
9 *The Stench of the Poor*

The Secretions of Poverty

THE INCREASED attention to social odors was the major event in the history of olfaction in the nineteenth century before Pasteur's theories triumphed. Whereas references to stench from the earth, stagnant water, corpses, and, later, carcasses gradually diminished, the discourse of public health and the language of novels, as well as nascent social research, spoke of smells to the point of suggesting an obsession with a human swamp. The shift from the biological to the social was a result of Cabanis's project. Moreover, observers no longer analyzed only the smells of hospitals, prisons, and all those sites where people confusedly crowded together to produce the undifferentiated odors of the putrid throng. A new curiosity impelled them to track down the odors of poverty in the very dens of the poor.

This reorientation away from public toward private space required a complete change of strategy. "While continuing to stress the utility of broad streets, houses with good aspects, cleanliness of villages, drainage of swampy lands, [we] state that it is not the outside wall, but the actual inhabited room itself where the greatest watch on salubriousness has to be kept," Piorry concluded after reading the reports on epidemics in France between 1830 and 1836.¹ Passot summarized this view brilliantly fifteen years later: "The whole-

someness of a large town is the sum of all its private habitations.”²

The new effort to monitor stench inside the dwellings of the humble was inseparable from the development, among the bourgeoisie, of a system of perceptions and a model for behavior in which olfaction was only one component, though not a minor one. The sudden awareness of the growing differentiation of society was an incentive to refine analysis of smells.³ Other people’s odor became a decisive criterion.⁴ Charles-Léonard Pfeiffer, for example, has shown what skillful detail Balzac used in *La Comédie humaine* to locate the status of bourgeois and petit-bourgeois, peasants or courtesans, by the odors they emitted.⁵

Once all the smells of excreta had been got rid of, the personal odors of perspiration, which revealed the inner identity of the “I,” came to the fore. Repulsed by the heavy scents of the masses—symptomatic of how hard it was for ideas of differentiated individuality to emerge in that milieu—impelled by the prohibitions on the sense of touch, the bourgeois showed that he was increasingly sensitive to olfactory contact with the disturbing messages of intimate life.

The social significance of this behavior is flagrantly obvious. The absence of intrusive odor enabled the individual to distinguish himself from the putrid masses, stinking like death, like sin, and at the same time implicitly to justify the treatment meted out to them. Emphasizing the fetidity of the laboring classes, and thus the danger of infection from their mere presence, helped the bourgeois to sustain his self-indulgent, self-induced terror, which dammed up the expression of remorse. From these considerations emerged the tactics of public health policy, which symbolically assimilated disinfection and submission. “The enormous fetidity of social catastrophes,” whether riots or epidemics, gave rise to the notion that making the proletariat odorless would promote discipline and work among them.⁶

Medical discourse went hand in hand with this evolution in sensory behavior. Shaken by anthropology and the nascent empirical sociology, medical science let some fundamental neo-Hippocratic principles fall by the way. Topography, the nature of the soil, climate, and the direction of winds gradually ceased to be regarded as determining factors; experts emphasized more than ever the harm caused by crowding or proximity to excrement; above all, they now accorded decisive importance to the “secretions of poverty.”⁷ This was basically the conclusion of the report on the 1832 cholera morbus epidemic.⁸

Doctors and sociologists had just detected that a type of population existed which contributed to epidemic: the type that wallowed in its fetid mire.

It is now easier to understand the persistent anxiety aroused by excrement. The ruling classes were obsessed with excretion. Fecal matter was an irrefutable product of physiology that the bourgeois strove to deny.⁹ Its implacable recurrence haunted the imagination; it gainsaid attempts at decorporalization; it provided a link with organic life, as the traces of its immediate past. "We find the candor of refuse pleasing and restful to the soul," confessed Victor Hugo, alive to the history that could be read in waste.¹⁰ Parent-Duchâtelet and many others set out to explore the mechanisms of the necessary evil of urban excretion from an organicist and Augustinian viewpoint. Crossing the center of the city, they met the men who worked with filth. Excrement now determined social perceptions. The bourgeois projected onto the poor what he was trying to repress in himself. His image of the masses was constructed in terms of filth. The fetid animal, crouched in dung in its den, formed the stereotype. The bourgeois emphasis on the stench of the poor and the bourgeois desire for deodorization were therefore inseparable.

