filth, Liminality, and Abjection in Bleak House

These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border. Such wastes drop so that I might live, until, from loss to loss, nothing remains in me and my entire body falls beyond the limit—cadere, cadaver.18

In Bleak House, smells move at will across boundaries or borders, threatening to smudge or blur desired distinctions. Bleak House is a novel obsessed with the possible failure or collapse of barricades or gates, haunted by the fear that what does not belong might somehow find a way in, that the unnamed, the non-thing, might find its way into the realm of the named and acknowledged; and in this respect, the opening paragraph’s “Megalosaurus, forty feet long or so, waddling like an elephantine lizard up Holborn Hill” (B, 49), appears as a kind of free floating signifier, identifying that which is out of place, blurring or complicating our sense of the place and order of things.

“It is,” David Howes notes, “in the rites and representations which attach to the events of birth and death that the connection between smell and liminality emerges most clearly,” and the center of Bleak House is occupied by two such events—Esther’s birth and Captain Hawdon’s death. It is at these sites and within those patterns of plot set into motion by them that the questions of thresholds and boundaries are at once most tenuous and also most sharply pronounced. For in both cases, that which has been repressed, hidden, or buried somehow emerges and, by doing so, threatens to collapses or disturb those categories or distinctions that enable society to bestow order and coherence on the world. Captain Hawdon enters the novel as neither dead nor alive, but rather as an intermediary figure, situated in a transitional state between the two, still in the process of crossing the threshold between these two worlds. As such, he is a liminal figure, what Howes refers to as a “corpse god,” offensive and feared not so much for hygienic reasons as because he is still transitional, confusing or smudging those categories of life and death.19 Such a figure, as Hertz observes, occupies a “confused period,” for it exists among the living in a “somewhat illegitimate and clandestine” fashion: “the stay of the soul among the living is somewhat illegitimate and clandestine. It lives, as it were, marginally in the two worlds: if it ventures into the afterworld, it is treated there like

480 Filth, Liminality, and Abjection in Bleak House
an intruder; here on earth it is an importunate guest whose proximity is dreaded.\textsuperscript{20}

In this respect, the scene with Krook’s cat is especially telling, for the cat and the surgeon are both aware of Nemo’s ambiguous status; but while one hopes to take advantage of this ambiguity by dining upon it, the latter does his best to insure Nemo’s intact state. But in \textit{Bleak House}, the processes of nature and the condition of burial grounds in nineteenth-century England conspire to frustrate the surgeon’s desire. Writing of the Ole Ngaju tribe of Indonesia, Hertz tells of how they seal their dead in a container so that

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the evil power which resides in the corpse during putrefaction and which is linked with the smells must not be allowed to escape and strike the living, but by the same token, they also make sure that the putrid matter can escape in some way (draining them into the ground or by collecting them in an earthenware vessel).
\end{quote}

In this way, he points out, the deceased can be freed of “mortuary infection.”\textsuperscript{21} But mortuary infection and the evil power associated with it are not contained or controlled in \textit{Bleak House}, for the corpse, or rather its “putrid matter,” does escape. Dickens is explicit about this point. Nemo is buried in the pauper’s cemetery, his body lowered down “a foot or two” in “a hemmed-in churchyard, pestiferous and obscene, whence malignant diseases are communicated to the bodies of our dear brothers and sisters who have not departed” (\textit{B}, 202). In such an arena, “every poisonous element of death in action [is] close on life” (\textit{B}, 202). Jo points out Nemo’s grave to a disguised Lady Dedlock, stressing its shallowness as he tells her how they had to “stamp” on the body to get it in the grave: “Over yinder. Among them piles of bones, and close to that there kitchen winder! They put him very nigh the top. They was obliged to stamp upon it to git it in. I could unkiver it for you with my broom, if the gate was open” (\textit{B}, 278). At this point, Lady Dedlock shrinks “into a corner of that hideous archway, with its deadly stains contaminating her dress; and putting out her two hands, and passionately telling him to keep away from her, for he is loathsome to her” (\textit{B}, 278). I will return to Lady Dedlock and her “deadly stains”; but for now I want to point out that containment of the dead in \textit{Bleak House} is at best ineffectual, and if we find in Chesney Wold “a general smell and taste as of the ancient
Dedlocks in their graves” (B, 56), similar smells and tastes pervade much of the novel’s landscape. Krook’s cat haunts this text, Lewis Carroll’s Cheshire cat cast, as it were, for a Stephen King novel, licking her lips and lusting, like the rat, after forbidden tastes. The corpse “is the most sickening of wastes,” Kristeva writes, “a border that has encroached on everything.” It is “the utmost of abjection . . . death infecting life,” and in this case, the infection from Nemo’s corpse, insufficiently or shallowly buried, spills easily over into life. Nemo or rather Nemo’s remains escape, aided by the emissary from the dead, staining whatever comes into contact with it. Graham Benton has suggested that “Nemo’s dead body is likened to the remains of a lit candle: yellow, waxy, and ultimately spent, he has been consumed by the polluted atmosphere that has refused to sustain him,” but the inquest scene and the pauper’s graveyard episode suggest instead that Nemo has not been spent, that potency is still attached to the site of his corpse by virtue of its capacity to both change and effect change around it. It is neither alive nor wholly, that is skeletally, dead, but somewhere between the two, still oozing and flowing.

