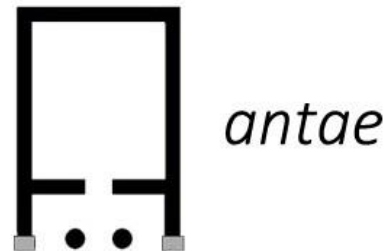


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The Aesthetics of Vomiting in Nietzsche's Philosophy

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Without a doubt, placing vomiting side by side with the concept of the aesthetic seems not only jarring but also a complication of our sense of aesthetics. However, as this essay tries to show, the historical link of the aesthetic with the concept of the sublime allows the former to not only encompass the beautiful but also include within it a darker side, one which enables us to connect it to the concept of disgust. Following the theories of Immanuel Kant, Jacques Derrida and Friedrich Nietzsche, is it here proposed that disgust and vomiting are forms of the aesthetic and the sublime, not their “other”.

Despite the original definition of the sublime as excellence of language, the Romantic period witnessed a modification of the term, extending associations of the sublime with a terror of certain powers threatening one's existence. In this respect, the act of vomiting shall here be related to the sublime in view of how key concepts of the Romantic re-definition of the term play out in vomiting—as pain, power, and terror. Kristeva's seminal work, *Powers of Horror*, is seen as further elaboration of this concept, enabling us to see the act of vomiting as exerting upon us, either openly or secretly, certain powers.

Through the theories of Kant and Derrida, this essay then moves to the possibility of including the repulsive into arts without breaching artistic imperatives. The importance of vomiting will be related to the expressive and emetic functions of language—two important concepts in theorising aesthetic thinking carried out by M.H. Abrams in his analyses. The article will discuss the possibility of employing the emetic function in order to structure a text: can vomiting be an underlying practice structuring the aesthetic, not as the “other” of the aesthetic but rather as a constitutive part? This essay will show that the philosophy of Nietzsche is ready to provide us with an answer, in whose works nausea and vomiting are understood as textual practices or as aesthetic ideals on which texts are based.

To understand vomiting and its relation to the aesthetic, one must briefly go into the history of the concept of the sublime. The concept of the sublime, so important to aesthetics, originated in classical antiquity when, for the first time, the concept was discussed in an anonymous treatise ascribed to Cassius Longinus: *On the Sublime*. Scholars date the manuscript to the first century AD, yet the author as well as the author's intentions remain dubious. Some scholars believe the purpose of the text was an indirect attack on the development of Roman society when the ideals of freedom were replaced by growing interest in luxury, and when political authority was no longer derived from personal power and public consensus, but from a small

group of people who either approved or disapproved of the emperor.¹ It might be that in such a context, when magnificence and extravagance were gaining strength as social values, Longinus felt under pressure to define his key category of the sublime as the cardinal excellence which consisted in a certain loftiness of language from which 'the greatest poets and writers have derived their eminence'.² Some scholars oppose the view that the text was meant to be a defence of simple republican virtues by asserting that the author created a new type of orator who preferred 'the grand, if flawed, products of natural genius' to 'impeccable mediocrity'.³

Contrary to Aristotle, who relies on *logos*, Longinus relies on *pathos*. In his definition of the sublime, Longinus nonetheless criticises grandiloquence, which he believes to be bombastic but empty: 'no man of sense can regard wealth, honour, glory, and power, or any of those things which are surrounded by a great external parade of pomp and circumstance, as the highest blessings'.⁴ On the contrary, those who neglect these qualities should be admired. Longinus applies the same principle to the sublime in poetry and prose; his aim is not a gorgeous exterior which he sees to be false, tasteless, and empty, but 'the true Sublime', by which he means lofty ideas and thoughts which extend beyond what is expressed: 'when a passage is pregnant in suggestion, when it is hard [...] to distract the attention from it, and when it takes a strong and lasting hold on the memory, then we may be sure that we have lighted on the true Sublime'.⁵

Longinus enumerates the five principle sources of the sublime and analyses several passages from classical literature which, in his opinion, lack sublimity. One of them is the lost play *Oreithyia*, written by Aeschylus. Longinus dwells on a fire scene and particularly on expressions such as 'curling torrent flames' and 'vomiting to heaven'. which, according to him, 'produce an effect of confusion and obscurity, not of energy; and if each separately be examined under the light of criticism, what seemed terrible gradually sinks into absurdity'.⁶ Another passage he criticises for lacking the sublime is from the epic poem *Shield of Heracles*, attributed to Hesiod. Longinus compares Homer with Hesiod's description of gloom and observes that 'rheum from her nostrils flowed' is not a terrible but, rather, a disgusting image.⁷ It is noteworthy that this passage, as well as the above-mentioned phrase 'vomiting to heaven', contains a disgusting element, in the sense of a substance transgressing the borders of the body. Although Longinus praises the dignity Homer gives to his descriptions of "the Battle of Gods", he nonetheless does not exempt Homer from his criticism. Longinus finds the description sublime but attacks it for being impious:

Earth rent from its foundations! Tartarus itself laid bare! The whole world torn asunder and turned upside down! Why, my dear friend, this is a perfect hurly-burly, in which the whole universe, heaven and hell, mortals and immortals, share the conflict and the peril.