This new attitude was a departure from eighteenth-century anthropologists' fascination with the odor of bodies, which did not connect it with the state of poverty but attempted to relate it to climate, diet, profession, and temperament. These pioneers analyzed the odor of the old man, the drunkard and the gangrenous, the Samoyed and the stableboy, but rarely the poverty-stricken. The fetidity of the throng was dangerous only because of the crowding and mingling of people. At the most, Howard declared that the air surrounding the poor man's body was more contagious than the air surrounding the rich man's, but he made no reference to a specific stench.¹¹ He only implied that disinfection techniques had to be modified according to degree of wealth.¹²

Nevertheless, medical science in those days suggested that some individuals exhaled an animal stench. The human who had always wallowed in the depths of poverty smelled strong because his humors did not have the necessary digestion and the "degree of animalization proper to man."¹³ Therefore, if he did not have a human odor, it was not because he had regressed but because he had not crossed the threshold of vitality that defined the species. Accordingly, portraits of madmen and some convicts reflected the model of a chained

dog squatting in a trough, turning its bed into a dunghill, and dripping urine like a liquid manure sump. These portrayals gave birth to the image of the “dung-man,” impregnated with excrement, forerunner of the image of the foul-smelling laboring proletariat of the July Monarchy.¹⁴

As early as the eighteenth century, several other groups had a similar image. Foremost among these, it goes without saying, were prostitutes, typically associated with filth and whose presence diminished when refuse disappeared from the streets. In Florence, Chauvet noted that the streets were paved, drains covered, rubbish contained behind screens, “roads strewn with odoriferous flowers and leaves”;¹⁵ there was no longer a single prostitute to be seen.

Jews also were regarded as filthy individuals. They owed their unpleasant odor, it was said, to their characteristic dirtiness. “Everywhere these Hebrews gather,” Chauvet asserted, “and where they are left to administer their precinct themselves, the stench is singularly perceptible.”¹⁶

The ragpicker brought the linkage between unpleasant odor and occupation to its extreme, because his person concentrated the malodorous effluvia of excrement and corpses.¹⁷ Domestic servants also smelled unpleasant, although their status and hygiene improved. In 1755 Malouin advised airing as much as possible the places where they had been.¹⁸ In 1797 Hufeland ordered their exclusion from children’s nurseries.¹⁹

Between 1800 and the aftermath of the great cholera morbus epidemic in 1832, the image of Job, in the guise of the dung-man, became linked to the obsession with excrement. A favorite subject of early, flattering social research was the city’s untouchables, the comrades in stench, the people who worked with slime, rubbish, excrement, and sex: sewer men, gut dressers, knackers, drain cleaners, workers in refuse dumps, and dredging gangs attracted the attention of the early pioneers of empirical sociology. I have emphasized elsewhere the immense epistemological significance of the inquiry into public prostitution in the city of Paris, which claimed Parent-Duchâtelet’s attention for nearly eight years.²⁰ The archives of the conseils de salubrité confirm this special interest.

In addition to the evidence on prostitutes, there are other examples. The convict wallowing in his filth was still an inexhaustible theme.²¹ Certainly, in the eyes of contemporary theorists, this figure of the convict had become virtually irrelevant. Nonetheless, studies

of the penitentiary bear witness to a continuing reality. Dr. Cottu described his visit to a dungeon in Reims prison: "I felt I was being stifled by the horrible stench that hit me as soon as I entered . . . At the sound of my voice, which I tried to make soft and consoling, I saw a woman's head emerge from the dung; as it was barely raised, it presented the image of a severed head thrown onto the dung; all the rest of this wretched woman's body was sunk in excrement . . . Lack of clothing had forced her to shelter from the stringencies of the weather in her dung."²²

In 1822 alone the ragpicker, the archetype of stench, was the subject of seventeen reports by the Conseil de Salubrité.²³ The authorities tried to move away from the city the malodorous dumps where, prior to sorting, he piled up the bones, carcasses, and all the remains collected from public highways. The council looked kindly only on collectors of "bourgeois rags"; there was no danger that these would transmit the infection of the masses. The ragpicker concentrated the odors of poverty and was impregnated with them; his stench acquired a symbolic value. Unlike Job or the putrefying convict, he did not wallow in his own dejecta; the grimacing face of the rubbish of the masses, he sat on other people's dung.

Down the rue Neuve-St.-Médard, rue Triperet, or, even more, the rue des Boulangers, individuals were to be seen "dressed in rags, without shirts, stockings, or often shoes, crossing the streets whatever the weather, often going home soaked . . . laden with different products plucked from the capital's refuse, its fetid odor seeming to be so much identified with their persons that they themselves resemble veritable walking dunghills. Can it be otherwise in view of the nature of their activity in the streets, their noses continually in dunghills?"²⁴ When they got home they sprawled on stinking and dirty straw amid vile-smelling refuse.

Blandine Barret-Kriegel discerned an element of fascination in the shocked gaze of those who visited the poor—from Condorcet to Engels, from Villermé to Victor Hugo—for "the ragpicker's dustbin house," "infernal dwelling," for "the unpleasant smell of another, more barbarous, stronger life," the "eternal return of subterranean powers."²⁵ Accounts of behavior toward smells along with frequent references to the stench of hell confirm that, whether it concerned excrement, prostitutes, or ragpickers, the fascination mixed with repulsion pervaded the discourse and governed the attitude of sanitary reformers and social researchers.