If Nemo inhabits the realm of the taboo, threatening the boundaries or borders of the living because he is neither alive nor sufficiently dead, Jo inhabits a similar status. Like Nemo, he too is filth, “dirty, ugly, disagreeable to all the senses, in body a common creature of the common streets,” a site that attracts those symptoms of the streets he inhabits—“homely filth begrimes him, homely parasites devour him, homely sores are in him, homely rags are on him” (B, 696). Dirt, Douglas argues, is “matter out of place,” and whatever else Jo might be, he is matter perpetually out of place, told throughout the novel to move on, to keep moving on. The constable complains that Jo, “although he’s repeatedly told to, won’t move on” (B, 319), but as Jo tells Snagsby, “I’m always a-moving on, sir . . . I’ve always been a-moving and a-moving on, ever since I was born” (B, 319). Jo’s job as street sweep suggests that he belongs to that group that Corbin identifies as “the city’s untouchables,” those “comrades in stench, the people who worked with slime, rubbish, excrement, and sex.” And like Freud’s gentleman, most of the people who see Jo turn up their noses, their delicacy offended by his presence. Jo, the narrator tells us, imagines himself more closely connected to horses and dogs than “to the superior beings in my shape, whose delicacy I offend!” (B, 274)
Again, like Nemo’s corpse, Jo’s presence occupies the realm of taboo. “Odor (like dirt),” writes Howes, “is that which must not be included if a pattern is to be maintained,” and it is primarily within the fields of odor or dirt that Jo inhabits the world of Bleak House.26 Kristeva’s remarks about the abject are particularly helpful here, especially her discussion of how the abject is intimately connected with the symbolic order. For Kristeva, as for Lacan, the symbolic order is “the dependence and articulation of the speaking subject, in the order of language,” and it is precisely the abject that lays bare “the objective frailty of symbolic order.”27

As readers have noted, the world of Bleak House is often a rather shattered or tattered affair. Michael Ragussis observes, for example, that the novel presents us with a “world where signifier becomes an unreadable abbreviation, never quite taking us back to the original whole: in short, it is a trace, to use Derrida’s term and Dickens.”28 Jo and Krook especially live in a world in which signifiers are forever unreadable, a series of mysterious hieroglyphs whose referents and meanings remain inaccessible. In reflecting on Jo’s life, the narrator observes how strange it must be “to shuffle through the streets, unfamiliar with the shapes and in utter darkness as to the meaning, of those mysterious symbols, so abundant over the shops, and the corner of streets, and on the doors, and in the windows” (B, 274). But by the same token, Jo too is an ambiguous signifier by virtue of those smells or stenches that cling to him. Smell signs, Howes suggests, “do not have the same logical/semantic structure as linguistic signs. This is because smells are traces which, unlike words, only partially detach themselves from the world of objects to which they refer.” Thus, he points out, “matter and meaning become in a sense miscible fluids in so far as smells are concerned.” “Odours are never ‘in place,’” he adds, “because they always escape from their objects,” or as George Eliot suggests in Middlemarch when comparing prejudices to “odorous bodies,” they “have a double existence both solid and subtle—solid as the pyramids, subtle as the twentieth echo of an echo, or as the memory of hyacinths which once scented the darkness.”29 Just as Nemo as corpse or waste inhabits an ambiguous state throughout the novel, neither wholly alive nor dead, Jo too inhabits similar spaces, never in place insofar as he is identified with those smell signs that cling to him and emanate from him. Like the corpse, Jo is thus a site of contagion and disease, that which must be moved on.

Robert E. Lougy

483
Death is a dirty business and Jo, at ease among the corpses in the burial ground, is akin to the corpse in that he too inhabits the realm of the taboo and is thus a producer of anxiety. "He’s not safe, you know," Skimpole notes of Jo, "there’s a very bad sort of fever about him" (B, 489), telling Jarndyce that "I recommend your turning him out before he gets still worse" (B, 490). And while Skimpole may be unusually callous in his attitudes towards Jo (and others), the fact remains that Dickens’s text participates in what Corbin describes as the nineteenth century’s “great dream of disinfection and the new intolerances, of the implacable return of excrement, the cesspool epic,” while at the same time, let me add, also being one of the age’s most scathing critiques of such dreams or fantasies.30 “A successful work,” Theodor Adorno writes, “is not one which resolves objective contradictions in a spurious harmony, but one which expresses the idea of harmony negatively by embodying the contradictions, pure and uncompromised, in its innermost structure,” and in this respect, as well as in others, Bleak House is an eminently successful work.31

Thus while the text mourns Jo’s death and condemns those various forces that have conspired to bring it about, it also kills him off, finding no way of accommodating him or keeping him alive. Like Nemo, Jo must be repressed, buried, consigned to a category that will finally assume some stability, settling into its proper or consigned space or place. But then again, the categories of life and death become muddled, confused, ambiguous in Jo’s presence, just as they are in the presence of Nemo or the graveyard. In the burial grounds, “every villainy of life in action [is] close on death, and every poisonous element in death in action [is] close on life” (B, 202), and we also find this ambiguity, this collapse of categories and distinctions, in Jo as well: “Jo lives—that is to say, Jo has not yet died—in a ruinous place, known to the like of him by the name of Tom-all-Alone’s” (B, 272). As such, Jo is an extraneousness that is very much a part of that which wants to exclude or deny him. As Kristeva points out, abjection by its very nature is “coextensive with social and symbolic order,” and thus we encounter the abject “as soon as the symbolic and/or social dimension of man is constituted.”32 While it is precisely these dimensions that want to contain and control both Nemo’s corpse and Jo, the abject, testifying to the ineffectuality of any attempt to create wholly stable and fixed boundaries, frustrates their efforts—there is, we hear, “not an atom of Tom’s slime, not a cubic inch of any
pestillential gas in which he lives, not one obscenity or degradation about him, not an ignorance, not a wickedness . . . but shall work its retribution” (B, 683, my emphasis).

