

Dirty Words

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In the light of the general 19th-century obsession with dirt and pollution, it isn't surprising that the theme should figured in critical writing about the state of the language. Here's a passage from an article entitled "Slang" that appeared in an 1853 number of *Household Words*. The article has often been attributed to Dickens, but it was actually written by George Augustus Sala, though of course Dickens would have passed on it:

The fertility of a language may degenerate into the feculence of weeds and tares; should we not rather, instead of raking and heaping together worthless novelties of expression, endeavour to weed, to expurgate, to epurate; to render, once more, wholesome and pellucid that which was once a "well of English undefiled," and rescue it from the sewerage of verbiage and slang? The Thames is to be purified, why not the language?

In fact this is just an example of a Victorian set piece on slang, where the comparisons to dirt or disease were obligatory. Here's an example from an 1859 book by G. F. Graham:

We may regard [slang] in the light of a pest to society. It takes a long time to clear the atmosphere from the baneful influences of certain epidemics. Now, the language of everyday conversation is suffering from this infectious disease, and it becomes the duty of every Englishman who has a proper feeling for his language, to refrain from this evil himself, and to throw in its way every possible discouragement. [Graham, 1991 #32, p. 166]/

And this remains a prevalent trope in Victorian language criticism from around 1840 — which is to say, shortly after the cholera epidemics — to around 1920.

That may seem a little late to be called Victorian, but we should bear in mind that language criticism tends to preserve figures and attitudes long after they've gone out of fashion in other critical domains. After all, language criticism is an old man's game, just as slang is a young man's game; Chesterton once observed that sons who have no defense against their fathers but new fashion can have no defense against their sons but old fashion. (The fact that Sala was only 25 when he wrote his piece on slang demonstrates only his precocious senescence.)

Now it's true that talk of corruption and purity have always been part of the discourse about language. Sala's phrase "the well of English undefiled" is originally from Dryden and was made proverbial by Johnson. And 18th century writers like Johnson and Campbell used a variety of organic figures to describe the language, the way Burke used them to describe society, with the implication that these were institutions that had grown up according to natural laws and processes, rather than mechanical constructions. For example there's the famous passage in the *Preface* where Johnson says:

Life may be lengthened by care, though death cannot ultimately be defeated; tongues, like governments, have a natural tendency to degeneration; we have long preserved our constitution, let us make some struggles for our language.

But while Johnson's sense of the language was organic, it wasn't corporeal, the way it was for 19th-century writers. By way of contrast, take this passage from a series of lectures on language given in 1859 by the American scholar and diplomat George Perkins Marsh. The point is more-or-less the same as Johnson's, but here the social body has taken on flesh:

To deny that language is susceptible of corruption is to deny that races or nations are susceptible of depravation; and to treat all its changes as normal, is to confound things as distinct as health and disease. (p. 649)

What I want to ask here is what it was about the Victorian conception of language that licensed this way of talking about it; how is it that words could come to be dirty or unclean? As a point of departure, let me take a remark that Christopher Herbert made in an article that appeared in *Representations* a couple of years ago called "Rat Worship and Taboo in Mayhew's London." This appears in the context of a discussion of what Herbert calls "secularizing" or "logicalizing" treatments of the concept of dirt — in particular Mary Douglas's characterization of dirt as "matter out of place," which locates the anxiety about dirt in the dangers created by the blurring of cultural categories. This is a conception that would have been appealing to Victorians, of course, who prided themselves on their scientific approach to sanitation. But Herbert argues — correctly, I think — that this approach doesn't account for the sacrality of dirt. The thing about dirt, he says, is

...that one is above all afraid... to *touch* it (or by extension to hear it spoken of). Dirt is what one feels contaminated and obscurely endangered by through contact. The key point, and the chief insight of the Victorian theorists of taboo, is that dirt, though it pervades certain kinds of matter, is not itself material; it is *force*, active and transmissible...[Herbert, 1988 #30, pp. 7-8]