¹ See Zdeněk Hrbata and Martin Procházka, *Romantismus a romantismy: Pojmy, proudy, kontexty* (Praha: Karolinum, 2005), p. 20.

² Longinus, *On the Sublime*, trans. by H. L. Havell (London: Macmillan and Co., 1890), I.2.

³ M.H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1958), p. 73.

⁴ Longinus, VII.1.

⁵ *Ibid.*, VII.4.

⁶ *Ibid.*, III.1.

⁷ *Ibid.*, IX.5.

A terrible picture, certainly, but (unless perhaps it is to be taken allegorically) downright impious, and overstepping the bounds of decency.⁸

Longinus's treatise thus complicates the possibility to see disgust or vomiting as part of the sublime. In the Romantic period, however, the concept of the sublime underwent certain modifications. The concept gained such modified meanings especially in Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and Beautiful*, where the sublime ceases to be associated with rhetoric and language but primarily with terror of external powers threatening one's existence. Another difference between Longinus's theory and that of Burke's is that the latter sees obscurity, uncertainty, and confusion as productive of the sublime: 'When we know the full extent of any danger, when we can accustom our eyes to it, a great deal of the apprehension vanishes'.⁹ This aspect of Burke's theory resonates with contemporary political issues as he extends it to despotic governments or religious systems, which operate on the obscure or fear of the dark, and keep the leader away from the public eye as much as possible; Burke regards Milton's description of Death in *Paradise Lost*, for instance, as a masterpiece in the arts of secrecy and expressive uncertainty.¹⁰ Burke's theories nonetheless differ from the Miltonic sublime (prevailing in England in 18th century and still popular in the Romantic era) in the way that Burke's sublime is no longer brought about by the conflict between God and man, but by obscure, uncertain, indefinable terror and anxiety which may humiliate and degrade human existence or, on the contrary, uplift it.¹¹

According to Burke, the sublime causes the state of the mind in which all its motions are suspended.¹² The mind is entirely filled with the terrifying object and the soul is overpowered to such a degree that it suspends its action and is filled with terror. For Burke, terror is the ruling principle of the sublime: whatever is terrible is sublime. Apart from terror, another ruling principle of the sublime is power: 'I know of nothing sublime which is not some modification of power'.¹³ In Burke's theory, power is connected to pain; not only is pain 'in all the modes and degrees of labour, pain, anguish, torment, [...] productive of the sublime', but pain 'is always inflicted by a power in some way superior, because we never submit to pain willingly'.¹⁴ That power derives all its sublimity from the terror with which it is accompanied is evident in the very few cases when power is stripped from its ability to hurt. As an example of such a case, Burke offers that of an ox, a creature of vast strength but extremely serviceable. When power loses its ability to inflict pain, it loses sublimity and becomes ludicrous; power, pain and terror are therefore interconnected in Burke's concept of the sublime.

This essay understands vomiting as related to this Burkean strand of the sublime. Opposed to Burke's concept of the sublime as the terror of external powers, vomiting is mostly associated with the internal powers of the body. Nonetheless, all the three concepts of Burke's theory of

⁸ Longinus, IX.7.

⁹ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and Beautiful* (London: Penguin Books, 2004), p. 102.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

¹¹ See Hrbata and Procházka, p. 121.

¹² Burke, p. 101.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 107.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 127, 108.

the sublime play out in vomiting (pain, power, and terror). The gagging sensation one experiences before vomiting, and, still farther down, the spasms in the stomach, when 'all the organs shrivel up the body, provoke tears and bile, increase heartbeat, cause forehead and hands to perspire'.¹⁵ The pain which accompanies vomiting could be viewed by some individuals as overwhelming: the body being seized by the terrifying act of vomiting and consequently the organism might be overpowered to such a degree that it suspends all its actions and could be filled with terror. The physical pain associated with vomiting is readily apparent, and power and terror are essential characteristics of vomiting, too. Kristeva titled her seminal essay on abjection *Powers of Horror* in the conviction that the horrors of bowels, blood, urine, or excrement, loathsome as they are, nonetheless exert upon us certain powers, either openly or obscurely.