III.

There do exist unmistakable links between excreta, decay, and sexuality.

Georges Bataille

Along with Nemo and Jo, there is, of course, a third participant in this burial ground scene, Lady Dedlock herself. I want to turn to her now, but in a somewhat indirect way, first looking at Krook’s spontaneous combustion, or more precisely at what remains of Krook after his combustion, and also at his cat once more, considering the ways in which their presence is entangled with that of Lady Dedlock’s and how such an entangling can help shed light on her problematic status in the novel. Mindful of Dickens’s reference to “Tom’s slime,” I also want to consider the presence of slime, for although Bleak House is in some respects a novel congested with slime, the scene involving Krook’s spontaneous combustion is still extraordinarily slimy. Not yet realizing he is in the presence of Krook’s remains, represented throughout the scene as both solid and liquid, Guppy stares aghast at some “stuff” on his coat sleeve that will not come off, something that “smears, like black fat” (B, 505): “a thick, yellow liquor [that] defiles them, which is offensive to the touch and sight and more offensive to the smell. A stagnant, sickening oil, with some natural repulsion in it that makes them both shudder,” that “slowly drips and creeps away down the bricks; here, lies in a little thick nauseous pool.” “This is a horrible house,” cries Guppy, “give me some water, or I shall cut my hand off,” as he “washes and rubs, and scrubs, and smells, and washes” (B, 509). Or as Sartre puts it, “I want to let go of the slimy,” but instead “it sticks to me, it draws me, it sucks at me.” In her study of dirt and pollution, Mary Douglas calls our attention to “the marvelous reflections to which Sartre is provoked by the idea of stickiness as an aberrant fluid or a melting solid.” The English translator of Being and Nothingness, however, translates “visqueux” as “slimy,” noting that although the French word “at times comes close to the English sticky . . . the figurative meaning of ‘slimy’ appears to be identical in both languages.”
Taking as his project the question of “what mode of being is symbolized by the slimy,” Sartre notes that “the slimy reveals itself as essentially ambiguous because “its fluidity exists in slow motion; there is a sticky thickness in its liquidity.” Slime, in other words, is neither liquid nor solid, but something in between, something that defies or escapes both categories. In the midst of liquid (for example, our body immersed in a tub of water) or in the presence of a solid, we are always aware of our facticity, our own solidity, but this is not so in the case of the slimy. Slime is “an aberrant fluid,” the “revenge of the In-itself,” in that there is always the feeling that it might absorb us, that we will not be able to get rid of it or escape it—“only at the very moment when I believe that I possess it, behold by a curious reversal, it possesses me,” Sartre writes. The “slimy offers a horrible image: it is horrible in itself for a consciousness to become slimy.”

Dickens writes of how the “thick yellow liquor” in Krook’s chambers is that which “defiles,” a peculiar but wholly appropriate word. Cultural rituals and ceremonies and laws of prohibition are designed to prevent one from coming into contact with defiling elements, but such rituals remain inaccessible to Guppy and Weevle as they, in a grotesque choreography of demented communion, feel, smell, and taste Krook’s remains, remains which are, like Nemo’s, out of place. The whole thrust of this scene reminds us not only of the initial unknowability of this thick yellow liquor, but of its general displacement and ubiquitousness, for like the fog in the novel’s opening pages, it is everywhere, “a smouldering, suffocating substance vapour” (B, 511) that slides down walls, clings to windows, and saturates exposed human flesh.

We not only have Krook’s remains, however, but also his cat, now gone mad, as well, one whose transgressive tastes and desires have already been noted. Krook’s cat, however, is not just any cat, but one that answers to the name of Lady Jane and, as such, exists as a feminine presence deeply and enigmatically inscribed within the dynamics of abjection and desire mapped out by the novel. Here too Sartre’s voice enters into our inquiry, for his meditations on slime frequently invoke images of the feminine. He describes the particular fusion that takes place when honey slides from the spoon into the honey jar, for example, as “a spreading out—like the flattening of the full breasts of a woman who is lying on her back,” and speaks of the “soft, yielding action, a moist and feminine sucking” of slime and its “sickly-sweet, feminine revenge.” But it
is especially the later sections of Sartre’s analysis of slime that can shed light on how deeply the abject as sexual difference (and Lady Dedlock figures here most prominently) is inscribed within *Bleak House*, but hieroglyphically or mysteriously so, only appropriate for a Bakhtinian text filled with the dialects and voices of the street. Jo tells Lady Dedlock that “I’m fly . . . But fen larks, you know. Stow hooking it!” (B, 277), provoking her to respond: “what does that horrible creature mean?” And the constable comments about how Jo is as “obstinate a young gonoph as I know” (B, 320). In the midst of gonophs, fen larks, and other strange signifiers, Lady Jane is not only a female cat, but also the possessor of a name that both conceals and reveals. According to Eric Partridge’s *A Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English*, “Lady Jane” was, ca. 1850, a vulgar slang expression for the female genitals, and given Dickens’s familiarity with the language of the street, it is likely that he would have known of its meaning. George Lear, a friend of Dickens, writes, for example, of how “I thought I knew something of the town, but after a little talk with Dickens I found that I knew nothing. He knew it all from Bow to Brentford,” adding that “he could imitate, in a manner that I never heard equalled . . . the low population of the streets of London in all their varieties, whether mere loafers or sellers of fruit, vegetables, or anything else.”