What I am particularly interested in here is the remark that Herbert makes in a parenthetical: "(or by extension to hear it spoken of)." What we want to know is,

exactly what kind of "extension" is this? There are two answers we can give here. One obvious answer — and I take it that this is what Herbert has in mind — is that words inherit the evaluations of their denotations: the names of dirty things are dirty, the names of sacred things are sacred, and so forth. And of course this is true. (Max Beerbohm once asked a friend, "Do you not think that *ermine* is among the most beautiful-sounding words in the language?" His friend said, "Oh, to be sure." And then Beerbohm asked, "Well, what about *vermin*?") The possibility of this kind of transfer is inherent in Frazer's definition of magic as the "efficacious symbolic" — that is, the idea that magic invests intentional relations with causal power. The same connection that enables a word to causally affect its denotation must allow a thing to causally affect its name. (The reciprocity of this relation is implicit in ambiguity of the word "curse" to mean both a word that evokes its reference and a word that is tainted by it.)

It was this principle of semantic contagion that motivated the Victorians to erect the vast apparatus of euphemism that protected them from direct discursive content with the names of dirty things. (Writing about the earlier French context, in fact, Alain Corbin has suggested that the tendency to euphemism preceded and foreshadowed concerns about physical hygiene.) But Herbert's discussion suggests the possibility of another kind of contagion, as well, where names are contaminated not through their relations to their denotations, but through relations that are more closely analogous to the relations that mediate the transfer of taboo. An essential property of taboo is its transmissibility by contact or physical contiguity, as a magical power or *mana* is passed from one thing to the next in the process that Frazer described as "contagious magic." In the classic Polynesian example, a dead body is taboo, and so is the man who touches it or whose shadow falls on it, and so are the utensils he touches, and so is the food prepared with them, and so are the people who eat the food, and so is their house, and so on. Each of these things becomes taboo in the same sense: it is dangerous to other people and to itself. What I want to argue here is that it was this kind of relation that the Victorians were thinking of when they spoke of language in terms of dirt and contamination. Words didn't become dirty only in virtue of a second-order transfer from the properties of the things they denote. They also participated in a kind of material pollution, where they acted directly on the body. But before I can make this point I should to step back and look at this discourse in its context.

It's important to bear in mind that Victorian language critics raised the issue of dirt only in connection with two topics. One was slang, as we've seen; the other was pronunciation. I'll take these up in turn. In the Victorian period the

word *slang* had two main senses as applied to language (though I should note that it was also applied to other things; you could talk about "a slang coat," for example). In its original 18th-century sense, the word is more-or-less a synonym for *cant*, and is a close equivalent of the French *argot*. As the OED says, it denotes "the special vocabulary used by any set of persons of a low or disreputable character." This is the way Mayhew tended to use the word, for example when he talked about the "slang language" of the costermongers, a kind of code that was formed by mixing cant words with words formed by a systematic phonetic inversion, like pig Latin or the French "verlin," which was said to be incomprehensible to outsiders. Like their predecessors, the Victorians had a fascination with this kind of language, which ensured a brisk trade in slang dictionaries, Newgate novels, and the works of writers like Pierce Egan and William Moncrief. But slang in this sense was not a matter for critical concern. If anything, the existence of these self-contained codes and varieties confirmed a reassuring picture of a well-regimented social order — the alleged incomprehensibility of the costermongers' language set them apart as almost a separate nation.

The other sense of *slang* is closer to the modern use of the word, though this was a much more charged category for the Victorians than it is for us. In this sense, the word *slang* has no exact equivalent in other languages, or in earlier stages of English. The best definition of this sense that I know of is in Henry Bradley's article on slang in the 11th *Britannica*, where he says that slang is

...a conscious offense against some conventional standard of propriety. A mere vulgarity is not slang, except when it is purposely adopted, and acquires an artificial currency among some class of persons to whom it is not native. The other distinctive feature of slang is that it is neither a part of the ordinary language, nor an attempt to supply for its deficiencies. The slang word is a deliberate substitute for a word of the vernacular, just as... a nickname is a substitute for an ordinary name.