It almost goes without saying that homosexuals shared in the stench arising from intimacy with filth. Symbols of anality, congregating in the vicinity of latrines, they also partook of animal fetidity.²⁶ According to Félix Carlier, the odors of the pederast, who was addicted to heavy perfumes, showed the close relationship between the smells of musk and of excrement.²⁷

The case of the sailor has been less closely investigated. As the ship, stockpot of every stench, quickly became the laboratory for experiments with ventilation and disinfection techniques, the individual who lived on board was to be seen as a necessarily important object of inquiry. He, after all, ran the greatest risk of falling victim to vile-smelling effluvia, as the tragic fate of the *Arthur* showed. Authors of manuals on maritime health were categorical: the sailor smelled unpleasant and was disgusting. "His customs are debauched; he finds supreme happiness in drunkenness; the odor of tobacco, wedded to the vapors of wine, alcohol, garlic, and the other coarse foods that he likes to eat, the perfume of his clothing often impregnated with sweat, filth, and tar make it repulsive to be near him." The stench of the sailor, "robust and libidinous," condemned to long continence or masturbation, added a strong spermatic secretion to the effluvia.²⁸

Fortunately, sailors—and in this context the crew stood for the masses at large—did not have a good sense of smell. They did not share the officers' revulsion, because they lacked delicate noses. Dr. Itard had stated that Aveyron's savage child felt no disgust for his own excrement.²⁹ The link that sanitary reformers established between stench and the relative anosmia of the masses only confirmed the bourgeoisie in their push toward deodorization. Although sailors were admitted to be keen-eyed, "hearing presents a slight difficulty" because of the uproar from storms and artillery; "the sense of smell is insensitive in that it is little exercised; the roughness of manual work makes the sense of touch very dull; the sense of taste is depraved by gluttonous and unrefined appetites."³⁰

In general "the sailor's sensory organs enjoy little activity; the nerve ends seem to be hardened by rough physical work and paralyzed by lack of exercise of the intellectual faculties."³¹ He would probably be unresponsive to the balsamic odors of spring flowers; far from the sights of rural nature, "his senses are no longer fine enough to analyze its charms."³² Worn out by strong emotions, sailors were unable to experience refined feelings. The sensory inferiority,

not to say disability, of the masses engendered a corresponding poverty of ideas and of feelings. Conversely, the refinement and acute sensitivity of the officer threw the deterioration of the sailor into even sharper relief, and justified the respect shown by the crew. After the cholera morbus epidemic, when the moral calculus movement was renewed, proletarian poverty became the favorite subject of social research. Now denunciations were directed against the stench of the masses as a whole instead of against a few isolated categories symbolically identified with excrement. If servants, nurses, and porters smelled unpleasant, it was because they brought the odor of the proletariat into the bosom of the bourgeois family; this was enough to justify their exclusion, with the exception of the wet nurse.³³ The neurotic Flaubert was a privileged witness to this repulsion toward “the basement odor” that emanated from the masses. “The journey back was excellent,” he wrote to Madame Bonenfant on May 2, 1842, “apart from the stench exhaled by my neighbors on the top deck, the proletarians you saw when I was leaving. I have scarcely slept at night and I have lost my cap.”³⁴ Huysmans later carried this intolerance of smells to its logical conclusion.

Jacques Léonard’s linguistic analyses of medical discourse emphasize how frequently the terms *wretched*, *dirty*, *slovenly*, *stench*, and *infect* were used together.³⁵ The unpleasant odor of the proletariat remained a stereotype for at least a quarter of a century, until the attempts at moralization, familialization, instruction, and integration of the masses began to bear fruit. Air, light, a clear horizon, the sanctuary of the garden were for the rich; dark, enclosed areas, low ceilings, heavy atmosphere, the stagnation of stench were for the poor. The archives of the conseils de salubrité and the Constituent Assembly’s 1848 inquiry into agricultural and industrial work are the crucial texts in this endlessly recycled discourse.

Several images dominated descriptions of poverty. Like the stench of certain artisans not long before, the stench of the poor man was attributed to impregnation even more than to his carelessness in disposing of all his excreta. Like earth, wood, and walls, the worker’s skin and, even more, his clothing, soaked up foul-smelling juices. In the Pompairin spinning mill, Dr. Hyacinthe Ledain wrote, the children were rickety. “Their condition is attributed to the fact that the air they breathe is unhealthy as a result of the large quantity of greasy oil used in these establishments. The clothing covering these children is so impregnated with it that the strongest, most repulsive odor can

be smelled when they approach.” The Secondigny textile mill was just as unhealthy. The children were hideous. “They can be seen coming out of their workshops covered in rags impregnated with oil.”³⁶ Jacques Vingtras felt repulsion for the lamplighter at the college at Le Puy who exhaled an odor of machine oil.³⁷ Again, in 1884 Dr. Arnould declared that the Lille poor were “inferior to the rich, not because of work, but because of their narrow, sordid shelters [the poor did not have dwellings], the uncleanliness that surrounds and penetrates them, their life in contact with filth which they have neither the time nor the means to get rid of and which even their education has not taught them to fear.”³⁸ While carrying out his retrospective research into working conditions in the north of France on the eve of World War I, Thierry Leleu heard it said that the reel-girls, called “chirots” (a dialect form of *sirops*, “syrups”) because of the liquid that poured out of the machines, “had the odor of linseed gum. A girl who worked in a spinning mill could be recognized by her odor, even in the street. This odor stuck to her skin.”³⁹ Popular novels later conveyed this perception and the repulsion it aroused. Their descriptions of factories stress the stench and suffocating heat rather than the industrial processes.⁴⁰

