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D. Phil in English Literature
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The Aesthetics of Sugar:
Concepts of Sweetness in the Nineteenth Century

Abstract

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My thesis examines the concept of sweetness as an aesthetic category in nineteenth-century British culture. My contention is that a link exists between the idea of sweetness as it appears in literary works and sugar as an everyday commodity with a complex history attached. Sugar had changed from being considered as a luxury in 1750 to a mass-market staple by the 1850s, a major cultural transition which altered the concept of sweetness as a taste. In the thesis I map the consequences of this shift as they are manifest in a range of texts from the period, alongside parallel changes in the aesthetic category of sweetness. I also assess the relationship between the material history of sweetness and the separate but related concept of aesthetic sweetness. In focussing on the relationship between sugar and sweetness in the Victorian period this thesis examines an area of nineteenth-century life that has previously never been subject to detailed study. Although several critics have explored the connection between sugar and concepts of sweetness as they relate to abolitionist debates in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, my focus differs in that I assert that other material histories of sugar played as significant a role in developing discourses of sweetness. Throughout this study, which spans the period 1780-1870, I draw on a range of sources across a variety of genres, including abolitionist pamphlets, medical textbooks, the novels of Charlotte Brontë and Wilkie Collins, the cultural criticism of Matthew Arnold and Walter Pater, and the poetry of Christina Rossetti and Algernon Charles Swinburne. I conclude that literary cultures in the nineteenth century increasingly use discourses of sugar to relate to the mass market and explore the commercialisation of literature, at a time when a growing commodity culture was seen as a threat to literary integrity.

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Introduction

In 1853 Charles Kingsley published a review of Alexander Smith's *A Life Drama and Other Poems* (1853) in *Fraser's Magazine*. Comparing Smith's writing unfavourably to the disinterested clarity of Pope, he dismisses Smith's work as part of a new tradition of poetry based on self-indulgent feeling and what Matthew Arnold would characterise later in the same year as 'the dialogue of the mind with itself'.¹ Locating the origins of this poetic delinquency in Keats, Kingsley identifies in his work 'an infinite hunger after all manner of pleasant things, crying to the universe, "Oh, that thou wert one great lump of sugar, that I might suck thee!"'² For Kingsley, sugar and the taste of sweetness that is intimately tied to it are emblematic of a poetics of sensation, initiated by Keats and continued by the Spasmodic poets with whom Smith was associated. This was worrying for two reasons: firstly because the poets had abandoned objective truth for subjective feelings, and secondly because these feelings were located in the body. To these modern poets, the whole cosmos was fodder for their keenly felt sensations. The fact that the universe itself becomes a 'great lump of sugar' in the passage, a physical manifestation of the pleasurable sensation of sweetness, and that Kingsley's Keats longs to 'suck' on it, foregrounds the intense physicality of his feelings. Sugar becomes for Kingsley the perfect symbol of what he calls the 'mere passionate sensibility' which has fatally damaged the art of modern poets like Keats and Smith, because of its link to the body.³

Metaphors of sugar and sweetness were a popular and effective means of addressing questions of literary and aesthetic value in the nineteenth century. During this period sugar became increasingly important as an everyday foodstuff and staple, and, as the above example demonstrates, the product also became an important trope in Victorian literary debates. Until

¹ Matthew Arnold, 'Preface' to *Poems* (1853), in *The Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold*, ed. R. H. Super, 11 vols. (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 1960-77), i, 1-15 (p. 1).

² [Charles Kingsley], 'Alexander Smith and Alexander Pope', *Fraser's Magazine for Town and Country* xlviii (1853), 452-66 (p. 466).

³ Ibid.

sugar began to be imported into England in the middle of the seventeenth century the taste of sweetness had been primarily associated with honey, fruit, and wine; however, by the mid-nineteenth century sugar had become the most widely consumed sweet food, transforming the way in which the taste of sweetness was experienced and redefining the cultural associations of sweetness. Throughout this thesis I examine the links between the material history of sugar and the cultural history of sweetness, arguing that the growing popularity of sugar as a commodity provoked new modes of representation for sweetness both as a taste and as a literary and aesthetic category. The symbolic connotations of the commodity, particularly the legacy of the slave labour used in its production, also had an impact on literary representations of sugar and sweetness in the period, but I argue that while these connotations continued to be an important part of sugar's figurative heritage, representations of sugar and sweetness in the nineteenth century were shaped more immediately by the ways in which the commodity was purchased and used on an everyday basis by ordinary British consumers. By mapping the material history of sugar alongside the aesthetics of sweetness in a range of literary and non-literary texts, I chart how these two histories intersect and inform each other while also remaining distinct and autonomous throughout the nineteenth century.

However, sugar and sweetness were often employed as effective substitutes for one another in nineteenth-century writing. To figure the taste of sugar as the epitome of pleasurable bodily sensation, as Kingsley imagines Keats to be doing when he '[hungers] after all manner of pleasant things', is to construct a kind of binary symbol in which sugar and sweetness are inseparable: sugar is defined solely by its sweet and therefore pleasant taste, while sweetness is figured purely as a taste, a sensual characteristic of sugar. But while sugar as a material thing and sweetness as an abstract concept were frequently conjoined in this way, ultimately the two remain separate entities, whose respective meanings, although closely bound together, do not entirely converge. Sugar was not only discussed in terms of its taste; and the literary, aesthetic

and moral connotations of sweetness were never straightforwardly determined by the changing profile of sugar in Victorian society. Nonetheless, as the most important material manifestation of the taste of sweetness, sugar always exerts some influence, whether overt or covert, on wider Victorian conceptions of sweetness as an aesthetic construction.

In *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, Terry Eagleton argues that '[a]esthetics is born as a discourse of the body'.⁴ In this thesis I aim to demonstrate not only how aesthetic and political questions are located within the physical history of sugar, but also how that physical history has a bearing on aesthetics and the politics of consumption. Despite the fact that aesthetics has long been seen as a discipline with a strong material basis, it is rare that we consider how individual aspects of the physical world play a role in aesthetic constructions. Terms such as 'the material world' and 'the body' emphasise this lack of specificity, underlining the difficulties in marking out connections between particular cultural and material configurations. Yet if aesthetics does have a basis in materiality then this must be on some level connected to specific 'things', real objects with a physical presence in the world. Throughout the thesis I trace the links between the material history of sugar and the aesthetic concept of sweetness. While the relationship between the two was in no way exclusive or consistent, by tracing the development of the aesthetic of sweetness over the course of the nineteenth century I hope to show that the reciprocal interaction between the material (sugar) and the aesthetic (sweetness) was an important element of the Victorian literary imagination. The wide range of genres I examine – including novels, poetry, political writing, and journalism – allow me to show how literary and aesthetic conceptions of sweetness, and their associated vocabularies, permeated British culture in the nineteenth century. This ubiquity at times threatens to empty sweetness of meaning, as the term 'sweet' comes to be used seemingly indiscriminately. However, read more carefully, the language of sweetness in Victorian writing yields an array of complex

⁴ Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), p. 13.

meanings and associations, many but not all of which are closely connected to the contemporary history of sugar.