For convenience sake, let me use *cant* or *argot* to describe the first sense of *slang*, and reserve the word *slang* itself for the sense of the word that Bradley is describing. Slang is different from cant in two crucial ways. First of all, it is illegitimate language, or "unauthorized," as some writers put it; language that appeared to have broken loose from its original social provenance and come to rest in some alien variety or register. Here is G. F. Graham, for example:

...slang consists of those vulgar, unauthorized terms, which have come into fashion during the last eighty or ninety years, and which are not confined to one class, but may now be heard in almost every grade of society. [Graham, 1991 (1869) #32, p. 164]

The second difference is also implicit in Graham's definition; slang is a property of words or expressions, rather than registers or varieties. This distinction has an important semantic consequence. When an educated speaker uses a vulgarism, the effect arises primarily from its association with the code it belongs to, rather than from any reinterpretation of its reference. So when Dickens writes "I dun it" in a letter (Forster, II, 4; II, 1), we take him as having said exactly the same thing that he would have said if he had used "I did it," except that here he is speaking in the character of a Cockney. Whereas when a young man refers to his father with a slang expression like "the old bean," he implies a different evaluation of the reference of the expression than he would have done if he had used *father*. As Chesterton put it in connection with this example: "It is obvious to me that calling the old gentleman "father" is facing the facts of nature. It is also obvious that calling him "bean" is not facing the facts of nature. It is... merely weaving a graceful fairy tale to cover the facts of nature." [Chesterton, 1932 #31, p. 3] And this is why we only introduce slang words to denote things that are subject to significant differences of evaluation. The Victorians wouldn't have had slang words for *street* or for the number seven, nor do we, although there were special words for these things in the cant of the costermongers and the patterers. (In practice, of course, slang is a notoriously fuzzy category, which merges into vulgarism at one end and mere colloquialism at the other. What is important is that the Victorians considered it as a discrete category, however hard it was to validate its extension.)

It is this property of slang that gave it its pathological quality for the Victorians. Slang introduces a kind of disorder by subverting legitimate linguistic authority, and denaturalizing the connections between words and things. Here is how Sala puts this point:

Without the slightest regard to the proprieties of nomenclature, or to what I may call the unities of signification, we apply names to objects, abstractions, and persons stupidly, irrationally, and inconsistently: completely ignoring the nature, the quality, the gender, the structure of the thing, we prefix to it a name which not only fails to convey an idea of what it materially is, but actually obscures and mystifies it.

Sala is right about the point of slang, of course; by renaming things, we pretend that their natures are other than the standard language assumes them to be. Of course so long as a word remains slang, and hence a substitute for a real name, this is only a pretense. The danger is that over the course of time the denotation may become permanently detached from its true name. So Sala continues:

A persistence in such a course must inevitably tend to debase, and corrupt that currency of speech which it has been the aim of the greatest scholars and publicists, from the age of Elizabeth downwards, to elevate, to improve, and to refine...

The transgression in slang, then, is its impertinence, both in the sense of impudence, and in the older sense of the word as "something incongruous or out of place." The danger of such an attitude was underscored by no less an authority than Archbishop Trench, the preëminent figure in mid-19th-century British language studies and the spiritual father of the OED. Trench located the source of linguistic decay in "the frivolity of an age or nation, its mockery of itself, its inability to comprehend the true dignity and meaning of life..." (p. 145) And this alone is enough to make it dirty: when we hand over the denotations of words to illegitimate authority, we create "matter out of place," with attendant dangers for ourselves and for others.

I should say a word here about the literary consequences of this view of slang, or rather the apparent absence of them. For all that Victorian regarded slang as transgressive, it isn't easy to find novelists developing this theme. On the contrary, writers like Dickens and Thackeray generally reveled in the linguistic exuberance of slang. At the same time, Dickens occasionally showed himself to be sensitive to the dangers of slang, and its potential connection to dirt. There is a nice example of this in *Hard Times*, in the drunken, slangy exchange where young Tom Gradgrind betrays to Mr. Harthouse the secret of his sister's unhappy marriage:

"I persuaded her," he said, with an edifying air of superiority. "I was stuck into old Bounderby's bank (where I never wanted to be), and I knew I should get into scrapes there, if she put old Bounderby's pipe out; so I told her my wishes, and she came into them. She would do anything for me. It was very game of her, wasn't it?"...(HT, II, Ch.3)