Kristeva's concept of vomiting shares with the Burkean sublime its obscurity, formlessness, and confusion. In vomiting, the border between inside and outside collapses; when one vomits it is as if the skin, a fragile container, no longer guarantees the integrity of one's 'own and clean self', but gives way to the contents of the body.¹⁶ The terrifying power of vomiting is that, out of well-articulated boundaries, vomiting makes ill-articulated, unclear, and indefinable areas.

The parallels between the sublime and vomiting did not escape the attention of James Joyce who, at the beginning of *Ulysses*, interchanges these two concepts. Sarah Tribuet-Joseph reflects the image of the sublime in the scene where Stephen and Mulligan observe the sea from the tower: 'Man is left awestruck by the sublime, rendered helpless before the greater forces of nature, the sea, in this instance, this vast expanse of water which threatens to swallow up human life altogether so insignificant is man beside nature'.¹⁷ Stephen, the artist, views this sublime scene differently:

Across the threadbare cuffed edge he saw the sea hailed as a great sweet mother by the wellfed voice beside him. The ring of bay and skyline held a green mass of liquid. A bowl of white china had stood beside her [his mother's] deathbed holding the green sluggish bile which she had torn up from her rotting liver by fits of loud groaning vomiting.¹⁸

Tribuet-Joseph suggests that, due to phonetic association and metaphoric resemblance, Stephen shifts abruptly from a traditionally sublime image into that of vomiting: 'Perhaps even the movement of the sea metonymically reminds him of the heaving and vomiting. For Stephen, the sublime becomes slime'.¹⁹ The parallels between the sublime and vomiting could not go any further; in this particular scene, the sublime and vomiting coalesce to the ultimate degree.

Although vomiting or defecation are not usually deemed to be epic topics, Hermione de Almeida believes that in his works Joyce aims to show the significance of seemingly

¹⁵ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. by Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 3.

¹⁶ Kristeva, p. 53.

¹⁷ Sarah Tribuet-Joseph, *Proust and Joyce in Dialogue* (Abingdon: Modern Humanities Research Association and Routledge, 2008), p. 41.

¹⁸ James Joyce, *Ulysses* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1992), p. 4.

¹⁹ Tribuet-Joseph, p. 41.

unimportant things; Joyce, as well as other writers, feel ‘entitled to include in their defiantly human myths all the acts of existing, loving, denying, and affirming: the affections of the body (tears, vomiting, defecation, micturition, menstruation), random thought, and meaningless event’.²⁰

To include the repulsive into arts is not an act of breaching artistic imperatives. By admitting the possibility and the concept of negative pleasure in his analysis of the sublime, Kant is convinced that the Fine Arts can give beauty to ugly or displeasing things: ‘furies, diseases, the ravages of war, etc. can all furnish beautiful descriptions’ and can be represented in art.²¹ Thus, despite repulsion being one of the facets of the sublime, the sublime is not the absolute other of the beautiful in still retaining an ability to provoke a certain pleasure. As Kant remarks, ‘[t]he Beautiful and the Sublime agree in this, that both please in themselves’.²² However, there are also remarkable differences between them. Whereas the beautiful is connected to the imagination, the sublime is connected to reason. The beautiful ‘directly brings with it a feeling of the furtherance of life’, whereas the sublime ‘is a pleasure that arises only indirectly; viz. it is produced by the feeling of a momentary checking of the vital powers and a consequent stronger outflow of them’—and thus ‘it seems to be regarded as emotion, not play, but earnest in the exercise of the Imagination’.²³ The imagination is seriously challenged by the sublime, and Krell specifies that the only proper object of the sublime in Kant’s analysis is ‘the human heart of hearts, the heart of man, the famous untranslatable *Gemüt*’.²⁴ For Kant, sublimity arises from ideas of reason, not from the realm of nature as such. Nevertheless, the violent, chaotic and dire forces of nature, nature experienced as disorder and devastation, provoke this experience in our heart of hearts.

Strikingly enough, the concept of the sublime itself is in Kant’s own text described by means of expressions associated with vomiting. Kant’s definition of the sublime as pleasure ‘produced by the feeling of a momentary checking of the vital powers and a consequent stronger outflow of them’ draws on metaphorical language evoking the act of vomiting.²⁵ Krell (as well as Derrida) draws attention to the corporal scheme of Kant’s sublime arising from a momentary inhibition of life-forces. Krell stresses the sudden ‘outpouring’ or ‘ejaculation’ which follows the inhibition of the forces, ‘all the stronger for their having been dammed up or contained’.²⁶ Derrida, too, comments on the passage but specifies that although the ‘outflow’ might resemble vomiting at first, it is rather ejaculation than vomiting.²⁷ He nonetheless asserts that vomit is ‘a

²⁰ Hermione De Almeida, *Byron and Joyce Through Homer: Don Juan and Ulysses* (London: Macmillan Press, 1981), p. 60.