Critical Context

In recent years what Lyn Pykett identified in 2003 as the ‘material turn’ in Victorian studies has become an increasing preoccupation in the field.⁵ Since the 1980s material culture has never been far from the critical agenda, and this was developed in the 1990s by sustained scholarly interest in the commodity culture of the nineteenth century. Two texts published in the late 1980s – Arjun Appadurai’s collection of essays *The Social Life of Things* (1986) and Asa Briggs’s *Victorian Things* (1988) – were particularly influential in mapping out these areas of study. Although Appadurai’s stance is anthropological, and although the essays in his book primarily focus on the eighteenth century, he nonetheless puts forward a theoretical model that was an important precursor for subsequent studies of nineteenth-century material culture. Appadurai argues that objects can be understood in terms of their symbolic as opposed to their use value; according to him, things as well as people have a social life which is determined by the meanings ascribed to them as a result of economic exchange.⁶ Appadurai’s work on the social and cultural resonances of objects was complemented shortly afterwards by Briggs’s endeavour in *Victorian Things* to offer a comprehensive explanation of the way in which the Victorians ‘designed, named, made, advertised, bought and sold, listed, counted, collected, gave to others, threw away or bequeathed’ an array of different items.⁷ Unlike Appadurai, Briggs focuses on describing the role of things as they were actually employed in the

⁵ Lyn Pykett, ‘The Material Turn in Victorian Studies’, *Literature Compass* i (2003), 1-5 (p. 1): http://www.blackwell-compass.com/subject/literature/article_view?article_id=lico_articles_bsl020 (accessed 3 July 2010).

⁶ Arjun Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 3.

⁷ Asa Briggs, *Victorian Things* (London: B. T. Batsford, 1988), p. 12.

nineteenth century rather than on giving an account of the social and economic foundation of material culture. *Victorian Things* is a detailed analysis of the Victorians' fascination with the material world.

This fascination is also evident in much nineteenth-century writing. Victorian writers' works abound with all manner of references to dresses and dress-suits, curtains and carpets, cups and saucers, newspapers and books. Dickens's 'Old Curiosity Shop' (from the 1841 novel) is an apt emblem of the Victorian obsession with things, or what we might now call clutter: 'There were suits of mail standing like ghosts in armour here and there, fantastic carvings brought from monkish cloisters, rusty weapons of various kinds, distorted figures in china and wood and iron and ivory; tapestry and strange furniture that might have been designed in dreams'.⁸ Cynthia Wall has argued that there is a qualitative shift in the way in which objects are represented between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Not only do possessions come to be discussed more frequently during this period, Wall argues, but the detailed description of objects also becomes more socially acceptable.⁹ Dickens's obvious delight in cataloguing the Old Curiosity Shop's wares with such precision adheres to this new-found interest in the intricacies of everyday items. If the literary critic has of late been more than ordinarily concerned with the matter of Victorian culture, she has taken her lead from the Victorians themselves.

Recent work on the subject of commodity culture has tried to make sense of the Victorians' interest in material objects. Since the 1990s a number of studies have appeared which deal with shopping, advertising, and the Great Exhibition in particular as especially emblematic of the new hold that consumerism was felt to have on Victorian society. In *The Commodity Culture of Victorian England* (1990) Thomas Richards argues that capitalism

⁸ Charles Dickens, *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1841), ed. Elizabeth M. Brennan (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), p. 10.

⁹ Cynthia Wall, 'The Rhetoric of Description and the Spaces of Things', in *Eighteenth-Century Genre and Culture: Serious Reflections and Occasional Forms: Essays in Honor of J. Paul Hunter*, ed. Dennis Todd and Cynthia Wall (Newark, NJ: University of Delaware Press, 2001), pp. 261-79 (267).

‘produced and sustained a culture of its own’ in the nineteenth century, and that the commodity rapidly assumed a position of authority within this framework as ‘the centrepiece of everyday life’.¹⁰ Literary critics have shown that Victorian literature was sensitive to these socio-economic developments. For example, Andrew H. Miller claims that:

[A]mong the dominant concerns motivating mid-Victorian novelists was a penetrating anxiety, most graphically displayed in Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair*, that their social and moral world was being reduced to a warehouse of goods and commodities, a display window in which people, their actions, and their convictions were exhibited for the economic appetites of others.¹¹

The roots of this pervasive commodity culture can be traced back to the eighteenth century, an age which witnessed what Neil McKendrick, John Brewer and J.H. Plumb have identified as the first ‘consumer revolution’.¹²

In many ways the commercial history of sugar encapsulates the development of a British commodity culture in this period. Sugar was one of many colonial products that began to be imported into Britain in large quantities during the eighteenth century. Like many of these new commodities, sugar opened up new imaginative possibilities for consumers, allowing them to refashion their identities through their consumption, but it was also the focus of anxieties connected to its origins as a foreign import and a product of slave labour and to its status as an extravagant luxury. Maxine Berg has argued that while luxuries such as sugar were condemned in the eighteenth century, they were also celebrated as part of a new ‘economy of quality and delight’.¹³ Even in the mid-nineteenth century, when sugar had ceased to be a luxury and become a staple, its position in British culture remained ambiguous. It was seen as a

¹⁰ Thomas Richards, *The Commodity Culture of Victorian England: Advertising and Spectacle, 1851-1914* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), p. 1.

¹¹ Andrew H. Miller, *Novels behind Glass: Commodity Culture and Victorian Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 6.

¹² Neil McKendrick, John Brewer and J.H. Plumb, *The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialisation of Eighteenth-Century England* (London: Europa, 1982), p. 1. For more reading about the growth of commodity culture in the eighteenth century see *Luxury in the Eighteenth Century: Debates, Desires and Delectable Goods*, ed. Maxine Berg and Elizabeth Eger (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2003); Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things; The British Atlantic World, 1500-1800*, ed. David Armitage and Michael J. Braddick (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2002); and Daniel Miller, *Material Culture and Mass Consumption* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987).

¹³ Maxine Berg, *Luxury and Pleasure in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 21.

commodity that was essential both to the national economy and to the individual consumer, but it was also viewed with suspicion due to its involvement in vexed debates concerning the quality of food and the cultural memory of slavery.