Tom's slang becomes an accomplice in a willful and dangerous series of miscategorizations. The bullying Bounderby is made innocuous with the prefixation of "Old"; Tom's larcenies are turned into "scrapes." And in particular, Tom's description of his sister as "game" demeans her, and traduces the nature of their relationship; it is the kind of sporting metaphor that men about town used when they described women as "fillies." And the practice dirties him, as Dickens makes clear in the concluding paragraph of the chapter:

The whelp went home, and went to bed. If he had had any sense of what he had done that night, and had been less of a whelp and more of a brother, he might have turned short on the road, might have gone down to the ill-

smelling river that was dyed black, might have gone to bed in it for good and all, and have curtained his head for ever with its filthy waters.

And of course when we last see Tom he is a clown in grimy blackface.

But as Herbert points out there was more to the Victorian notion of dirt than its blurring of categories. Dirt was also sacralized, and hence both repulsive and obsessively interesting. And there was usually something of this in the Victorian notion of slang, as well. It's true that some writers used the word *slang* to just about any unauthorized language, whether or not it had disreputable connotations. For Sala, the category also includes the French phrases of the fashionable world — words like *chaperon* and *beau monde* and what he called the "abominable slang practice" of writing RSVP at the bottom of an invitation.¹ But Thackeray would have described this latter sort of language as *slipslop* or *jargon*.² On the more common understanding, slang was touched by some vulgarity or lubricity. In *The Adventures of Philip*, for example, Thackeray describes the parson Tufton Hunt as a man who "garnished his conversation with slippery double-entendre and dirty old-world slang," by which he meant the scabrous language of the Regency period. And when Dickens mentions a Lord Slang in "The Egotistical Couple" in the *Sketches of Young Couples*, the name would have suggested a Regency buck along the lines of Lord Frederick Verisopht from *Nicholas Nickleby*. This sense of slang as low language was dominant in later discussions: slang is low, "cheap," and significantly, "a sign of mental poverty." As one early 20th-century rhetoric book puts it:

Slang, for the most part, comes up from the coarse and more ignorant portion of the community. Reading but few books, and those usually of no literary merit, they have nothing to hold them up to high standards of speech.... Even

¹ It also included Parliamentary language and the language of criticism — expressions like *transcendental* and *middle distance*.

² For example, this is from *Vanity Fair*, in a passage where Becky is patronizing Amelia at the ball in Brussels:

She found fault with her friend's dress, and her hair-dresser, and wondered how she could be so *chaussée*, and vowed that she must send her her *corsetière* the next morning. ... It is a fact, that in a fortnight, after three dinners in general society, this young woman had got up the genteel *jargon* so well, that a native could not speak it better; and it was only from her French being so good, that you could know she was not a woman of fashion. (Chapter XXIX)

words and phrases once excellent in meaning come to express some idea of the saloon or the gutter.....The stir of the lower life is constantly bringing to the surface mud and slime. James C. Fernald 1918

The idea that slang has a low origin connects it to dirt in another way. The denotation of a slang word isn't usually something inherently dirty — it couldn't be, if the slang word is to exist alongside a respectable synonym. But a slang word has at least a mythical origin in the practices of dirty persons, and when we use it, we come into contact with them in a direct and dangerous way. This point recurs over and over again in descriptions of the epidemiology of slang. Here are two typical versions of this story, the first from 1893, the second from the 1918 rhetoric I cited a moment ago.

...slang is to a people's language what an epidemic disease is to their bodily constitution; just as catching and just as inevitable in its run.... Like a disease, too, it is severest where the sanitary conditions are most neglected. John F. Genung, *Outlines of Rhetoric*, Ginn, Boston, 1893, p. 32

If [slang] expressions are vigorous, they quickly become current, for feeble, lethargic, and uninventive minds are glad to be caught up caught up and carried along by those of more originality and force, who are yet not too far above their own grade. Thus some word or phrase... will go down street after street, through whole sections of a city. The low theaters catch it up, the saloons pass it over the bar, the yellow journals print it, business men who deal with the rough element adopt it, children learn it from their playmates. [Fernald, 1918 #33, 247-248]