In writing of the case history of Dora, Jane Gallop has noted that when Freud resorts to French (“*J’appelle un chat un chat*”) in order to refer to gynecological matters, “he takes a French detour and calls a pussy a pussy,” and Dickens, I would argue, draws upon his familiarity with London street vernacular in order to take his own English detour in pursuit of a similar end. It is only fitting that Krook, a resident member of that “low population” of which George Lear speaks and an indefatigable collector of women’s hair, would have named his cat Lady Jane. One of Dickens’s great fetishists, Krook early in the novel draws Ada’s tresses through his fingers until reproved by Richard, observing, “here’s lovely hair. I have got three sacks of ladies’s hair below, but none so beautiful and fine as this. What colour, and what texture” (B, 69). Inquiring into the peculiarly significant “importance attached to hair,” and women’s hair in particular, Bataille also speaks specifically of “ladies’s hair below” when he writes of how the “image of the desirable woman as first imagined would be insipid and unprovocative if it did not at the same time also promise or reveal
a mysterious animal aspect, more momentously suggestive.” He further observes that “the beauty of the desirable woman suggests her private parts, the hairy ones to be precise, the animal ones.”

Towards the latter part of his reflections on the nature of slime, Sartre also invokes these parts in a series of observations that seem excessive, even hysterical, and thus especially worth noting. Characterizing the image of the feminine as mouth or hole, Sartre observes that “the obscenity of the feminine sex,” is that “of everything that ‘gapes open.’ It is an appeal to being as all holes are,” and woman “appeals to a strange flesh which is to transform her into a fullness by penetration and dissolution.” “Beyond any doubt,” he writes, “her sex is a mouth and a voracious mouth which devours the penis—a fact which can easily lead to the idea of castration,” or in the case of Bleak House, to Lady Jane’s unwelcome presence at Nemo’s inquest, licking her lips and winding her lithe tail.

Approaching this question from an admittedly different angle, Elizabeth Gross makes a similar point. Reminding us of how the abject, like “the maternal chora and the semiotic . . . is placed on the side of the feminine in Kristeva’s work,” Gross notes that “abjection is the underside of the symbolic.” It is, she writes, “what the symbolic must reject, cover over and contain. . . . It is an insistence on the subject’s necessary relation to death, to animality, and to materiality.” Kristeva herself points out that “the masculine, apparently victorious, confesses through its relentlessness against the other, the feminine, that it is threatened by an unsymmetrical, irrational, wily, uncontrollable power.” The symbolic, she observes, does “not seem to have . . . sufficient strength to dam up the abject or demoniacal potential of the feminine,” and if the symbolic order in Bleak House is finally ineffectual in containing Nemo and Jo within its boundaries and categories, Lady Dedlock by virtue of her sexual difference threatens such boundaries as well. The extreme, and at times, offensive language that Sartre uses in describing the feminine testifies to “the relentlessness against the other, the feminine” of which Kristeva speaks, but Freud also worried about this “demoniacal potential of the feminine.” In one of his early letters to Fliess, for example, he writes of how “I would have liked to write to you about the sexual theory” but confesses that he does “not yet have the slightest idea what to do with the +++female aspect, and that makes me distrust the whole thing.” The editor of Freud’s letters points out that the
sign of the three crosses “was sometimes chalked on the inside of doors in peasant houses to protect against danger,” and, as such, this “+++female aspect” is not only Freud’s acknowledgment of sexual difference, but a semiotic gesture of incantation, drawn from cultural sites rather different from his own, on his part to protect himself against it. We see him worrying about this same concern in another letter to Fliess discussing “the theory of internal stinking,” when he similarly identifies the site of the feminine or sexual difference as the place of the abject. “Everything related to birth, miscarriage, [menstrual] period,” he writes, “goes back to the word toilet via the word Abort [toilet] (Abortus [abortion]).” “This is really wild,” Freud continues, as he seems to argue for a teleologically driven etymology, “but it is entirely analogous to the process by which words take on a transferred meaning as soon as new concepts requiring a designation appear.”