Much of the recent critical work on commodity culture takes its lead from Marx's definition of commodity fetishism in *Capital*, whereby an object becomes a commodity when its use-value is not reflected in its price. For Marx, a commodity's price is instead determined by the socio-economic conditions which consumers perceive as surrounding it, and particularly the work that has gone into its production: '[t]he mysterious character of the commodity-form consists therefore simply in the fact that the commodity reflects the social characteristics of men's own labour as objective characteristics of the products of labour themselves'.¹⁴ Marx demonstrates that to exchange a commodity is not an exclusively material transaction, but instead calls into play a series of social and cultural factors mediated by market forces. In this way commodities embody and encapsulate the social relations that define them, relations that originate, according to Marx, in the conditions of the commodity's production. These socio-economic determinants mean that although a commodity 'appears at first sight an extremely obvious, trivial thing [...] its analysis brings out that it is a very strange thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties'.¹⁵ Nearly all the critics who discuss the role of objects in Victorian culture draw, in one way or another, on Marx's account of the commodity, and on his description of the 'metaphysical' significance that adheres to it through its position in systems of social and economic exchange.

The view of commodities as deserving of critical attention primarily because of their economic and ideological ramifications has been reformulated by recent work on 'thing theory', a term coined in 2001 by Bill Brown in a special issue of *Critical Inquiry*. The premise of Brown's argument, which he later expanded in *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of*

¹⁴ Karl Marx, *Capital: Volume One*, trans. Ben Fowkes, 2nd edn (London: Penguin, 1990), pp.164-5.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 163.

American Literature (2003), was that the focus on economic exchange had ‘left things behind, never quite asking how they became recognizable, representable, and exchangeable to begin with’.¹⁶ For Brown, a ‘thing’ embodies ‘a massive generality as well as particularities’; ‘the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation’.¹⁷ Brown proposes an understanding of things as meaningful in their immediate context as opposed to primarily relevant in terms of their wider socio-economic significance.

A Sense of Things focuses on late-nineteenth-century American writing. In one of his case studies, Mark Twain’s *The Prince and the Pauper* (1881), Brown shows how the way in which an object is used can change how its value is interpreted.¹⁸ In the story, a young pauper swaps places with a prince, and, failing to recognise the prince’s royal seal for what it really is, uses it instead as a nutcracker. The shift in the object’s ontological status is reflected in the subject’s shift in social status. When the real prince returns, he produces the missing seal in order to prove his royalty. Its authentic purpose restored, the seal is an apt reminder of the instability of systems that try to place a fixed value on either things or people. On the contrary, Brown suggests that multiple potential meanings inhere within the thing itself. In contrast to the Marxist focus on the forces of production, Brown’s thing theory emphasises the ways in which things are consumed and utilized. An object is not defined by the social relations between the people who make it and those who use it, but by the specific uses to which it is put.

In *The Ideas in Things* (2006) Elaine Freedgood applies elements of Brown’s thing theory to readings of mid-nineteenth-century British fiction. She develops the concept of Victorian ‘thing culture’ to describe ‘a more extravagant form of object relations than ours, one in which systems of value were not quarantined from one another and ideas of interest and

¹⁶ Bill Brown, *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2003), p. 4.

¹⁷ Brown, ‘Thing Theory’, *Critical Inquiry* xxviii (2001), 1-22 (p. 4).

¹⁸ Brown, *A Sense of Things*, pp. 36-42.

meaning were perhaps far less restricted than they are for us'.¹⁹ Following Brown's strategy, Freedgood differentiates thing culture from commodity culture, which is characterised by shopping, in order to consider what Clare Pettitt has called 'the politics of possession'.²⁰ But while Brown reads things as the sum of their different uses, for Freedgood objects are literal reminders of the past, bringing in to literary texts evidence of a larger cultural history that promises to transform the basis on which the novels she discusses can be read and understood. Thus the mahogany wood in *Jane Eyre* (1847) is a '[souvenir] of sadism', the calico curtains in *Mary Barton* (1848) mask a hidden history of Indian textile manufacture and the Negro head tobacco in *Great Expectations* (1860-61) reminds the reader of the genocide of Australian Aborigines.²¹ *The Ideas in Things* combines Brown's interest in the uses to which objects are put with a Marxian emphasis on the political systems that shape their production. Much of Freedgood's work focuses on the way in which seemingly ordinary British possessions flag up violent colonial histories. Her argument is most convincing when making the case for mahogany and cotton as mementos of imperialist ideology in *Jane Eyre* and *Mary Barton*, domestic novels which can clearly be read as engaging with colonial questions.²² Although Freedgood's focus on colonial issues has obvious relevance for a wide range of Victorian objects and texts, this argument risks undermining the more mundane ways in which things were used and became meaningful in the period.

Critical work on literary engagements with sugar has tended to adopt an approach similar to Freedgood's, emphasising the connection between sugar and colonial exploitation and figuring the commodity as a troubling reminder of the physical suffering (often undocumented) of millions of Africans who were enslaved and sent to work on sugar

¹⁹ Elaine Freedgood, *The Ideas in Things: Fugitive Meaning in the Victorian Novel* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2006), p. 8.

²⁰ Clare Pettitt, 'On Stuff', *19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century* vi (2008), p. 9: <http://19.bbk.ac.uk/index.php/19/article/viewFile/474/334> (accessed 3 July 2010).

²¹ See Freedgood, *The Ideas in Things*. Her first chapter is entitled: 'Souvenirs of Sadism: Mahogany Furniture, Deforestation, and Slavery in *Jane Eyre*'.

²² See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's analysis of *Jane Eyre* in 'Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism', *Critical Inquiry* xii (1985), 243-61.

plantations in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Recent work by Timothy Morton, Deirdre Coleman, Carl Plasa, Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace, Keith A. Sandiford, and Charlotte Sussman provides an important context to my own research, charting the importance of discourses of slavery and abolitionism to literary representations of sugar.²³ Most of this work concentrates on the Romantic period, when the antislavery movement reached a peak, but the issue of slave labour continued to reverberate throughout the nineteenth century even after slavery was outlawed. Both in terms of its political and cultural legacy and in terms of ongoing debates about abolition in, for example, America, slavery remained a live issue throughout the Victorian period. Although legislation abolished the practice of slavery in the British Empire after 1834 continuing references to the idea of it demonstrate its enduring power over the British imagination. The legacy generated by sugar's early associations with slavery shaped the way in which the commodity was perceived by consumers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and it continues to exert an influence on the way in which sugar is understood in contemporary culture. Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), for example, makes sweets the focus of the murdered slave girl's insatiable appetite, showing that even in late twentieth-century texts sugar still produces echoes of slavery.²⁴

Yet while sugar can be read as the straightforward symbol of a history of colonial oppression – Susan de Sola Rodstein calls it a 'slavery-tainted import' which carries 'the historical symbolism of a foundational commodity of the British Empire' – Brown's work on thing theory opens up the possibility of considering it as a more nuanced and complex

²³ Timothy Morton, *The Poetics of Spice: Romantic Consumerism and the Exotic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Deirdre Coleman, 'Conspicuous Consumption: White Abolitionism and English Women's Protest Writing in the 1790s', *ELH* lxi (1994), 341-62; Carl Plasa, *Slaves to Sweetness: British and Caribbean Literatures of Sugar* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2009); Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace, *Consuming Subjects: Women, Shopping, and Business in the Eighteenth Century* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1997); Keith A. Sandiford, *The Cultural Politics of Sugar: Caribbean Slavery and Narratives of Colonialism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); and Charlotte Sussman, *Consuming Anxieties: Consumer Protest, Gender, and British Slavery, 1713-1833* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000).