Of course these associations also explain the almost salacious pleasure that Victorians took in using slang, in a kind of play that suggests the sacral nature of the category. The speaker who used a slang word could imply vaguely disreputable connections and indulge in a measured display of disregard for convention — always providing that he could be secure that his usage would not be misinterpreted. / There's a nice turn on this point in Fowler's *Modern English Usage* in an article headed "Superiority" — though again, this is later, of course — where he takes on the practice of using a slang word while at the same putting in quotation marks or apologizing for it with a phrase like "to use an expressive colloquialism" or "as the street boys have it." Fowler suggests that speakers who do this want to "touch pitch without being defiled": he compares them to a person who offers excuses when he is surprised in the act of cleaning his own boots — a sure sign, Fowler says, that he is not in fact superior to boot-cleaning.

The reason slang is susceptible to being described on the model of a contagious disease is that, being "unauthorized," it is necessarily oral language, the language, as Fernald says, that comes from people that read few books. (Of

course as critics pointed out the newspapers and popular novels had an increasing hand in disseminating slang. But the effect of slang always requires a presumption of oral transmission. Then as now, nobody would admit to having learned his slang from the newspaper.) The use of a slang word is *prima facie* evidence that the speaker is connected to doubtful persons and circumstances in a chain of direct, intimate contacts. And hence the contagion of slang was transmitted like other taboos, through a chain of physical contiguities. In fact when we read Fernald's description of the way slang "goes down street after street through whole sections of a city," we are put in mind of the conception of the miasma, whose history Alain Corbin has traced in his book on the development of the consciousness of odor — an emanation that issued from the low and dirty parts of the city (and I should stress here that slang was essentially an urban category) and contaminated the public and domestic atmosphere.

Now there is a temptation to take all this talk of linguistic pollution as an elaborate metaphor. We say, look, words aren't material things: they can't be literally dirty, and they can't really contaminate a person in the way that contact with waste or ordure can. And if we understand the concern about slang in this way, then we'll still see it as a kind of shadow of the anxiety about material pollution, a projection of the idea of filth into a purely intentional world. But I think this view is a mistake, for two reasons. In the first place, it makes dirt too material. I don't want to go into this here, because this ground has been covered by Corbin and a lot of other people. But it is clear that the miasma was a psychic and social emanation, as well. As Michelet put it — this is from the epigraph that Corbin uses in the French edition of his book (for some reason this has been dropped in the English translation) — as he puts it, the miasma was "a wretched mixture of a hundred depraved and vicious things that ascend to her from the street, the breath of vile spirits, the pell-mell of smoke, foul emanations, and bad dreams that hovers over our dark cities." (Understand, this was before emission controls.)

The second reason for my reluctance to take this discourse metaphorically is a kind of obverse of the first, and is more germane to our immediate interests. The Victorians were keenly aware of what we often lose sight of, that language is a category that partakes of material life. This point emerges most clearly when we look at the way these themes of dirt and pollution were developed in connection with pronunciation. (I should note that this topic was treated somewhat differently in England and America, for various reasons. But the underlying social metaphysics was the same in each case.)

If anything, pronunciation engaged the themes of moral and physical cleanliness even more directly than discussions of slang. For example, here is George Perkins Marsh in 1859, talking about the practice of pronouncing words like *Ohio* and *Mississippi* with a lax final vowel, as "Ohiuh" or "Mississipih."

To pillory such offenses, to point out their absurdity, to detect and expose the moral obliquity which too often lurks beneath them, is the sacred duty of every scholar,... who knows how nearly purity of speech, like personal cleanliness, is allied with purity of thought and rectitude of action.

Now this is likely to strike a modern reader as disproportionate, to put it mildly. But 19th-century writers were conscious of speech as both a social and a physical activity, the liminal practice where culture imposed itself on the body, and vice-versa. Marsh makes this very clear in another passage, where he discusses regional differences of pronunciation, which he connects to physiological differences that are determined, among other things, by different "modes of life."