The odor of rancid tobacco that impregnated workingmen’s clothing was another common theme.⁴¹ Everything seems to suggest that the effluvia from tobacco was tolerated to only a limited extent at the end of the eighteenth century—the ruling classes were probably more tolerant of farting and the odor from latrines. Tobacco—pipe, cigar, then cigarette—conquered public places in the first half of the nineteenth century. At first glance this phenomenon seems to run counter to the strategy of deodorization then in progress; however, some doctors still attributed disinfectant properties to smoke. Old soldiers, veterans, and halfpay officers, as well as sailors, were responsible for its spread.⁴²

From this point on, tobacco never lost its ambiguity. Its odor signaled the arrival of the boor;⁴³ the majority of sanitary reformers denounced it. Michelet accused it of killing sexual desire and reducing women to solitude; Adolphe Blanqui demanded that women and children be forbidden to use this drug, because “it is the beginning of every disorder.”⁴⁴

The repulsion often assumed a sociological significance. Forget reviled the sailor’s quid; its odor impregnated his breath, hands, and clothing. It was true, he observed on a conciliatory note, that it was

a form of compensation; it should therefore be tolerated. "The sailor uses tobacco as you use coffee, balls, and entertainments, as the literary man feasts on Voltaire, the scholar on an abstract problem."⁴⁵ "Tobacco is the only thing that assists the imagination of the poor," pleaded Théodore Burette in his *Physiologie du fumeur*.⁴⁶

But tobacco's victory also symbolized the victory of liberalism; it bore witness to increasing male domination of social life before it actually became its instrument. Like conscription, to which its spread was largely due, tobacco was decked with "patriotic," egalitarian qualities. It was in this context that it earned its title to nobility. "Smoking creates an equality among its confraternity . . . rich and poor rub shoulders, without being surprised by the fact, in places where tobacco is sold," and only there.⁴⁷ "The firmest support of constitutional government,"⁴⁸ the July Monarchy ensured its triumph. For our purposes, it is important to note that this successful popularization occurred at exactly the time that the stench of the laboring classes was perceived as a natural act of the social landscape.

The stress on the repulsive smell of the proletariat appears clearly in the accounts by doctors and visitors to the poor. This was a new intolerance. Hitherto, doctors had seemed impervious to disgust; only fear of infection appeared to motivate precautions.⁴⁹ During the second third of the century, repulsion toward the smell of the masses was openly acknowledged, without any real recognition whether this represented a new intolerance or a new frankness. The patient's domicile became a place of daily torture for the doctor. "One positively suffocates there," Monfalcon and Polinière stated. "It is impossible to go into this center of infection; often the doctor who visits the poor cannot bear the fetid odor of the room; he writes his prescription by the door or the window."⁵⁰

Unlike his wretched clientele, the doctor no longer tolerated animal effluvia. "On entering this house," noted Dr. Joire in 1851, "I was struck by the foul-smelling odor breathed there. This odor was literally stifling and unbearable and seemed like the smell of the most fetid dung; it was particularly strong around the patient's bed, and was also spread through the whole apartment, despite the outside air that came in through the half-open door. I could not remove from my nose and mouth the handkerchief with which I protected myself the whole time I stayed with this woman. Yet neither the inhabitants of the house nor the invalid seemed to notice the inconvenience of the miasma."⁵¹ Adolphe Blanqui, assailed by the stench

of the Lille cellars and by the odor of filthy men emanating from them, recoiled in shock at the entrances to these “ditches for men”; only in the company of a doctor or a police officer did he “hazard” descent into this hell where “human shadows” tossed and swirled.⁵²

Inside the workshop, on the ship’s bridge, in the sickroom, the threshold of perception, or more precisely of tolerance of smells, defined social status. Bourgeois repulsion accompanied and justified phobia about tactile contact. The patient’s stench rather than respect for feminine modesty established the use of the stethoscope.⁵³

This social division perceived through bodily messages also embraced the disgust inspired by teachers, schoolmasters, even professors. Paul Gerbod skillfully demonstrated that their image then was that of an antihero.⁵⁴ These old, frustrated bachelors, whose former bourgeois pupils remembered their odor of sperm and rancid tobacco, had proved unable to fulfill their dreams of promotion; their stench, like the stench emitted by clergy of humble descent,⁵⁵ continued to betray their origins.