²⁴ Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (1987) (London: Vintage, 2005). Of the character Beloved, Morrison writes: 'sugar could always be counted on to please her. It was as though sweet things were what she was born for' (p. 66).

signifier.²⁵ The legacy of slavery has an enduring impact on conceptions of sugar throughout the nineteenth century and beyond. But while slavery must always remain a crucial context for considerations of sugar, the importance of the product's other physical histories should not be underestimated. I want to suggest that patterns of consumption made a more direct and immediate impact on the figurative meanings of sugar in the Victorian period than systems of production. The ways in which the commodity was bought and used by the Victorians had a profound effect on literary representations of sugar and by association of sweetness. This argument is in keeping with much Victorian thinking about commodities and economics; Regenia Gagnier has shown that '[t]he second half of the nineteenth century saw a shift from notions of Economic Man as producer [...] to a view of Economic Man as consumer'.²⁶ The literary engagements with sugar that I will examine show that the beginnings of this shift can be seen earlier in the nineteenth century and even in the eighteenth. From the abolition debates of the 1780s onwards, writings about sugar focus at least as much on the role of the consumer as they do on the conditions of the commodity's production.

A focus on consumption when studying sugar is also apt because, as a foodstuff, sugar is a literal consumable, ingested into the body, and as such its relationship to the individual is far more intimate than that of most other commodities. Thing theory, as practised by Brown and Freedgood, does not really engage with this peculiarity of food, but the body of work which Morton groups together under the rubric of 'diet studies' in *Cultures of Taste/Theories of Appetite* (2004) comes closer to providing a critical model of food and drink that accounts for their unique mutability and connection to the body. Food complicates any straightforward conception of subject-object relations because it is both separate from and part of the body (or, it becomes a part of the body once it has been eaten). As Morton argues, the subject who eats

²⁵ Susan de Sola Rodstein, 'Sweetness and Dark: George Eliot's *Brother Jacob*', *Modern Language Quarterly* lii (1991), 295-317 (pp. 317, 296).

²⁶ Regenia Gagnier, *The Insatiability of Human Wants: Economics and Aesthetics in Market Society* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 2.

‘is no longer entirely a self-possessed subject’: ‘[h]e has consumed, and been consumed by’, the foods that he has eaten.²⁷ As I will show in Chapter 1, radical abolitionists seized on the intimate corporeality of food to construct a metaphorical link between sugar and the bodies of the slaves that grew it, and to claim that consumers of sugar were also ingesting the slaves’ blood. While it changes the body, food itself is also less stable than other objects, both because it is likely to be eaten, and therefore to change form, and also because it is inherently mutable, frequently transformed by cooking or processing, or, in sugar’s case, liable to be absorbed as an ingredient and a taste in other dishes. Moreover, sugar is not a clearly demarcated entity like other objects. As Benedict Anderson points out, one pound of sugar flows into the next: to purchase a pound of sugar is to buy a quantity, not a specific thing, and therefore sugar is not an object in the same way as a book is an object.²⁸

Recent critical interest in the senses provides a further context for my examination of sugar and sweetness. Monographs by Catherine Gallagher, Nicholas Dames and William Cohen have argued that Victorian literature, and the Victorian novel in particular, consistently presents experience as embodied, figuring sensations as an index of internal feeling.²⁹ Other work has explored the way in which individual senses, such as hearing, smell and vision, shaped the Victorian consciousness.³⁰ To date, however, there has been little critical work addressing how the Victorians understood and discussed the sense of taste, although there is a burgeoning critical literature about taste in the Romantic period which can throw light on what

²⁷ Morton, *Cultures of Taste/Theories of Appetite: Eating Romanticism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. xv.

²⁸ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 2nd edn (London: Verso, 1991), p. 34. I am grateful to Robert Douglas-Fairhurst for drawing my attention to this passage.

²⁹ Catherine Gallagher, *The Body Economic: Life, Death, and Sensation in Political Economy and the Victorian Novel* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006); Nicholas Dames, *The Physiology of the Novel: Reading, Neural Science, and the Form of Victorian Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); William A. Cohen, *Embodied: Victorian Literature and the Senses* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).

³⁰ For examples of work that concerns senses other than taste, see John M. Picker, *Victorian Soundscapes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Janice Carlisle, *Common Scents: Comparative Encounters in High-Victorian Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); and *Victorian Literature and the Victorian Visual Imagination*, ed. Carol T. Christ and John O. Jordan (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995).

the concept might have meant later in the nineteenth century.³¹ In *Taste: A Literary History* (2005), Denise Gigante develops the thesis that food and eating was elevated to a fine art in the late eighteenth century by the era's obsession with gastronomy, and as such became the subject of aesthetic appreciation.³² According to Gigante, by the turn of the nineteenth century food and taste had become embroiled in other cultural contexts too, specifically that of consumerism.³³ The trend whereby the physical dimensions of food and eating take on aesthetic and cultural significance throws considerable light on representations of sugar in the nineteenth century. The way in which both sugar and sweetness come to be incorporated into aesthetic and cultural debates in this period is heavily influenced by the growing importance of sugar to the mass-market economy.

The relationship between the material history of sugar as a commodity and the cultural fortunes of both sugar and sweetness lies at the heart of this thesis. A model for how I want to approach this relationship can be found in another recent text on nineteenth-century material culture, Isobel Armstrong's *Victorian Glassworlds* (2008). In this authoritative work Armstrong presents a comprehensive account of the physical presence of glass in Victorian Britain and, as Chris Otter has noted, in so doing '[s]he does exactly what Arjun Appadurai once suggested scholars do: she "follow[s] the things themselves"'.³⁴ More importantly, however, Armstrong suggests that the material history of glass in the Victorian period spawned its own aesthetic, a 'many-faceted poetics of glass' which inscribed its language on both literal

³¹ See Morton, *Shelley and the Revolution in Taste: The Body and the Natural World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994). Morton has also edited *Radical Food: The Culture and Politics of Eating and Drinking, 1790-1820* (London: Routledge, 2000). For other work in this area see Denise Gigante, *Taste: A Literary History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005). Gigante's book claims to be a 'literary history' of taste, but in fact five out of seven chapters (discounting the introduction) are dedicated to figures from the Romantic period. Another text Gigante has edited – *Gusto: Essential Writings in Nineteenth-Century Gastronomy* (London: Routledge, 2005) – gathers together an interesting collection of nineteenth-century texts which shed important light on how the Victorians related to food.