As suggested earlier, Bleak House is a text haunted by the fear that that which does not belong might somehow find a way in. While there are no chalked crosses in Bleak House to prevent such things from happening, the novel too attempts to protect itself against such dangers. And in its case, the abject and demoniacal potentials of the “+++female aspect” that so worried Freud find their most potent presence in the figure of Lady Dedlock. The abject as sexual difference, especially as situated in the figure of the mother or potential mother, differs from other sites or “polluting objects,” such as “excrement and its equivalents” (decay, infection, disease, corpse, etc.), in that while they represent “the danger that comes to identity from without,” sexual difference, located especially in the cultural taboo of incest and the horror of menstrual blood, “stands for the danger issuing from within.” The figure of the mother as monster or monstrosity appears most prominently in the novel in the form of Mrs. Jellyby, a Kristevan archaic mother feared because of her generative power; but she is controlled in this text, her transgressive powers subdued not so much by her man/child of a husband who is deprived both of voice and virility, but by a text that contains her within the language of caricature and satire. Unlike Mrs. Jellyby, however, Lady Dedlock remains, as do Nemo and Jo, an ambiguous and uncontained signifier by virtue of those smells and stains that cling to her. The fluids and stains that cling to Lady Dedlock register the abject not in terms of the corpse (Nemo) or of excrement (Jo), but of sex and sexual difference and the power of pollution that arises, on a
symbolic level, as Kristeva points out, from “the permanent conflict resulting from an unsettled separation between masculine and feminine power at the level of social institutions.” It is, as we have seen, at the sites of birth and death that liminality figures most prominently; and Lady Dedlock is situated at the site of birth, not so much the actual birth of Esther, an unrecoverable event buried deep in the midst of multiple layers of narratives, but rather at that point in the novel when mother and daughter become fully aware of each other’s existence. The choreography of this scene reminds us that it is not so much a moment of reunion as of birth itself. Esther says of it, for example, that “so strangely did I hold my place in this world, that, until within a short time back, I had never, to my own mother’s knowledge, breathed—had never been endowed with life—had never borne a name” (B, 569). In this respect, Lady Dedlock’s letter to Esther, her testimony to her status as mother, is to be regarded as the placental remains of a birth that must be eliminated. Esther writes, for example, of how her mother “put into my hands a letter she had written for my reading only; and said, when I had read it, and destroyed it, but not so much for her sake . . . as for her husband’s and my own—I must evermore consider her as dead” (B, 566). But while Nemo as corpse/god, neither alive nor dead, occupies an ambiguous status precisely by virtue of a refusal to be contained by a shallow grave and thus by his ability to contaminate whatever he comes into contact with, Lady Dedlock, similarly both alive and dead, attempts to make certain that her remains are contained and protected: as Esther tells us, “my first care was to burn what my mother had written, and to consume even its ashes” (B, 583). If only such prophylactic care had been extended to Nemo’s remains.

Corbin tells the story of a monk from Prague who “was capable of spotting the odor of adulterous women,” and Lady Dedlock, guilty of sexual transgression, if not adultery, fears such exposure, engaging from the beginning in strategies of evasion and denial with Tulkinghorn, a monk-like figure given to nosing around in other people’s affairs. Like Nemo and Jo, Lady Dedlock is filth, for she too has been jettisoned out of a boundary, moved to the other side, beyond its margins. “Margins are dangerous,” writes Douglas, for they can be crossed and transgressed, and Lady Dedlock has done both. Recalling once again Freud’s image of the “+++female aspect,” invoked to protect himself against that
which he both fears and desires, we can see that Lady Dedlock is on the outside of this chalked door, her transgressive powers of sexual difference protected against by a text that must draw itself tightly around any seams or gaps through which the abject might slip, acknowledging the presence of the abject while at the same time protecting what Kristeva describes as “the objective frailty of symbolic order.”⁵⁰ We are also reminded here of Sartre’s suggestion that “the obscenity of the feminine sex is that of everything that ‘gapes open.’ It is an appeal to being as all holes are,” and such holes, those tears in the frail symbolic structure caused by sexual difference and the abject located on the side of the feminine, must be penetrated, their emptiness filled up.⁵¹ In Dickens, as in Sartre and Freud, the masculine confession of fear and desire against the uncontrollable power of the feminine, as well as the incantatory gesture of protection against such fears, assumes the shape of language itself. Words move in to fill up such holes created by the feminine, testifying to the power of abjection embodied in Lady Dedlock while at the same time attempting to create their own protective signs against its potentially destructive intrusion.

At this point, I would like to pursue the connection between sexual difference, language, and abjection, but I want to shift my attention from Lady Dedlock to her daughter, or more precisely, to the scene in which Esther comes upon her dead mother in the pauper’s burial ground. Thus far, my focus has been on the “Tom-all-Alone’s” chapter of Bleak House and thus on its omniscient narrative voice, but Esther notes early on that “if these pages contain a great deal about me, I can only suppose it must be because I really have something to do with them, and can’t be kept out” (B, 162–63); and although she has been offstage for much of this paper, she cannot be kept out any longer.⁵² Specifically, I want to suggest that Esther’s account of the journey leading her to her dead mother’s body discloses once again the final frailty of the symbolic order in this text, as the abject makes its presence felt in her narrative, disrupting or disturbing her efforts to control or contain it.

At the end of chapter 59, Esther discovers that the woman lying dead on the steps of the pauper’s cemetery is in fact her mother, and immediately after this moment, she deflects the path of her narrative, attempting to decontaminate it as she moves both the narrative and her readers away from this site of death and decay. But before she does so, she writes of approaching the fallen body

*Robert E. Lougy*  491
alone, as Woodcourt and Bucket step aside in order to allow her to do so, and what she recounts is a powerful, even brutal, moment of recognition: leaning over the body, she “lifted the heavy head, put the long dank hair aside, and turned the face. It was my mother, cold and dead.” At this point, the text moves directly into the next chapter, Esther informing us that she will “proceed to other passages of my narrative” (B, 869). “I have said so much of myself, and so much still remains,” she writes, “that I will not dwell upon my sorrow” (B, 869). What is most striking about this abrupt transition is not so much what is said, although her language seems flat at times, almost empty, as what is not said, her mother disappearing into the blank space between the two chapters. It is a rhetorical gesture reminiscent of the noble gentleman’s nose, for it too seems to be held delicately in the air; and as in those dream-like moments of the preceding chase sequence in which Esther desperately clings to her mistaken impressions regarding the woman’s identity, it too would seem to operate within the dynamics of disavowal. As Esther deflects the directions of her gaze and thus the flow of her narrative, her mother recedes into the silences of a repressive text, elided by a storyline that moves rapidly towards the closure of a marriage plot.