The masses gradually came to feel the same repulsion. The new sensitivity reached that fringe of workers who spent their nights trying to escape being haunted by their involvement in manual labor. Hitherto unperceived horrors had to be endured in the process of adopting the new culture. The warm consolation of sleeping more than one to a bed had to be given up. Norbert Truquin, a railway navvy, felt his gorge rise when he breathed the odor of brandy and tobacco exhaled by his companions; forced to share his pallet, he confessed that he could no longer without repulsion tolerate contact with another man.⁵⁶

*Cage
and Den*

The flood of discourse on the habitat of the masses and its stifling atmosphere revealed the new preoccupation after the 1832 cholera morbus epidemic. “The atmospheric swamp of the house” had replaced the cesspools of public space in the hierarchy of anxieties about smells.⁵⁷ In towns, complaints concentrated on the stench of the communal sections of the dwellings of the masses. The basic theme of the diatribe was a denunciation of the odor of excrement and refuse, which had not yet been privatized in these sections of society. Consequently the denunciation of stench was closely linked to the denunciation of

promiscuity. On this subject, discourse on sanitary reform was churned out with tedious monotony. Lachaise, Hatin, Bayard, Blanqui, Passot, Lecadre, Tétrais, Ledain, and many others unflaggingly copied each other or just repeated themselves. It would be interesting to analyze in detail the operation of this obsessional litany from the point of view of psychohistory. Popular novels, as Marie-Hélène Zylberberg-Hocquard has shown, 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.⁵⁸

The odor of stagnant urine, congealed in the gutter, dried on the paving, encrusted on the wall, assailed the visitor who had to enter the wretched premises of the poor. The only means of entry was through low, narrow, dark alleys. These formed channels for a fetid stream laden with greasy water and “the rubbish of every type that rained down from all the stories.”⁵⁹ Gaining access to the poor man’s stinking dwelling almost amounted to an underground expedition. Adolphe Blanqui moved through the Lille courtyards or the Rouen slums with the fascinated caution that earlier had driven Parent-Duchâtelet to cross the sewers of the city. The narrowness, darkness, and humidity of the small inner courtyard into which the alley opened made it look like a well, the ground carpeted with refuse. Here, garbage rotted, laundry- and dishwater formed pools; stenches amalgamated and rose to nourish the fetidity of the upper stories. Within this order of perception the staircase acted as an overflow; a foul-smelling cascade rushed down it, checked at every floor by the landing, fed by the latrines, which revealed through open doors the obscenity of the privy full of excrement. Dr. Bayard retained the aural memory of the “gurgling household water” on staircases in the IV^e arrondissement of Paris.⁶⁰ The stench of these premises formed an ensemble. The odor of excrement predominated; it varied only in strength from one place to another. There was no subtle division into different categories of smells here.

Inside the dwelling, congestion, a jumble of tools, dirty linen, and crockery, prevailed. The poor man “wallowed” amid this disorder, often in the company of animals;⁶¹ the cage rather than the den was the dominant image. “Poverty is enclosed in a narrow dungeon.”⁶² The obsession with air now focused on the dungeon; its lack of air seemed all the more apparent since scientists had succeeded in defining precise norms of ventilation. More than conveying the presence of miasma, stench now threatened suffocation. This basic

psychological shift helps explain the forms the new vigilance took.

In particular, writings focused on the aspect of narrowness. The crampedness of the sleeping area, the depth of the yard, and the length of the alley created in the mind of the bourgeois (who normally had plenty of room) the impression of suffocation. The phobia about lack of air focused attention on the stifling atmosphere of the craftsman's garret under the roof, the low ceiling of the lodge where the porter crouched like a dog, the tradesman's back shop, and the narrow closet of the student or draper's assistant.

Lodgings and hostels were even worse. Louis Chevalier has noted the repulsion aroused by the smell of immigrants from the provinces.⁶³ City dwellers' repugnance and contempt for the regional odors that impregnated seasonal workers from Limoges or Auvergne helped to justify the segregation of these country people for a long time.⁶⁴ Martin Nadaud was retrospectively shocked at the indifference that masons from the Creuse showed to the stench of their hostels. Both the vicomte d'Haussonville and Pierre Mazerolle denounced the odors from the cheese and bacon piled up on the shelves there.⁶⁵

The dormitories for the people of the Limousin region were well organized; yet the confusion that reigned in certain overnight lodgings haunted the bourgeois imagination. Visitors were aghast when faced with this total promiscuity. Here, the brotherhood of filth fostered an atmosphere of animality. Individuals, it was said, coupled freely there.⁶⁶ "Did these people really know each other?" asked Victor Hugo about the *Jacressade's* imaginary guests. "No, they sniffed one another."⁶⁷