²¹ See Jacques Derrida, ‘Economimesis’, in *The Derrida Reader: Writing Performances*, ed. by Julian Wolfreys (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1988), pp. 263-293 (p. 290). See also p. 289.

²² Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgment*, trans. by J.H. Bernard (London: Macmillan and Co, 1914), p. 101.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 102.

²⁴ David Farrell Krell, *Sexuality, Disease, and Death in German Idealism and Romanticism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), p. 7.

²⁵ Kant, p. 102. Kant uses the word *Ergiessung*, “pouring out”.

²⁶ Farrell Krell, p. 7.

²⁷ Derrida, (p. 289).

parergon of the third *Critique*'.²⁸ Vomiting as a violent, dark, and uncontrolled power of the body is productive of a sudden, but massive, burst of the sublime into the external world.

In 'Economimesis', which is Derrida's analysis of the role of disgust—*Eckel* in Kant's aesthetic philosophy—Derrida relates vomit to *jouissance*.²⁹ It is important to note that Derrida distinguishes between vomit and vomiting, thus reconciling the tension between pleasure and terror. Whereas the act of vomiting has been seen as powerful, overwhelming, and terrifying in the theories based on Burke and Kristeva, Derrida excludes vomit from this definition. No matter how terrifying vomiting seems to be, it relates to relief or even joy. Derrida sees the process of vomiting as something that exists in and through the symbolic and can be signified; for him, it signifies an activity or incentive. On the other hand, Derrida associates vomit *jouissance* and as such with what cannot be said or represented in language: 'vomit is related to enjoyment [*jouissance*], if not to pleasure. It even *represents* that very thing that forces us to enjoy—in spite of ourselves. But this representation annuls itself, and that is why vomit remains unrepresentable'.³⁰ Yet it is not the negative of the system, and it is vomit, not vomiting, that Derrida is interested in.

Derrida starts his argument with Kant's concept of negative pleasure, a concept that admits the possibility of the ugly, the monstrous, or the sublime to be represented by art. As Derrida claims, the sublime is the absolute other of the beautiful, and it can still raise (negative) pleasure. The negative is thus a part of Kant's aesthetic system; it has its role there. What is however excluded from the aesthetic is that which cannot be digested, that which cannot be eaten 'either sensibly or ideally', and by never 'letting itself be swallowed must therefore *cause itself to be vomited*'.³¹ For Kant, the excluded is the disgusting: 'There is only one kind of ugliness which cannot be represented in accordance with nature, without destroying all aesthetical satisfaction and consequently artificial beauty; viz. that which excites *disgust*'.³² As Eugenia Brinkema explains in her analysis of the disgusting in films, for Kant, *Eckel* is the particular form of ugliness which 'functions as the limit for the possibilities of the aesthetic'.³³ The disgusting is thus an inassimilable aspect of the aesthetic that aesthetic theory cannot digest. Brinkema goes on to claim that disgust is a 'catastrophe for the beautiful'.³⁴ Derrida, thus, understands vomit as 'the absolute excluded' from aesthetical representation, and concludes that everything can be expressed by Kant's aesthetic and 'logocentric system except vomit'.³⁵ Vomit, the disgusting, forms 'the transcendental of the transcendental' and, as such, vomit is then for philosophy 'an elixir, even in the very quintessence of its bad taste'.³⁶ Derrida's 'Economimesis' thus posits vomit at the centre of transcendental aesthetics and in this way prioritises vomit *en route* to theorising philosophical questions.

²⁸ Derrida, (p. 289).

²⁹ *Ibid.*, (p. 291).

³⁰ *Ibid.*, (p. 291).

³¹ *Ibid.*, (p.289).

³² Kant, p. 195.

³³ Eugenia Brinkema, 'Laura Dern's Vomit, or, Kant and Derrida in Oz', *Film-Philosophy*, 15(2) (2011), 51-69 (p. 57).

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Derrida, (pp. 290-91).

³⁶ *Ibid.*, (pp. 290, 293).

As vomit is so vital for Derrida, he also sees the mouth as both a very important organ and concept: it is ‘an analogy, towards everything returns as towards the logos itself’; in this way Derrida thus identifies in Kant ‘two means of entering and two means of leaving the mouth, where one would be expressive and emissive (of the poem in the best case), the other vomitive or emetic’.³⁷

In the sense Derrida understands it, the mouth and its expressive function is thus an important term for theorising aesthetic thinking. M.H. Abrams’s analysis of the dominant orientation in aesthetic theories evidences a shift during the Romantic era from mimetic theories, based on imitation of aspects of the universe, to expressive theories, with focus on the poet and his ‘natural genius, creative imagination, and emotional spontaneity’.³⁸ Abrams identifies the lamp as a recurrent metaphor of the Romantic understanding of ‘the mind as receptor or projector’, throwing its beams onto an external world consequently transformed by the perceptions of the poet.³⁹ As his point of departure, Abrams takes Wordsworth’s 1800 definition of poetry ‘as a spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings’ and argues that Romantic aesthetic conceptions were expressive theories, primarily based on this ‘overflow’, signifying ‘the internal made external’.⁴⁰