To the extent that Esther’s story makes such erasure possible, it creates the same kind of distance from or protection against abjection that we have seen earlier, and, in this respect, she might be said to resemble “the little old woman” who sweeps “the cobwebs out of the sky” (B, 148), employing a narrative voice rather than a broom, however, to keep dirt or filth at a comfortable distance from herself. And yet, of course, Esther’s various narrative strategies do not change the fact that as a woman she also occupies those sites of sexual difference inhabited by her mother. “We are used to the real,” writes Lacan, “the truth we repress,” but the truth, he also reminds us, finds ways of escaping through language. Helena Michie has noted that by casting Esther as the subject rather than the object of the gaze, “Esther’s narrative works against its title to suppress all signs of her physical presence in it,” but she also points out that Esther’s narrative testifies both to the erasure and the affirmation of the body. Esther may tell us that “my little body will soon fall into the background now” (B, 76), but it adamantly refuses to do so. Just before looking into the mirror after her illness, for example, Esther writes of how “my hair had not been cut off, though it had been in danger more than

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Fifth, Liminality, and Abjection in Bleak House
once. It was long and thick. I let it down, and shook it out, and
went up to the glass upon the dressing table” (B, 559). As Michie
observes, the physicality of this moment is “startling,” and, as such,
it not only anticipates “the long dank hair” that covers her mother’s
face in the final scene, but also recalls the earlier episode in which
Krook runs his fingers through Ada’s hair:55

Commenting on Lacan’s examination of the symbolic, Colette
Soler notes that “the truth of a subject is not exactness concerning
facts, it is something which is produced in speech,” and in order to
locate the truth of Esther’s speech, or at least a part of it, we need
to turn to her narrative and specifically to the circulation of her
handkerchief within it.56 For it is this circulation that discloses the
ways in which the figural nature of language creates holes or gaps
through which the abject escapes the restraints of a repressive
narrative voice, once again becoming associated with sites of
sexual difference, birth, and death. First surfacing in the novel
when Esther uses it to cover Jenny’s dead baby—“I took the light
burden from her [Jenny’s] lap; did what I could to make the baby’s
rest the prettier and gentler; laid it on the shelf, and covered it
with my own handkerchief” (B, 160)—the handkerchief shows up
again when Miss Flite tells Esther about its various movements or
circulation. The carefully mapped out choreography that sur-
rounds its appearance at this point is significant, for it testifies to
the ways in which the text resists, albeit unsuccessfully, the return
of the repressed that demands to be heard. Miss Flite, visibly
anxious to talk about the handkerchief, but also uneasy about
introducing the subject, glances over for guidance to Charley, who
does not want Miss Flite to say anything about it. As Esther tells
us, “Charley glanced at me, and looked unwilling to pursue the
suggestion.” However, Miss Flite has said enough to entice Esther’s
participation in the disclosure of the story, for seeing that Miss
Flite “wanted to go on,” she tells her that “you have roused my
curiosity, and now you must gratify it” (B, 551). Before continuing,
Miss Flite once again “looked at Charley for advice in this
important crisis,” and being given the green light by Charley, who
says to her that “you had better tell then,” Miss Flite describes for
Esther how a “lady with a veil” took the handkerchief from Jenny
and left some money behind, letting it be known that she wanted
the handkerchief as “a little keepsake” to remind her of Esther (B,
551, 552). Charley speaks up at this point, identifying once again
the sites associated with the handkerchief when she suggests that
Jenny had kept the handkerchief “partly because it was yours, miss, and partly because it had covered the baby.” Her curiosity gratified, Esther dismisses this story rather abruptly, noting only that “I did not think very much about this lady then, for I had an impression that it might be Caddy” (B, 552), but we need to pay attention to it.

Miss Flite is one of Dickens’s “great fools,” to use G. K. Chesterton’s phrase, a member of that company of mad and eccentric characters, such as Mrs. Gamp, Dick Swiveller, Miss Mowcher, and Mr. Dick, who may say aloud what others dare not utter.57 As she tells Esther, “‘I am afraid I am at times (between ourselves, you wouldn’t think it) a little—rambling you know,’ said Miss Flite, touching her forehead” (B, 551). Her determination to speak of the handkerchief is nothing less than the insistence of the signifier making itself heard, the signifier in this case being the handkerchief itself as it moves through the story, for the subject of Miss Flite’s narrative, rambling though it may be, is precisely the directions or patterns of this circulation. In writing of Poe’s “The Purloined Letter,” Shoshana Felman has noted that the letter in that story becomes “through its insistence in the structure . . . a symbol or signifier of the unconscious,” observing that through it “the repressed unconscious insists on making itself known in the signifying chain.”58 And Esther’s handkerchief, like Poe’s letter, similarly insinuates itself into the structure of the text, functioning as a signifier of the repressed unconscious that connects Esther in ways that her narrative attempts to conceal with various textual sites of abjection as it moves from Esther to Jenny and her dead baby, and finally, to Lady Dedlock herself. And in this final scene, Esther, a child long assumed to be dead by her mother, pursues her mother, Lady Dedlock, who is fated to die before she is found; but while chasing her mother, Esther thinks that she is in fact following Jenny, the mother of the dead baby whose body her own handkerchief had once covered.