"Rooms that are too narrow for one man to live in produce effects just as deadly as spacious chambers where many men are gathered," wrote Piorry about the dwellings of the masses.⁶⁸ In this environment, the sickroom recreated the marsh. It combined all the conditions of the swamp in the equatorial jungle, stated Dr. Smith.⁶⁹ This was where those putrid fevers incubated that it was eventually suggested might be the result of slow asphyxia, accompanied by ataxia and adynamia.⁷⁰ The unpleasant odor was evidence of the lack of air that hampered the efficient deployment of the work force. What was described as shameful laziness was most often only "debilitation . . . from the vitiated atmosphere in unhealthy dwellings."⁷¹ The poor had to be given air; doctors and sanitary reformers were unanimous on this point. Ventilation and deodorization were economic

imperatives. Gabriel Andral, Louis, Jean Bouillaud, Chomel, and many others carried out abundant observations to measure the effects of congestion, which, according to Jean Louis Baudelocque, was the cause of scurvy. Studies of cholera had established “the almost constant relationship between the gravity of the symptoms and the tinniness of dwellings”; it was probably the smallness of the dwelling that gave the disease its “typhohemic and mortal character.”⁷² Villermé focused on the ravages wrought by cholera in lodgings; the most congested areas were the most deadly.

The sense of smell was still better than the instruments of physics for measuring the renewal of air and thus for averting the ill effects of overcrowding. But there was increased concern for light in private dwellings, as in public space; this was the beginning of the great swing in attitudes that was to give uncontested supremacy to the visual. Moreover, Baudelocque noted that dark places made flesh soft, puffy, and flaccid; inadequate light slowed circulation, brought on the young girl’s terrible chlorosis; Jean Starobinski has stressed its effect on the imagination.⁷³ Darkness made nocturnal animals sad and perfidious; uncertain light was a threat to health, zeal for work, and sexual morality.⁷⁴ A young husband’s first duty, stated Michelet, was to give his child and its young mother “the joy of a good light.”⁷⁵

The countryside had never been thought particularly sweet-smelling. The peasant’s lack of hygiene and the strong odor of his sweat were very old themes; Sancho Panza had daydreamed about the heavy scent of Dulcinea’s armpits,⁷⁶ and a couple of centuries later Rousseau’s contemporaries complained freely on the same theme. The agitation about excrement had not been confined to the towns; it penetrated to the depths of the countryside. Country smells were often the objects of attack. In 1713 Ramazzini had already denounced the foul-smelling proximity of dung and, even more, the horrible stench from steeping hemp.⁷⁷ Before the discoveries by Priestley and particularly Ingenhousz, people were afraid of being near trees, lest these add to the ill effects of the subterranean blasts that beset the laborer. Even the air from kitchen gardens, stinking of manure, concealed many dangers. Like swamps, villages engendered miasma.⁷⁸

All this is a far cry from Julie’s garden and Jean-Jacques’s reveries. Two apparently contradictory systems of perception were intermingled; as a result of this duality, the image of the countryside remained complex throughout the following century.⁷⁹ For the moment, the contradiction was only on the surface. The countryside exalted by

Rousseau and his disciples emerged as a sweet-scented area, free of stench from the village and its assembled peasants, wafted by nothing but the breath of spring flowers. It was a countryside that seemed to have been created for solitude, where the traveler seemed able to tolerate only the isolated farm, the mill, the chalet, at a pinch the hamlet, and the momentary contact of a chance meeting with a shepherd.

This idyllic vision of the peasant and the life of the fields survived into the nineteenth century. Picturesque journeys, and particularly iconography, helped to keep it alive.⁸⁰ Unlike the everyday contact of medical practice, which involved the senses of touch and smell, ethnology via observation allowed distance; it permitted scales of revulsion. The artist's brush easily transferred reality into symbolism.

Nevertheless, the village was soon perceived as the antithesis of the mountain summit bathed in the purity of the ether, and was painted in dark colors. Social emanations fermented in the depths of valleys; travelers should not leave the slopes of hillsides. Obermann fled from low ground; Dr. Benassis set out to curette it. This was no hopeless undertaking: as early as 1756, Howard successfully transformed Cardington peasants' "mud huts," where in his opinion they lived like savages, into cheerful cottages.⁸¹

Charles-Léonard Pfeiffer has cataloged the manifestations of Balzac's repugnance to the smell of peasants. Here is just one example: "The strong, savage odor of the two habitués of the highway made the dining room stink so much that it offended Madame de Montcornet's delicate senses and she would have been forced to leave if Mouche and Fourchon had stayed any longer."⁸²

When Balzac wrote *Le Médecin de Campagne* (1833) and *Les Paysans* (1844) the stench from villages had been feeding a steady stream of writing for some years. No report read to the Conseil de Salubrité from whatever rural department, no medical thesis about the peasant environment, no report on an inquiry under the July Monarchy or the Second Republic failed to denounce violently the poor hygiene of the habitat of rural space. Thus, every book about the social history of the French countryside at that time gives considerable space to this complaint.⁸³ Most of the authors—including myself—have rather naïvely used the copious discussions by bourgeois observers for their own purposes. It would have been more valuable if they had tried to unravel the tangled systems of images and, above all, shown that the basic historical fact was not the actuality (which had probably

changed little) but the new form of perception, the new intolerance of traditional actuality. This sensory change within the elite and the flood of discourse it provoked were to bring about the revolution in public health, the road to modernity.