The most frequent of these terms was ‘expression,’ used in contexts indicating a revival of the root meaning *ex-pressus*, from *ex-premere*, ‘to press out.’ As A.W. Schlegel wrote in 1801, referring to the vocal signs of feeling, ‘The word expression (*Ausdruck*) is very strikingly chosen for this: the inner is pressed out as though by a force alien to us.’ ‘Poetry,’ said John Stuart Mill, is ‘the expression or uttering forth of feeling’; and ‘utter’ in its turn derives from the Old English word for ‘out’ [...].⁴¹

At the end of the British Romantic era, roughly the 1830’s, most literary critics and thinkers came to the conclusion that it was emotion that was made external, pressed out in a Romantic poem. Earlier in the century, there had been variety of opinions ‘as to just what mental elements are externalised in a poem’.⁴² Coleridge, for example, believed that poetry expresses intellectual purposes, thoughts, and sentiments which originated in the poet’s mind. Of all English Romantics, Coleridge undeniably deals most with the process of thinking. In *Treatise on Method*, Coleridge offers a physiological definition of the mind:

Events and images [...] are like light, and air, and moisture, to the seed of the Mind, which would else rot and perish. In all processes of mental evolution the objects of the senses must stimulate the Mind; and the Mind must in turn assimilate and digest the food which it thus receives from without.⁴³

³⁷ Derrida, (p. 282).

³⁸ Abrams, p. 21.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 47-48.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ S.T. Coleridge, ‘Treatise on on Method, as Published in the Encyclopædia Metropolitana’ (Constable & Co., 1934), p. 7. As quoted in Abrams, p. 172.

In this definition, Coleridge materialises the thinking process and identifies its operations with the physiological process of digestion: in his view, images of sense become 'materials on which the mind feeds'.⁴⁴ Coleridge gives a metaphorical account of the mind in which the cognitive processes are related to the digestive system where the mind behaves like the stomach: it takes in food from the outside, absorbs it, assimilates it, digests it and, finally, releases it, that is, it expresses the processed food from the inner body to the outside. There cannot be any doubt as to which orifice the poem is outwardly expressed through: even though the food has been digested, it is, in accordance with Derrida's reading of Kant, expressed through the mouth. The poem spontaneously overflows and brims over the poet, whose body is the origin of the poem. In some Romantic aesthetic theories, at least, the expressive and emetic functions of the mouth seem to be almost indistinguishable.

The emetic function of the mouth is further highlighted by the fact that in theories of many Romantic thinkers, thinking is equalled to eating. That not only the poet's genius, imagination and spontaneous feelings are expressed in a Romantic poem is complicated by the way they understand the mind and mental processes. Slavoj Žižek reminds us that Theodor Adorno sums up G.W.F. Hegel's philosophical system in an aphorism that it is 'the belly turned mind'.⁴⁵ More than perhaps any other modern European philosopher, Hegel, David L. Clark is convinced, understood how eating is inevitably a 'metonymy of introjection', a figure for a range of psychic processes including cognitive processes such as perception and thinking.⁴⁶ Thus, for Hegel (and other idealist philosophers), thinking is indistinguishable from a kind of eating, with eating and thinking being 'not so much antithetical as competing metonymies of introjection'.⁴⁷ In an interview on digestion, Derrida expresses his interest in the figures of incorporation, that is, memory and interiorisation, which are found in speculative thought. He considers the act of assimilation through which Hegel's spirit incorporates history to be 'a kind of sublimated eating', and understands Hegel's spirit as 'eating everything that is external and foreign, and thereby transforms it into something internal, something that is its own'.⁴⁸ Derrida in fact calls the figures of incorporation the 'tropes of cannibalism' and asserts that nowhere 'is this clearer than in Hegel, but these tropes are at work everywhere in Western thought'.⁴⁹

The conceptual borrowings used in Coleridge's definition of cognitive processes, where he applies to the mind the characteristics of eating and digestion as mentioned above, suggests that some of the Romantic expressive theories, read from a Derridean perspective, are a form of sublimated vomiting. The poet's mind feeds on the images from the outside; it eats them,

⁴⁴ Abrams, p. 172.

⁴⁵ Slavoj Žižek, 'Hegel and Shitting: The Idea's Constipation', in *Hegel and the Infinite: Religion, Politics, and Dialectics*, ed. by Slavoj Žižek, Clayton Crockett, Creston Davis and Jeffrey W. Robbins (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), pp. 221-32 (p. 222).