[On regional differences in stress pronunciation]: ...many a Northern member of Congress goes to Washington a *dactyl* or a *trochee*, and comes home an *amphibrach* or an *iambus*. [This has to do with stress retraction, but Marsh doesn't give any examples of what he has in mind.] Why and how external physical causes, as climate and modes of life, should affect pronunciation, we cannot say; but it is evident that material influences of some sort are producing a change in our bodily constitution, and we are fast acquiring a distinct national Anglo-American type. That the delicate organs of articulation should participate in such tendencies is altogether natural...

Now if you recall the remark of Marsh that I cited at the beginning — "To deny that language is susceptible of corruption is to deny that races or nations are susceptible of depravation" — you can see that this has something more than a metaphorical interpretation.

Marsh doesn't really develop this theme at length; for this I want to turn to an address that Henry James made in 1905 to the graduating class of Bryn Mawr College, called "The Question of our Speech." James begins with the premise that the American failure to arrive at a distinctive voice is the last barrier to the achievement of a national culture:

Of the degree in which a society is civilized the vocal form, the vocal tone, the personal, social accent and sound of its intercourse, have always been held to give a direct reflection.... Judged in this light, it must frankly be said, our civilization remains strikingly *unachieved*...

He goes on:

Nothing is commoner than to see throughout our country, young persons of either sex... whose utterance can only be indicated by pronouncing it destitute of any approach to the pronunciation of a consonant. It becomes

thus a helpless slobber of disconnected vowel noises — the weakest and cheapest attempt at human expression that we shall easily encounter, I imagine, in any community pretending to the general instructed state.

James allows that the *vox Americana* — our "collective vocal presence," he calls it — is shaped by "a convergence of inscrutable forces (climactic, social, political, theological, moral, "psychic"). But above all, it has been the victim of inattentiveness and bodily slackness, a point James makes in an unmistakably literal way:

...speaking badly is speaking with that want of attention to speech that we should blush to see any other of our personal functions compromised by — any other controllable motion, or voluntary act, of our lives... To walk in the dark, dress in the dark, eat in the dark, is to run the chance of breaking our legs, of misarranging our clothes, of besmearing our persons; and speech may figure for us either as the motion, the food, or the clothing of intercourse.

The control of bodily functions was doubly important: it both protected one from contagion and ensured that one would not inadvertently dirty oneself or one's environment. Corbin notes, for example, the strict discipline surrounding the teaching of retention in young girls' boarding schools, by which a gentlewoman might prove that she was able to control the other urges of the body. But the most immediate connection for James' listeners would have been to correct breathing, which was regarded as both the filter of noxious vapors and the emunctory for effluvia that might have accumulated in the lungs.³

The general indifference to speech becomes the source of pollution in the language, which James describes as "a living organism, fed by the very breath of those who employ it." There follows a passage remarkable for the grandiloquence of its dyspepsia, where James catalogues the despoilation and befoulment that the language has suffered in the New World at the hands — or rather mouths — of people with no concern for its civilized use, while the educated classes watch on indifferently:

To the American common school, to the American newspaper, and to the American Dutchman and Dago, as the voice of the people describes them, we have simply handed over our property — not exactly bound hand and foot, I admit, like Andromeda awaiting her Perseus, but at least distracted, dishevelled, despoiled, divested of that beautiful and becoming drapery of native atmosphere and circumstance which had, from far back, made, on its behalf, for practical protection, for a due tenderness of interest... There are many things our now so profusely imported and, as is claimed, quickly

³ An 1891 ad for Listerine carried the headline "Breathe through your nose — there are microbes in the air!"

assimilated foreign brothers and sisters may do at their ease in this country... but the thing they may best do is play, to their heart's content, with the English language, or in other words, dump their mountain of promiscuous material into the foundations of the American.

The pollution here is both collective and individual. The only defense we have, James argues, is that cultivated people shall become attentive to speech, and shall surround themselves with appropriate models in what he calls "a beneficent contagion." Only thus can we bring about the happy state of "a care for tone," which unites with other things to bear testimony to the value of "good breeding... the "most precious conquest of civilization, the very core of our social heritage." And tone — or as James calls it elsewhere, "position" — is above all a physical achievement, a shaping of the bodily dispositions that constitute what Bourdieu calls the *habitus*.

It is a metaphor to say that culture is inscribed on the body; but it is not a metaphor to say that culture is pronounced there.