As Esther returns to this moment, the sense of control and order so characteristic of much of her narrative begins to hemorrhage, as those sites of abjection associated with the maternal and with death overflow their boundaries or borders, bleeding into one another. It is a scene bathed in phantasmagoric images—“the stained house-fronts put on human faces and looked at me,” Esther writes, adding how “the unreal things were more substantial than the real” (B, 867). And in those ruptures of consciousness
and language that we hear in her voice, the connections that Esther tells us that she is unable to follow are nevertheless charted out for us by a narrative in which the identity and separateness of subjectivities break down or collapse. As Esther approaches the burial ground, for example, she sees a woman’s body, “one arm creeping around the bar of the iron gate, and seeming to embrace it” (B, 868), and she identifies this woman as “the mother of the dead child,” the one “who brought my mother’s letter,” one who had “come to this condition by some means connected with my mother that I could not follow” (B, 868). When Bucket tries to hint at the real identity of the woman they are pursuing, Esther confesses that she “had not the least idea what it meant” (B, 868). She similarly notices the “solemn and compassionate look in Mr. Woodcourt’s face” but does “not comprehend” it, for, as she puts it, her “understanding for all of this was gone” (B, 868). But while Esther’s understanding fails her, her narrative does not, for if Esther’s méconnaissance makes it possible for her to characterize the dead woman as one who “had come to this condition by some means connected with my mother that I could not follow” (B, 868)—a declaration that is at once erroneous and yet unmistakably true—her handkerchief in fact traces the shape and directions of these connections, identifying at each point the ways in which Esther is also implicated in its journey. Like the fluids from Nemo’s decomposing corpse, the ubiquitousness of Jo’s smells, Krook’s slimy remains, and Lady Dedlock’s stain marks of sexual difference, Esther’s story testifies to how the abject, defining her relationship to itself even as it speaks through her, once again calls our attention to the precariousness and frailty of the symbolic order.

Language finally succeeds, however, in restoring a momentary order and control, and the narrative shift of Esther’s voice, the deflection of her gaze, enables her to turn away from such images and to stem the hemorrhaging seen in the barely controlled turbulence of her memories and its potential damage to the closure towards which her narrative moves. Before she can finally acknowledge the woman in front of her as her mother, Esther must remove the long, dank hair that covers her mother’s face, and once she does so, she moves towards a narrative that will repress or conceal such memories. But too much has intervened for such a gesture to be successful in wholly stabilizing the turbulence created by such textual sites. Michie has noted that “Lady Dedlock’s death allows the marriage plot to begin and the novel to end, but
Esther’s marriage is made possible only at the sacrifice of her own body and her mother’s.”59 However, the novel’s final unfinished sentence—“they can very well do without much beauty in me—even supposing . . .” (B, 935)—turns our attention once again towards Esther’s body, as it is called forth by her recollection of her husband’s remark to her that “don’t you know that you are prettier than ever” (B, 935), even as she makes a half-hearted and even coy attempt to hide the very body she has just recently exposed. In *Far from the Madding Crowd*, Thomas Hardy observes of one of Bathsheba’s unfinished sentences that “never did a fragile tailless sentence convey a more perfect meaning,” and we might say the same thing about Esther’s sentence.60

*Bleak House* as house/text cannot fully protect itself against such intrusions, regardless of its multiple layers of crosses, incantations, and other signifiers, for like our relationship with olfaction itself, it is deeply inscribed within the dynamics of both desire and disgust. However, *Bleak House* does chalk its own crosses and restores what order it can, affirming finally that words do matter. This discussion of Esther began with the scene in which she removes the long, dank hair from her mother’s face, and I would like to conclude by turning to an Inuit legend that also concerns words and long, dank female hair. The legend, recounted by Howes, tells of how if the female bodily processes associated with birth or menstruation somehow break free of the taboo or limits imposed upon them, they form a foul smoke that “collects in the form of filth in the hair of the Mother of the Sea Beasts.” In order to make sure that this great Mother does not retire in disgust and shut up all of the game in her house, a shaman “must descend to the House of the Mother of the Sea Beasts and attempt to appease her,” sitting with her and combing “her hair, a tangled untidy mass,” until her disposition improves and she agrees to release the animals. Words, the shaman says, “do arise.”61 Dickens, Freud, and even Sartre (his presence here is problematic but not untenable) might be thought of as such shamans, combing the hair of abjection itself in gestures of appeasement and control as they attempt through words that will indeed arise to restore structure to the symbolic order, hoping to keep that forty foot long Megalosaurus, with its long, dank hair, from crashing through their precariously chalked doors.

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NOTES


14 In speaking of the relationship between the novel and social research in nineteenth-century France, Corbin makes the point that popular novels "used these shocked descriptions of vile-smelling homes for their own ends; this is not surprising, since the novelists were inspired by the writings of social researchers" (145). In England, however, the social novels of the mid-nineteenth century did little to advance the cause of sanitary reform. For example, Chadwick’s monumental Report was published in 1842, followed up in 1843 by a report on the condition of burial grounds in England, characterized by Chadwick’s editor, Flinn, as “possibly his finest piece of work” (68). As Flinn observes, this report “ranged more widely and probed more deeply than any of the previous investigations of this subject,” exposing “the evils resulting from the exploitation of pride.
Filth, Liminality, and Abjection in Bleak House

and sorrow by undertakers, as well as the fearful consequences to health of the mismanagement and overloading of urban burial-grounds" (68). Yet, Flinn also notes that

there are few, if any, indications in literature before the 1840s that the shortness and brutishness of much of human life owed anything to a lack of sanitation. The subject makes its entry into the pages of novels only after 1842, and then seldom with the depth of feeling which characterized the wholehearted sympathy of some novelists with, say, factory, prison, or educational reform. (69)

To some extent, Dickens is obviously an exception here, but in the 1840s, this was not a burning issue for him either. In fact, Chadwick had written in 1842 to Dickens’s brother-in-law, Henry Austin, asking for Dickens’s help, arguing that “Mr. Dickens will have the possession of the ear not only of America but of Europe” (56) in order to advance the cause of sanitation reform. But Dickens’s response was lukewarm, if not cool. However, towards the end of his American Notes, Dickens acknowledges that “there is no local legislature in America which may not study Mr. Chadwick’s excellent Report on the Sanitary Condition of our Labouring Classes with immense advantage” (as cited in Report, 57).