⁴⁶ David L. Clark, 'Hegel, Eating: Schelling and the Carnivorous Virility of Philosophy', in *Cultures of Taste/Theories of Appetite*, ed. by Timothy Morton (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp. 115-39 (p. 121).

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

⁴⁸ Danial Birnbaum and Anders Olsson, 'An Interview with Jacques Derrida on the Limits of Digestion', trans. by Brian Manning Delaney, *Journal*, 2 (2009). <<https://www.e-flux.com/journal/02/68495/an-interview-with-jacques-derrida-on-the-limits-of-digestion/>> [accessed 1 December 2019].

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* Starting from biblical hermeneutics and the interpretation of the Christian doctrine of transubstantiation, it continues towards speculative philosophy where eating is a metaphor for and conceptual—sometimes hidden and sometimes apparent—precondition of thought.

assimilates them and expresses them in a poem through his mouth. Abrams brings up one of Byron's metaphors for creative processes, which strengthens the view to see expressive theories more as emetic theories. As Byron prefers 'metaphors of greater daring, dash, and grandiosity',⁵⁰ he, in a letter to Annabella Milbanke dated the 29th of November 1813, introduces his mental processes through the analogy of a volcano: poetry 'is the lava of the imagination whose eruption prevents an earthquake'.⁵¹ In this analogy, Byron thus sees poetry as something ejected, something expelled from the poet under immense pressure as a result of an eruption which cannot be curbed or controlled. The explosion is spontaneous and overwhelming; it is also accompanied by enormous energy, which has accumulated inside of the body until it bursts forth. In this analogy, imagination is viewed as spewing poems out from the inside to the external world, whereby the ejected transforms and changes the surrounding area in a profound way. Poetry, as Byron understands it, is thus rather a product of the emetic function of the mouth than that of the expressive.

This emetic function is also highlighted in Nietzsche's philosophy, and it might be suggested that Nietzsche's philosophy grapples with the question of whether it is possible to employ the emetic function in order to structure a text. Can vomiting be an underlying practice structuring the aesthetic, not the "other" of the aesthetic but a constitutive part of it? Is it possible to understand vomiting as a textual practice, an aesthetic ideal on which texts are based? Nietzsche offers such a possibility, a possibility where vomiting is a necessary condition for the production of texts. Although Nietzsche was a significant critic of Romanticism, his indebtedness to Romantic thinking is undeniable. Octavio Paz's remark upon Eliot and Pound could indeed be extended to Nietzsche: 'Denial of Romanticism was also Romantic'.⁵²

In his writings, Nietzsche explicitly connects the body with his textual practice. He sees the body to be the source of his dialectical argumentation and rhetorical power, and his book *Ecce Homo* to be the result not so much of his intellectual facilities but rather of nausea, vomiting and mucus, which have brought his intellectual process into being in the first place:

The perfect brightness and cheerfulness, even exuberance of the spirit, reflected in this work, is compatible in my case not only with the most profound physiological weakness, but even with an excess of pain. In the midst of the torments that go with uninterrupted three-day migraine, accompanied by laborious vomiting of phlegm, I possessed a dialectician's clarity par excellence and thought through with very cold blood matters for which under healthier circumstances I am not mountain-climber, not subtle, not cold enough.⁵³

In this case, nausea has structured his text, its style, and meaning; it made it bright, cheerful, and even exuberant in spirit. It provided it with the clarity, elaboration, and eloquence that the text would be missing had it originated 'under healthier circumstances'. His text reflects its

⁵⁰ As quoted in Abrams, p. 49.

⁵¹ Leslie A. Marchand, *Byron's Letters and Journals, Vol. III* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1974), p. 405.

⁵² Michael Löwy and Robert Sayre, *Romanticism Against the Tide of Modernity*, trans. by Catherine Porter (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), p. 150.

⁵³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals/Ecce Homo*, trans. by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1969), pp. 222-23.

origin in physiological functions and acknowledges its indebtedness to nausea, a nausea transformed into his textual practice. Nietzsche's text is thus driven by certain emetic logic: his dialectical method is not merely logical, but most of all physiological.