³² Gigante, *Taste*, p. 1.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

³⁴ Chris Otter, 'Victorian "Ways of Seeing"?', *Journal of Victorian Culture* xiv (2008), 95-102 (p. 95). Otter is quoting Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things*, p. 5.

and cultural landscapes.³⁵ In this respect, Armstrong's achievement differs from thing theory in that it links the material impact of a particular object to a developing aesthetic discourse. In the same way as Armstrong connects material and aesthetic phenomena in *Victorian Glassworlds*, presenting Victorian glass culture as a group of ideas founded on a physical history, I want to show how the ways in which sugar became known and used in the period reshaped an existing aesthetic concept of sweetness. Armstrong's interpretation of glass presents it as an object defined not only by its uses (as the thing theorists would have it) but also by its contribution to a culture-wide aesthetic of reflection and transparency. In other words, the materiality of glass had an aesthetic manifestation, which in Armstrong's view became a central component of Victorian conceptions of modernity. She demonstrates how the physicality of glass was fundamental to its ability to shape the world of ideas as well as the 'real' world around it, identifying Victorian glass culture as both a material state and a condition of nineteenth-century modernity, a 'glassworld' which acted as 'a place where related and complex Victorian modernities played out their concerns'.³⁶

The material function of sugar in Victorian society also played a part in contemporary cultural debates, specifically through the development of a new aesthetic of sweetness that was both connected to and distinct from previous constructions of the concept. In the same way as Armstrong argues that glass became synonymous with the display and vision of modernity in the Victorian period, I want to suggest that sugar transformed the concept of sweetness both as a taste and as an idea. Like glass, sweetness has a long history prior to the nineteenth century, over the course of which it collected its own diverse and idiosyncratic set of meanings. These meanings – literary, aesthetic, and sensual – retained their currency in the nineteenth century, with the result that the cultural conception of sweetness was never entirely dependent on that of sugar. Nonetheless, the basis on which sweetness was experienced and understood shifted

³⁵ Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Glassworlds: Glass Culture and the Imagination 1830-1880* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 16.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

fundamentally in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as sugar became a mass market product and the most widely known form of the taste of sweetness.

Sugar in the Nineteenth Century

John Boyd Orr, who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1949 for his work on nutrition, concluded that the single most important dietary change that took place in Britain in the nineteenth century was the fivefold increase in sugar consumption.³⁷ By 1900, sugar was supplying an estimated one sixth of the calories that the average person consumed in any given year.³⁸ Considering that 150 years earlier the product had been a luxury which only the very richest members of society could afford, this represented a significant social, as well as culinary, development. The early story of sugar is characterised by haphazard, uneven developments, with fledgling sugar industries emerging in various geographically dispersed locations before the Spanish, British, Dutch and French colonisation of a handful of islands in the Atlantic Ocean. From the mid-seventeenth century onwards the sugar trade became significant to Europe both financially and politically. Millions of African people were transported to the colonies to work on sugar plantations, and the legacy of slavery remains an important part of sugar's heritage. I will consider the connection between sugar and slavery at length in my first chapter, while the rest of this section will focus on the developments in production and consumption by which sugar rose to become, in the words of Sidney W. Mintz – whose *Sweetness and Power* (1985) has, more than any other text, provided a definitive history for the product – a 'virtual necessity' by the middle of the nineteenth century.³⁹ 'The wilderness of

³⁷ John Boyd Orr, *Food, Health, and Income: Report on a Survey of Adequacy of Diet in Relation to Income* (London: Macmillan, 1936), p. 17.

³⁸ Sidney W. Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (London: Penguin, 1985), p. 149.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 148. Noel Deerr's *The History of Sugar* was an important forerunner to *Sweetness and Power*. See Noel Deerr, *The History of Sugar*, 2 vols. (London: Chapman and Hall, 1949-50).

sweets, exhibited in London and other populous towns in the shape of the shop-window attractions for the palate', wrote one writer in 1856, 'owe their sweetness for the most part to one single product – SUGAR'.⁴⁰ By the middle of the nineteenth century sugar had become a truly democratic product: as much at home in the houses of the wealthy as in that of the lowliest labourer.

Sugar probably first arrived in Europe in the seventh century. Over the course of the next thousand years, Europeans developed a significant sugar industry, but for a variety of reasons this never became highly competitive. It was only when the Portuguese colony of Brazil began making huge profits from sugar production in the sixteenth century that the commodity became central to a new phase of economic expansion. Brazilian sugar first began to be exported in the 1520s, and before long had made the colony the most important in the New World. One reason for this was the system's dependence on slavery, which saved on costs and ensured a continuous labour pool. The plantation model of sugar production which developed in this era, including its links to the slave trade, formed the basis of British, French, and Dutch ventures in the Caribbean a century later. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries these northern Europeans began to colonise increasing areas of the Spanish-controlled Americas and used them to cultivate (amongst other things) sugar. In 1627 the English settled on Barbados and began to send regular shipments home, and from this time on the colony became an important source of revenue. Between 1636 and 1656 Barbados contributed £46 million to the national wealth of England, rising to £138 million between 1676 and 1756.⁴¹

From 1650 onwards, when Barbadian imports of sugar first began to make an impact on the home market, the commodity grew in importance: not only because it made a valuable financial contribution but also in terms of British diet. Over time Britain began to export less

⁴⁰ George Dodd, *The Food of London* (London: Longman, 1856), p. 426.

⁴¹ Sandiford, *The Cultural Politics of Sugar*, p. 30.

than she imported as demand from the homeland kept pace with what the West Indies could supply. In 1660, the English consumed 1,000 hogsheads of sugar and exported twice that amount, but in 1700 they received 50,000 hogsheads and exported only 18,000. In 1753 a total of 110,000 hogsheads of sugar were imported into the country while no more than 6,000 were re-exported out again.⁴² Economic historian D. C. Coleman estimates that per-capita sugar consumption between 1650 and 1750 rose more rapidly than that of bread, meat, or dairy products in the same period.⁴³ The speed of this uptake can be mostly explained by Britain's ready access to a seemingly limitless colonial supply, but equally important is the fact that the country appears to have had a pre-existing taste for the product. Sugar was bought by wealthy English households from the thirteenth century onwards, and became so essential to medical practitioners that the phrase 'like an apothecary without sugar' came to mean a state of complete and utter helplessness. A German visitor to the court of Elizabeth I records that her teeth were totally black: 'a defect the English seem subject to, from their too great use of sugar'.⁴⁴ The importance of sugar to the national economy can be seen in the amount of taxation brought in by duties on the product, which were first introduced by the Commonwealth government in 1651.⁴⁵ As L. A. G. Strong records, while the yield from a combined sugar and tobacco tax was £148,000 in 1688, a century later (in 1781) the revenue from sugar alone was £326,000. By 1815, due to a series of increases brought in by William Pitt in order to finance the Napoleonic Wars, the tax on sugar was the source of nearly £3 million to the government.⁴⁶

In *Sweetness and Power* Mintz argues that the human taste for sugar is based on 'culturally conventionalized norms, not biological imperatives'.⁴⁷ In fact sweeteners have

⁴² Mintz, *Sweetness and Power*, p. 39.