But some ten years later, his representations of Tom All-Alone’s and the pauper’s cemetery in Bleak House would suggest that Dickens had read more carefully what Chadwick has to say. By 1854, articles by Dickens in both Household Words and Household Narrative suggest that he “warmly supported Chadwick and the work of the Board [General Board of Health]” against attacks on it by Lord Seymour and others who feared Chadwick’s desire for a centralized authority to handle questions of sanitation and health. See The Letters of Charles Dickens, ed. Graham Storey, Kathleen Tillotson, and Angus Easson, vol. 7: 1853–1855 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 384, n. 6. Also see Dicken’s Letters, 7:436, n. 1 for more on this particular question.

15 Corbin, 7.

16 See Freud’s 14 November 1897 letter to Fleiss, in Freud’s Letters, 279, 280, Freud’s emphasis.

17 “Tendentious jokes,” Freud writes, can be either hostile or obscene, and, as such, they “make possible the satisfaction of an instinct [whether lustful or hostile] in the face of an obstacle that stands in the way. They circumvent this obstacle and in that way draw pleasure from a source which the obstacle had made inaccessible.” Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious, ed. Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton, 1960), 101.

18 Kristeva, 3.


21 Hertz, 32. Corbin points out that by the end of the eighteenth century, there was “a reduced threshold of tolerance among the masses, who made a direct connection between odors and death” (58), and thus the demand for individual

498 Filth, Liminality, and Abjection in Bleak House
tombs arose in part because of a wish to reduce the intensity of offensive smells, but also, according to one theorist, so that “the rays emanating from each would not intermingle” (Corbin, 102).

22 Kristeva, 3.
23 Benton, 73.
24 Douglas, 35.
25 Corbin, 143.
26 Howes, 408.
27 Kristeva, 67, 70.
30 Corbin, 232.
32 Kristeva, 68.
34 Sambudha Sen speaks of the “nauseating liquid that flows out of [Krook’s] body” and regards it as an image for the “unpurged accumulations of what Conversation Kenge calls ‘the very great system of a very great country’” (“Bleak House and Little Dorrit: The Radical Heritage,” ELH 65 [1998]: 961). In Dickens’s text, however, Krook’s body is nowhere to be found, and what flows instead down windows, walls, and other surfaces is not a liquid, but something that exists ambiguously between a liquid and solid state.
36 Sartre, 774 (“sliny”; “fluidity”; “aberrant”; “revenge”), 776 (“only”), 778 (“sliny offers”), Sartre’s emphasis.
37 Sartre, 775, 776-77.
41 Bataille, 143.
42 Sartre, 782.
44 Kristeva, 70, 64–65.
45 See Freud’s 5 November 1899 letter to Fleiss, in Freud’s Letters, 382.
46 See Freud’s 22 December 1897 letter to Fleiss, in Freud’s Letters, 288.
47 Kristeva, 71, 78.
48 Corbin, 46.
49 Douglas, 23.

Robert E. Lougy
Kristeva, 70.

Sartre, 782. In her essay, “Representation of Patriarchy: Sexuality and Epistemology in Freud’s Dora” (In Dora’s Case: Freud-Hysteria-Feminism), Toril Moi describes the phallocentric epistemology of that case history and notes how Freud’s “oddly intense discussion” of the fragmentary nature of the “Dora” text would suggest that “to admit that there are holes in one’s knowledge is tantamount to transforming the penis to a hole, that is to say, to transforming the man into a woman” (197–98).

Audrey Jaffe considers at length the question of omniscience or the lack of it in Bleak House, writing that “I use the term ‘omniscient’ for this narrative not because I believe that it ‘is’ omniscient, but because I believe Dickens meant it to be taken as such.” See her chapter, “David Copperfield and Bleak House: On Dividing the Responsibility of Knowing,” in Vanishing Points: Dickens, Narrative, and the Subject of Omniscience (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1991), 128. I am using the term “omniscient” in much the same sense.

I have in mind here the concept of disavowal (Verleugnung) as Freud uses it in his 1927 essay “Fetishism” (SE, 21.149–57), wherein the subject refuses to recognize the reality of a traumatic perception. Jaffe draws upon Freud’s concept of “negation” in speaking of the “denegation” we find in Esther’s narrative, the means whereby, as Jaffe puts it, Esther has it both ways: “to be present and yet absent, letting herself in even as she insists on her desire to keep herself out” (137). I think “disavowal” reflects more accurately than “negation” the kind of dynamics I am trying to describe, but the two terms seem rather similar in that both enable the unconscious to disclose itself without being recognized as such. Jaffe, for example, remarks of the recognition scene that “the language of denegation” is such that “it kills the mother by denial” (144) and similarly notes that denial “is built into the narrative’s structure” (143).


Michie, 208.

Thomas Hardy, Far from the Madding Crowd, ed. Ronald Blythe (New York: Penguin, 1985), 226. Interestingly enough, this “tailless sentence,” occurring during a conversation between Bathsheba and Sgt. Troy, similarly calls our attention to Bathsheba’s beauty, even as she denies thinking of herself in such terms.