Besides his writing, nausea and vomiting affect Nietzsche's private life as well. However, even when he speaks about the impact of sickness in his life, it is more often than not related to his creativity and thinking. Nausea gives Nietzsche the power and impulse to live and create. Nietzsche speaks from his own experience:

[B]eing sick can even become an energetic *stimulus* for life, for living more. This, in fact, is how that long period of sickness appears to me *now*: as it were, I discovered life anew, including myself; I tasted all good and even little things, as others cannot easily taste them – I turned my will to health, to *life*, into a philosophy.⁵⁴

His completion of *Gaya Scienza* is the result of the most unexpected thing, 'convalescence'.⁵⁵ From such severe sickness as he experienced, he speaks of when:

one returns *newborn*, having shed one's skin, more ticklish and malicious, with a more delicate taste for joy, with a tenderer tongue for all good things, with merrier senses, with a second dangerous innocence in joy, more childlike and yet a hundred times subtler than one has ever been before.⁵⁶

But at the beginning of this new life of more intense joy and subtler sensitivity, there was nausea, a nausea 'that had gradually developed out of an incautious and pampering spiritual diet, called romanticism'.⁵⁷ By calling Romanticism a 'diet', Nietzsche equates eating and thinking. Brinkema makes a similar point when admitting that an overindulgence on the Romantic—on the beautiful, on the aesthetic, on excessive sweetness past a certain point—becomes nauseating: '[t]he risk of overdose on the beautiful, a surfeit experience of pleasure, can thus lead to the sensation of unpleasure, a super-satiation and exhaustion'.⁵⁸ How does one get rid of the Romantic diet, this 'careless mental diet and pampering'?⁵⁹ One either never eats Romanticism, or else must get rid of it before it is digested. 'One has to know the size of one's stomach',⁶⁰ says Nietzsche, and, Weineck adds, 'one must also know when to throw up what is already inside: Romanticism, Wagner, both Anti-Semitism and Christian Love, for example, all those overly sweet stuffs that, if digested, will make you lazy and interfere with your instinct'.⁶¹ It is the throwing up of Romanticism, therefore, that makes Nietzsche live anew and more fully. Vomiting, for Nietzsche, thus seems to be a liberating strategy. His waste does not seem to be either appalling or an obstacle to his advancement.

⁵⁴ Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, p. 224.

⁵⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), p. 32.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

⁵⁸ Brinkema, (p. 56).

⁵⁹ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, p. 33.

⁶⁰ Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, p. 239.

⁶¹ Silke-Maria Weineck, 'Digesting the Nineteenth Century: Nietzsche and the Stomach of Modernity', *Romanticism*, 12(1) (2006), 35-43 (p. 38).

Another example of vomiting can be found in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. The text opens with Zarathustra leaving his mountain-top in order to bestow wisdom to men. What Zarathustra teaches to men is the hour of *the great contempt*, which is related to Kant's concept of disgust. Derrida connects Zarathustra with *Eckel* by emphasising the fact that the disgusting is a topic Zarathustra 'endlessly ruminates' in the third passage of the text.⁶² Zarathustra wishes men to see that their existence, their happiness, and their beliefs are repulsive. Zarathustra, nonetheless, quickly notices that people do not understand him; he realises, then, that the most contemptible thing in the world is *the last man*, whom he defines as "the most despicable man" and whose biggest problem is that 'he can no longer despise himself'.⁶³ Nietzsche defines the last man as an individual who is unable to see himself as sickening, a reason why the life of the last man has become stagnant. Nietzsche's last man values the aesthetic, the beautiful, the healthy; sickness, nausea, and vomiting he regards as sins. To prevent being sick, to prevent an upset stomach, people prefer to accept things as they are: 'People still fall out, but are soon reconciled—otherwise it spoileth their stomachs'.⁶⁴ However, nothing seems to spoil their digestion because they tend to digest everything; what yesterday was tough, hard, and indigestible, 'hangs today, outchamped and outchewed, from the mouths of the men of today'.⁶⁵ From Nietzsche's perspective, it follows that, as the result of digesting the harmful things, society is stagnant and constipated. Even though the last man wants to go up, and therefore, denounces the body, he is actually going nowhere, as 'man returneth eternally! The small man returneth eternally!'⁶⁶ There is no progress, no movement; society is paralysed. Nietzsche, thus, identifies an inability to vomit as the main obstacle to change. According to Kant's theory of *Eckel*, there is something worse than the worst, 'something more disgusting than the disgusting'.⁶⁷ For Zarathustra, this would be the inability to be disgusted, the inability to vomit. Although people in his text exhibit all the signs of tiredness, exhaustion, the dissolution of instincts and the impoverishment of life, they still regard themselves as beautiful and healthy. People cannot be liberated from their existence of illusory health and beauty as long as they are unable to vomit. Nietzsche sees vomiting, then, as a meaningful activity with wide-ranging transformative powers.

The transformative effect of vomiting is explicitly stated in a parable, and Zarathustra feels its effect on his own body because, as is revealed later, in the chapter tellingly entitled 'The Convalescent', the main protagonist of the parable is Zarathustra himself:

And truly, what I saw, the like had I never seen. A young shepherd did I see, writhing, choking, quivering, with distorted countenance, and with a heavy black serpent hanging out of his mouth. Had I ever seen so much loathing and pale horror on one countenance? [...]. Then had the serpent crawled into his throat. [...]. Far away did [the shepherd] spit the head of the serpent:—and sprang up—[...] No longer shepherd, no longer man—a

⁶² Derrida, (p. 292).