⁴³ D. C. Coleman, *The Economy of England 1450-1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 118.

⁴⁴ Mintz, *Sweetness and Power*, pp. xxix, 101, 134.

⁴⁵ Deerr, *The History of Sugar*, ii, 427.

⁴⁶ L. A. G. Strong, *The Story of Sugar* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1954), p. 107.

⁴⁷ Mintz, *Sweetness and Power*, p. 15.

played a number of roles in a variety of different cultures, varying in importance: sugar is much less conspicuous in Chinese and French cuisine, for example, than it is in British and American. While numerous scientific studies have shown that our primate ancestors would almost certainly have evolved to favour sweet tastes (since the sweetest-tasting fruits would also have been the ripest), the idea that a desire for sweetness is somehow universal contradicts other anthropological data. There is convincing evidence – given the sweetness of breast milk – that biological factors do play a role in the human preference for sweetness: for example researchers in America have shown that newborn babies tolerate glucose better than water.⁴⁸ The taste of breast milk or of ripe fruit (both naturally occurring types of sweetness) is, however, structurally different from the kind of heavy sucrose consumption often found in the West, leading to the assumption that the extent to which individuals develop a ‘sweet tooth’ is mostly culturally defined. Mintz’s own view – that an increase in the supply of sugar fuelled rising consumption in Britain from the seventeenth century onwards – while generally accepted, has been challenged by Daniel A. Baugh. As he points out, the fact that consumption increased so rapidly during the very period in which prices of sugar were kept artificially high by duties on foreign imports would appear to contradict the relatively uncomplicated equation Mintz draws between supply and demand.⁴⁹ Although Baugh offers no other explanation for the phenomenal increase of sugar in the Western diet throughout the modern period, his research suggests that taste played a greater role in this uptake than has been conceded by Mintz.

Bruce Robbins has described commodity histories as a genre in themselves, thanks to the recent ubiquity of works of this kind, which place an excessive emphasis on the importance of economically-valued commodities. Taking for granted the fact that commodities which

⁴⁸ See Mintz, *Sweetness and Power*, pp. 14-18 for a summary of recent scientific research into the human preference for sweetness.

⁴⁹ See Daniel A. Baugh, ‘British Sugar: Consumption in Historical Context’, *Food and Foodways* ii (1987), 113-19 (pp. 115-16).

attain mass-market status do so due to the innate predispositions of human beings, commodity histories praise capitalism for providing a means of remission for these (perceived as) unfulfilled needs.⁵⁰ My approach to the history of sugar will differ in the respect that I contend that the product became popular due to a range of cultural, economic, and political factors, and not just because of the nevertheless relevant human penchant for sweetness. Whatever the reasons for the huge uptake of sugar in Britain after the West Indian colonies developed a profitable industry, by the eighteenth century sugar had become the country's largest single import. Consumption of sugar rose rapidly in the eighteenth century, and markedly again after 1850 when the price of sugar fell considerably. As John Burnett records, average consumption of sugar per person was 30.6 lbs in 1801 but fell thereafter due to a set of expensive duties on sugar which made the product less affordable. Consumption per head had fallen to 24 lbs in 1849, but increased as the duties were reduced accordingly: meaning that by the end of the century average consumption of sugar had risen to 80 lbs per head of the population.⁵¹ Throughout the nineteenth century bread was the staple food of the working classes, but household budgets collected by factory commissioners in the 1840s show that cheese, butter, tea, sugar, salt and potatoes were also regularly included in the diet. Rural labourers consumed less sugar than their urban counterparts, but since tea was also a staple they increasingly adopted sugar over time.⁵² The increase in sugar consumption for women and children in the period was probably even higher than these figures suggest, since they were less likely to consume the family's allowance of meat (traditionally reserved for the main male breadwinner). Burnett records the testimonial of a butcher from Brigg who confirmed that while the majority of a family's budget went to sustaining the male, the women of the family

⁵⁰ Bruce Robbins, 'Commodity Histories', *PMLA* cxx (2005), 454-63.

⁵¹ John Burnett, *Plenty and Want: A Social History of Diet in England from 1815 to the Present Day* (London: Nelson, 1966), pp. 9, 98-9.

⁵² Sally Mitchell, *Daily Life in Victorian England* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996), p. 122.

ate more sugar to compensate: '[t]he women say they live on tea: they have tea three times a day, sop, bread, and treacle'.⁵³

Treacle, jam, sweetened tea, baked goods and puddings began to form a bigger portion of working-class calorific input from the mid-nineteenth century onward. Angeliki Torode claims that by the end of the nineteenth century the urban working classes consumed most of their fruit intake in the form of jam, a product they had acquired a taste for through other sugar-rich working-class staples. 'Since the 1840s, people whose main staple was bread indulged in sugar', Torode argues, and this would have included the majority of labourers. A pudding or currant cake is common in the budgets of working-class families from the 1860s onwards, while when times were especially bad poor families used treacle as a substitute for sugar, spreading it on bread and even using it in tea instead of sugar, which was more expensive.⁵⁴ By the end of the nineteenth century sales of sweets and chocolate were booming.⁵⁵ Although the sharp increase in sugar consumption from the middle of the nineteenth century onwards was due in no small part to the contemporary reduction in sugar duties, over the course of the Victorian era the British people had acquired a desire for sugar that was driven as much by taste as by economic imperatives.

The hottest debates about the duties on sugar took place in the 1840s. Mintz estimates that as a result of new legislation the price of sugar fell by 30% between 1840 and 1850 and by a further 25% over the course of the two succeeding decades.⁵⁶ Prior to this, West Indian planter interests had been artificially protected by higher duties on foreign products, but in 1846 the Tory government under Sir Robert Peel introduced the Sugar Duties Act which

⁵³ Burnett, *Plenty and Want*, p. 27.

⁵⁴ Angeliki Torode, 'Trends in Fruit Consumption', in *Our Changing Fare: Two Hundred Years of British Food Habits*, ed. T. C. Barker, J. C. McKenzie, and John Yudkin (London: MacGibbon and Kee, 1966), pp. 115-34 (pp. 122).

⁵⁵ T. C. Barker, 'Nineteenth Century Diet; Some Twentieth Century Questions', in *Our Changing Fare*, pp. 18-29 (p. 27).