A reversal thus took place at the level of perceptions. Filth and rubbish, so greatly feared by refined city dwellers, invaded the image of the countryside; even more than in the past, the peasant tended to be identified with the dung-man, intimate with liquid manure and dung, impregnated with the odor of the stable. Hitherto, the public stench of the town had been under fire; now, the town was—slowly—cleared of its refuse; half a century later it had almost succeeded in cleaning up its poor. Its relationship with rural space was reversed: it became the place of the imputrescible—that is, of money—whereas the countryside symbolized poverty and putrid excrement.⁸⁴ The power of agrarian ideology was not sufficient to challenge a perceived reality, which the negative welcome given to immigrants from the countryside and the attitude of travelers or city-dwelling tourists bore out for more than a century.⁸⁵ A new relationship between the images of town and countryside was not established until the arrival in the latter of water supply, mechanization, household equipment, and ecological propaganda.

In their repetitive descriptions, the explorers of peasants' households under the July Monarchy confined themselves to a few stereotypes that make the discourse wearisome to the reader. This monotony had set in as early as 1836, as Piorry's analysis shows.⁸⁶ The cramped nature of the premises, the narrowness of the windows, the lack of air and light, the dampness of the floor aggravated by the absence of paving, the ill effects from smoke, the stench of dung coupled with the odors of laundry and washing-up, the exhalations of putrid and fermented scents from stable and dairy located too close by were the basic elements of the picture. The use of deep featherbeds that became impregnated with the sleeper's sweat, the presence of domestic animals, competing with men for air, and the numerous hams hung from the ceiling added substance to witnesses' complaints; only rarely did they deplore inadequate bodily hygiene. They were obsessed with the animal stench of the place, not yet with its lack of refinement. The normative system being built up elsewhere could not yet be applied to the peasant;⁸⁷ all he was asked to do was to remove his dung and poultry droppings, then to open his door and windows wide.

The stench of the poor became less of an obsession during the second half of the century. Advances in hygiene caused the concern to become more specialized and marginal in its choice of object. Peasants became the objects of a repulsion which was already obsolete and which veered toward barrack-room humor.⁸⁸ The same was true of seasonal workers, maids, porters, and a few workers in particularly dirty urban trades (such as the “chirots” in the north). The description of the backstairs in Zola’s *Pot-Bouille* exemplifies this obsession; it shows the unwelcome presence of people who could hardly be regarded as a serious threat any longer.

Tramps and vagabonds were endowed with a specific stench, and this development proved that the proletariat had lost some of its threatening smells. According to the Goncourt brothers, the odor of cockchafer was “recognized at the prefecture as the special odor of the vagabond, the man who sleeps under bridges; the odor of the convict and the prisoner.”⁸⁹ We are thus returned to the odor of the dungeon; the circular form of perception in which the confused stench of the proletariat becomes complete. Henceforth it was the odor of race that would constitute a threat and provide the focus of scholars’ attention.⁹⁰ But that is another story.

*Cleaning Up
the Wretched*

Under the July Monarchy, the perception of the stench of the poor required their deodorization or, alternatively, their disinfection. The objective was to abolish the vile-smelling organic odor that bore witness to the presence of death and could provoke a return of that “brain fever”⁹¹ so murderous in the recent past. Durkheim was to insist on distinguishing the moral element from society’s preoccupation with hygiene,⁹² but before him the moral implications of the public health venture were emphasized on many occasions in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; they were particularly apparent under the July Monarchy. To rid the masses of their animal fetidity, to keep them at a distance from excrement, was part of the therapeutic strategy deployed against social pathology. When stench declined, violence was blunted. Hygiene reigned supreme “against the vices of the soul . . . a crowd with a liking for cleanliness soon has a liking for order and discipline,” wrote Moléon, chairman of the Conseil de Salubrité, as early as 1821.⁹³ “Cleanliness,” de Gérando remarked in 1820, “is simulta-

neously a means of preservation and a symptom that betokens the spirit of order and preservation; it is distressing to see how unknown it is to most poor people, and this is a sad symptom of the moral disease that afflicts them.”⁹⁴

Twenty years later, Monfalcon and Polinière still entertained the fantasy of the odorless worker: “After the respiration of pure air, cleanliness, temperance, and work are the principal conditions for the well-being of the laboring classes”; the dwelling of the good worker “has no luxury, but nothing in it injures the senses of sight or smell . . . Merely because this worker breathes a sufficient quantity of healthy air and has plenty of water for his daily needs, he is in better health and earns more. Content in his domicile, he has more respect for cleanliness and the law and is more devoted to the observance of his duties.”⁹⁵ The indefatigable artisan did not smell strongly, and Zola, in love with Pauline, extolled “the healthy odor of her housewife’s arms.”⁹⁶