⁶³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. by Thomas Common and Bill Chapko (New York: The Modern Library, 1930), 'Prologue 5'.

⁶⁴ *ibid.*

⁶⁵ *ibid.*, LIII.

⁶⁶ *ibid.*, LVII.2.

⁶⁷ Brinkema, (p. 60).

transfigured being, a light-surrounded being, that LAUGHED! Never on earth laughed a man as HE laughed! O my brethren, I heard a laughter which was no human laughter.⁶⁸

Zarathustra reveals that the serpent is a metaphor for his great disgust at mankind, which 'strangled [him] and had crept into [his] throat'.⁶⁹ After overcoming this disgust and vomiting and spitting, the shepherd (Zarathustra) is transformed into a totally different being. A being who laughs, which connects Nietzsche to Kristeva and Derrida, who also relates vomit to *jouissance*. After vomiting, Zarathustra is no longer human: he has been elevated and has reached the knowledge of the true condition of the world, which he formulates in his Law of Eternal Return. His philosophy of the eternal return, nonetheless, is also a product of vomiting. The thought comes to him from his stomach, and he vomits it out:

Up, abysmal thought out of my depth! [...]. My voice shall soon crawl thee awake. Thou stirrest, stretchest thyself, wheezest? Up! Up! Not wheeze, shalt thou, - but speak unto me! Zarathustra calleth you, Zarathustra the godless! [...] Joy to me! Come hither! Give me thy hand - ha! Let be! Aha! - - Dis- gust, disgust, disgust - - - alas to me!⁷⁰

After days of severe sickness and pain, Zarathustra's body again becomes healthy; and, after his experience of agony, he has become 'the man without disgust, this is Zarathustra himself, the surmounter of the great disgust'.⁷¹ Thus 'ends Zarathustra's down-going'.⁷² Despite his downward movement, he advanced as no one before him. It is vomiting that helped him overcome the great contempt, raising him, thus, to the highest sphere, as Nietzsche specifies in *Ecce Homo*: 'How did I redeem myself from nausea? What rejuvenated my sight? How did I fly to the height [...] [It was] nausea itself that created wings for me'.⁷³ Nietzsche understands vomiting as rebirth.

In his philosophical texts, Nietzsche describes a society extremely afraid of sickness. The fear is so strong that people want to avoid sickness at all cost; they swallow what is offered, reconcile every argument, and accept existing conditions. They are trapped in their belief that they live in a beautiful world, where everything is pleasant, tasteful, and healthy, and that any other kind of life would be worse, more tiring and complicated. Thus, they close themselves to other possibilities. Convinced by philosophical systems, they believe that things cannot be otherwise than as they are. They know nothing of reversing the course their lives go; they know nothing of vomiting, and, if they do, then vomiting is obscured as something unhealthy. Vomiting seems to be so appalling that people do not want even to think about it; they are determined to pursue health and do not realise that society has taken their power and health away from them.

Nietzsche's philosophy, however, offers an alternative. As Nietzsche shows, the fear of sickness is unjustified because life must be experienced both in sickness and in health. In *Ecce Homo*, sickness is regarded as 'an energetic *stimulus* for life, for living more'.⁷⁴ The works of Nietzsche

⁶⁸ Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, XVI.2.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, XLVII.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, LVII.1.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, LXVIII.

⁷² *Ibid.*, LVII.1.

⁷³ Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, p. 234.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 224.

ultimately show immense gratitude and indebtedness to sickness and nausea. Sickness, Nietzsche believes, has cheerful, inspirational, and transformative effects on the individual. That is the reason he does not want to exclude vomiting from life, from one's existence. A society that values beauty and health, while finding vomiting repugnant, stagnates because it lacks a crucial transformative, rebellious force and energy. A society suspicious of sickness has reached an impasse, because it lives in a form of permanent self-deception; it is unable to see that its health is just a form of illness without any prospects of being cured, for the remedy itself—vomiting—is avoided as an undesirable and unhealthy function of society. Society's condition is the most despicable: its biggest problem, nevertheless, is its inability to despise itself.

Nietzsche regards nausea as a noble and heroic virtue which is a necessary precondition for creativity, thinking, and aesthetics. Nietzsche aestheticises vomiting because his philosophy creates a liberating space where the beautiful and the disgusting, the aesthetic and the non-aesthetic, are interrelated, a space where the aesthetic and the non-aesthetic complement each other. For Nietzsche, then, philosophy is interdependent on the human ability to be disgusted and to be sick—just as vomiting is a symptom of the beautiful, so must the beautiful manifest symptoms of the disgust.

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