⁵⁶ Mintz, *Sweetness and Power*, p. 144.

equalised tax on foreign and colonial imports.⁵⁷ Following this, duties on sugar were progressively reduced until in 1864 Gladstone's administration announced that from 1874 onwards these taxes would be abolished entirely. To the West Indian lobby, the removal of the sugar duties represented the final betrayal: they had already lost money in 1807 and 1834, when the slave trade and then slavery respectively were abolished. But the repeal of the sugar duties was celebrated by free-trade advocates for whom the 'sugar question' had come to symbolise liberal, progressive politics. In Trollope's *Can You Forgive Her?* – which began to appear in 1864, the same year as Gladstone struck the final, fatal blow to the old system of duties on sugar – their removal is aligned with a new kind of politics, as espoused by Plantagenet Palliser, which emphasises free-market principles. Palliser's wife Lady Glencora congratulates her cousin Alice on becoming engaged to a man who has no interest in politics because '[h]e'll never explain the sugar-duties to you'. Later she makes sugar the measure of Alice's fiancé Mr Grey's subsequent conversion to a political life: '[w]hen [he] began to say something the other night in the drawing-room about sugar', she dryly informs her cousin, 'I knew it was all up with you'. Mr Grey's fate as a politician of the progressive school is sealed when he becomes 'almost as full of politics, almost as much devoted to sugar, as Mr Palliser himself'.⁵⁸

The removal of the duties on sugar secured the product's place as a staple in the English diet and by 1856 consumption was forty times higher than it had been 150 years earlier. More than ever British cuisine came to be associated with sweetness, and this applied not only to the working classes – whose consumption surpassed that of the higher classes after 1850 – but to British society in general.⁵⁹ During the nineteenth century the sweet or pudding solidified into a course of its own and became increasingly elaborate. Eliza Acton's *Modern Cooking for*

⁵⁷ For a full account of the history of sugar duties in England see Deerr, *The History of Sugar*, ii, 427-48.

⁵⁸ Anthony Trollope, *Can You Forgive Her?*, (1865), ed. Andrew Swarbrick, 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), ii, 359, 405, 413.

⁵⁹ Mintz, *Sweetness and Power*, p. 143.

Private Families (1845) pays homage to ‘the immense variety of cakes, biscuits, confections, ices, *bonbons*, and other *sucreries* (some of them extremely brilliant in appearance)’ that were suitable for dessert in this period. Desserts, she concludes, ‘may be served in any kind of style’.⁶⁰ Snacking on sweet food also became increasingly popular as the institution of afternoon tea became more established, and this also served to increase middle class consumption of sugar. Kate Colquhoun records that biscuit manufacturers Huntley and Palmers were producing more than 120 varieties by the 1860s as afternoon tea became increasingly overrun by biscuits, cakes and other sugary treats.⁶¹

A painting by E. T. Parris from 1846 demonstrates how popular sugar had become by the middle of the nineteenth century (see next page). *The Sugar Hogshead* depicts a brood of hungry children, who, along with some adults, are gathered round a sugar barrel which the unkempt crowd has presumably emptied, as the painting shows the remains of the sugar spilling out onto the floor.

⁶⁰ Eliza Acton, *Modern Cooking for Private Families* (1845), 2nd edn (Lewes: Southover Press, 2002), p. 471.

⁶¹ Kate Colquhoun, *Taste: The Story of Britain through its Cooking* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007), p. 299.



Fig. 1: E. T. Parris, *The Sugar Hogshead*, 1846.

Although the picture shows white sugar spilling out of the barrel in actual fact sugar that arrived in this condition would almost certainly have been brown. This dark, raw sugar was known as muscovado, and was produced on the plantations before being shipped to Europe in hogsheads. The taxes that until the 1840s protected British colonial interests prevented suppliers from importing refined sugar into the country because the duties on this were more expensive. As a result, London became an important refining centre in the sixteenth century and remained so into the nineteenth. By 1650 there were no less than 50 'sugar bakeries' in London alone, whereas by the middle of the eighteenth century refineries had been set up in Bristol, Chester, Liverpool, Whitehaven, Hull, and Southampton, followed by centres in Glasgow, Aberdeen, Dundee, Edinburgh and Greenock which were established in the latter half of the eighteenth century.⁶² Once the sugar had been processed, it was sold in solid conical

⁶² Strong, *The Story of Sugar*, p. 137.

loaves (known as sugarloaves) which could be anything up to a yard or more in length. This was as a result of the refining process, during which the raw sugar was suspended in tapered moulds and drained to remove impurities, meaning that the final product formed a cone-like shape. Such was the ubiquity of this method of sale that a sugarloaf became a common symbol for a grocer in the period. In George Eliot's *Felix Holt* (1866) the 'Sugar Loaf' is the name of the local public house, but it was more often used as the sign of a grocer and was commonly found outside a grocer's premises or in his window, and occasionally on the trade tokens shop owners would periodically dispense in lieu of cash.

Sarah Freeman has argued that the difficulty of using sugar loaves was one of the main reasons why the Victorians tended to leave the making of highly sugared confections, such as cakes and creams, to professionals.⁶³ In fact, it wasn't unusual for people to order all types of food from grocers in the period, but the fact that the majority of sugary food had to be ordered in must have affected popular perceptions of the product and enhanced the sense in which it came to be seen as commercialised and artificial, the opposite of home-grown food. While many traditional British foodstuffs, such as bread, honey and butter, were made from natural products and could technically be overseen from field to table by the same family, sugar was grown in the farthest reaches of the empire and transported overseas for thousands of miles before being subjected to a further exhaustive refining process once it had reached Britain. In *Adam Bede* (1859) George Eliot depicts Hetty Sorrel making butter in the Poyser family dairy as a sign of the simple self-sufficiency of country life. In her novella *Brother Jacob*, which I discuss at length in Chapter 4 and which was composed the year after *Adam Bede*, sugar is representative of all forms of shop-bought food, which have a corrupting influence on the inhabitants of the small town of Grimworth. Towards the end of the century, Henry Tate (subsequently famous as one half of the sugar dynasty Tate and Lyle) developed a process of

⁶³ Sarah Freeman, *Mutton and Oysters: The Victorians and their Food* (London: Gollancz, 1989), pp. 91-2.

manufacturing sugar so it could be sold in cubes as opposed to a standard sugarloaf. Because they were cumbersome and difficult to use sugarloaves were unpopular with customers. People used sugar-nips, a small pair of cutters similar to pliers, or a small hammer to break off sugar from the loaf, but this was time-consuming as well as tricky. Tate began to produce sugar cubes in the 1870s and they quickly became popular with consumers, so much so that he grew to be one of the richest sugar refiners of all time.⁶⁴ At around the same time, the use of centrifugal machines made low-cost granular sugar widely available, which in turn made it easier for consumers to use sugar in their home cooking.⁶⁵