However, there was no question of bathrooms for the time being, and bodily hygiene was limited to a few very specific occupations. Baths were taken almost solely by miners and furnacemen, soiled by coal dust, and by some domestic servants in close contact with the elite. The aim was to remove grease and dirt and, most of all, to wash the face. Of overriding importance was the battle against impregnation of clothing. Being clean meant, above all, having clothing that was free of grease and odor.⁹⁷ Thus for a long time the first injunction of what the masses called “bodily” hygiene was to have their personal belongings cleaned. According to Cadet de Vaux in 1821, the crust of dirt covering her clothes, combined with the coarseness of her chemise, prevented the woman of the people from giving off her personal atmosphere and deprived her of the basic element in her power of attraction.⁹⁸

In the town, overcoming the uncleanness of communal conveniences and draining off the filth from the courtyards seemed the most urgent requirements. Progress occurred via the semiprivatization of latrines and the distribution of keys to families whose dwellings opened onto the landing.⁹⁹ In this environment the advance in “privacy” consisted chiefly in protection against other people’s dirt and odors, in the achievement of an approximate familialization of excrement, and in protecting modesty against potential dramatic interruption. Abolishing the promiscuity of latrines, keeping doors closed, and installing blowoff pipes were indispensable preliminaries

for that disciplined defecation deemed essential to the elimination of stench. It was also important to keep watch against individuals who urinated in alleys: this was a task for the good porter. If necessary, Passot noted, he could set up a small barrier outside and cover the gutter with a slab.¹⁰⁰ In short, the venture aimed at progressively transforming communal conveniences into private conveniences. Frequently, whitewashing and painting to eliminate impregnation of walls completed the arsenal of measures advocated. Obviously, the advance involved a subscription to the water company; the manifold obstacles that blocked the extension of this practice are well known.

In the country and in a number of small towns, the struggle against the stench of excrement sustained the interminable battle between municipal officials on the one hand and the owners and users of dung on the other. Opposition to abolishing smells was keen, sometimes savage, because it was desperate.¹⁰¹ The sanitary reformers most often lost the fight; they never succeeded in getting dung buried in trenches. Other measures expected to disinfect the rural house included using lime, opening new casements, and knocking down party walls.¹⁰²

The model projects remain to be considered: the workers' cities of Mulhouse, Brussels, and the rue de Rochechouart in Paris. There are interminable descriptions of the subtle tactics used by their creators and the sanitary reformers, particularly Villermé, to abolish all promiscuity there, to protect the privacy of the family, and to eliminate the erotic encounter in passages and stairways.¹⁰³ However, this scholarly, very significant sanitary and moral plan involved only a tiny work force at the time.

More important to the present argument was the attempt to inspect the habitat of the masses. Once again, it was the terrible epidemic of 1832 that prompted new tactics. District commissions were set up when it was announced that the scourge was imminent; their function was to visit every house, detect the causes of insalubrity, and force the landlord to comply with police rules. These commissions performed their task thoroughly; the one in the Luxembourg district visited 924 properties in less than two months. The prefect Gisquet claimed that he received about ten thousand reports from these organizations.¹⁰⁴

In England, even before the General Board of Health was established in 1848, the dwellings of the masses had been "harassed

by the hygiene police” for some considerable time.¹⁰⁵ Here, the authority was in the hands of local committees. In London, health inspectors arranged visits to houses and sent in a “note specifying which habitation had to be washed, whitewashed, cleared of rubbish, its courtyard or cellars paved, water supplied, drained, ventilated, finally cleaned up in any way whatsoever.”¹⁰⁶ A medical practitioner was to judge whether these comments were well founded, and, with his approval, instructions were sent to the landlord, who had to carry them out within a fortnight. In 1853 the inspectors visited 3,147 houses, or 20 percent of the total, in this way, and sent out 1,587 specifications.

The long-called-for French law on unhealthy habitations was finally promulgated on April 13, 1850. Its basis had long been prepared by work carried out in the Conseil de Salubrité since 1846, and it was preceded in Paris by the police ordinance of November 20, 1848. According to the principal craftsman of the new law, the marquis de Vogüé, it tended to establish “a closer patronage” over habitations.¹⁰⁷ The inspection card—the model for which appeared as an appendix to the text of the law—provided for investigation of the condition of latrines and the odors they emitted.¹⁰⁸ Monfalcon and Polinière had cause for congratulation; it was they who had wanted the administration to decide to supervise the dwellings of the poor no less than the animals’ cages in the zoological gardens.¹⁰⁹ Passot, for his part, asked that the police inspect the workers’ latrines and that they be authorized to make an official report.¹¹⁰ In fact this law was very rarely enforced; on this point all the sources concur.¹¹¹