While the manufacturing process in the British West Indies changed little in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the nineteenth century saw considerable advances being made in terms of grinding capacity, cane varieties, pest control and cultivation methods. Plantations themselves became increasingly mechanised, in part because they had to become more efficient following the respective abolitions of the slave trade and slavery in 1807 and 1834. Other changes in the production of world sugar also made the need for improvement more pressing. After the Haitian Revolution on the French colony of St Domingue (1791-1804), Cuba replaced St Domingue as the world's largest producer of sugar, and was able to undercut the price of sugars from the British West Indies since it continued to use slave labour until 1884. In *Cuban Counterpoint* (1940) Fernando Ortiz documents Cuba's modern history as inextricably bound to the twin industries of sugar and tobacco, which from the nineteenth century onwards shaped the country's development both as a nation and an economic entity.⁶⁶ The British 'sugar islands' also faced competition from new colonies such as Mauritius, Fiji and Natal, all of which as well as increasing the pressure on West Indian planters to produce higher quality sugar also had the effect of driving down prices. By the end of the nineteenth

⁶⁴ Sanjida O'Connell, *Sugar: The Grass that Changed the World* (London: Virgin Books, 2004), p. 113.

⁶⁵ Colquhoun, *Taste*, p. 277.

⁶⁶ Fernando Ortiz, *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar* (1940), trans. Harriet de Onís (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995).

century British cane growers were facing dismal times in general. Years of aggressive sugar cultivation had made the once fertile soil of the Caribbean islands less tractable, and to make matters worse they faced increased competition both from within the sugar cane market and from farmers of a new crop called sugar beet.

Until the 1830s sugar cane was the only significant plant source for sugar, but shortly afterwards the beet sugar industry came to be increasingly important. During the course of the nineteenth century beet sugar began to account for an ever larger share of imports; between 1870 and 1900 the proportion of beet sugar in terms of total sugar imports to the United Kingdom rose from 23% to 90%, reducing cane sugar to only a 10% share of the market. This staggering turnaround changed the face of sugar production completely during the nineteenth century. In 1839, cane sugar accounted for over 95% of world sugar production, but by the 1880s this had dropped to less than half.⁶⁷ Sugar beet is a vegetable of the beetroot family. In 1747 German chemist Andreas Marrgraff discovered a process by which sugar could be extracted from the plant, but despite his best attempts and those of his successor Karl Achard an industry failed to get off the ground until the Napoleonic Wars, when Napoleon invested heavily in sugar beet technology as an alternative to cane sugar. During the war France was cut off from their colonial supply of cane sugar due to English control of the sea, but unlike sugar cane sugar beet could be grown in more temperate climes, making it suitable for cultivation in Europe. By 1813 Napoleon had built 334 sugar beet factories which had produced by that date over 7 million tons of sugar.⁶⁸ After cane-grown sugar became available once again and the sugar beet industry in Europe ceased to be championed as an alternative, however, the sugar beet market became less influential. But as technology improved and slavery was gradually

⁶⁷ Deerr, *The History of Sugar*, ii, 490.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, ii, 479.

abolished beet sugar became increasingly commercially viable. By 1900, six million tons of beet sugar was being produced worldwide.⁶⁹

The shift from cane to beet sugar should technically have severed all ties between sugar and slavery. However, the product still retained associations with the slave trade which were rightfully the legacy of the Caribbean cane planters only. In Isabella Beeton's *Household Management* (1861), the now famous cookery book, sugar is referred to exclusively as a colonial product. Beeton discusses the process of cultivating cane sugar as if it were the sole method, and praises it, without irony, as an occupation providing 'employment to thousands upon thousands of slaves in the slave countries'.⁷⁰ The reference demonstrates that sugar continued to be associated with slavery well into the middle of the nineteenth century, but it also shows that to a certain extent the actual history of the product had ceased to matter – after all, Beeton's reference is hardly accurate, considering that slavery had been abolished throughout the British Empire in 1834. What is not in question in her book, however, is the centrality of sugar to the British diet, as it is featured in nearly every recipe. In many ways, although the political, economic and cultural trajectories of sugar are undoubtedly important, the real history of the product in the nineteenth century takes place in the kitchen, as sugar increasingly began to transform culinary and social life.

Sweetness as an Aesthetic

The term 'sweetness' was in use long before sugar became prominent in Western culture. Indeed, in many of its usages, it can seem completely removed from sugar as a thing or from any physical referent whatsoever. What kind of relationship, after all, do a 'sweet road', 'sweet heat', or 'the sweet voice of a bird', for example, have with sugar or with any other substance

⁶⁹ Ibid., ii, 491.

⁷⁰ Isabella Beeton, *The Book of Household Management* (1861) (Lewes: Southover, 1998), p. 671.

that tastes sweet?⁷¹ Sweetness as an abstract concept encompasses a plethora of meanings, the vast majority of which have no connection to the taste with which it shares its name. The scope of the concept is evinced by the breadth of its associated vocabulary: ‘sweet’, ‘sweetness’, ‘sweetly’, ‘to sweeten’, as well as a number of terms of affection such as ‘my sweet’, ‘sweetie’, and ‘sweetheart’ (not to mention ‘honey’ and ‘sugar’). The ubiquity of such words means that they can be easily ignored, their complexity and significance overlooked. We all know (or think we know) what sweetness means, but although the term involves certain very specific definitions (such as that of taste), it is, for the most part, extraordinarily flexible. Sweetness is primarily a broad and powerful signifier of pleasantness, but its very universality means that it is open to manipulation, its meanings liable to be disrupted and transformed. Its usage spans centuries: according to the online Oxford English Dictionary (hereafter OED) the earliest applications of sweet as a descriptive term date back to the ninth century. Yet within this long and complex history there are some broad trends that stand out.

The OED does not attempt to define what sweetness is like as a taste, instead identifying it as a flavour characteristic of certain foods, foremost amongst which is sugar. (I don’t differentiate between flavour and taste in the following discussion. As far as a differentiation can be made, however, flavour is olfactory in origin, while taste is defined by the OED as the act of perceiving flavour). The adjective ‘sweet’ describes, according to the OED, something which ‘[has] a pleasant taste or flavour; spec. having the characteristic flavour (ordinarily pleasant when not in excess) of sugar, honey, and many ripe fruits’. Its figurative definition proves to be equally broad. To be ‘sweet’ in this sense is to be ‘[p]leasing (in general) to the mind or feelings’. It appears that both kinds of sweetness – literal and metaphorical – can be classified only in terms of their effects and not their essence. A sweet temperament produces a pleasant impression, a sweet taste an agreeable sensation. But

⁷¹ These three examples are taken from the online Oxford English Dictionary entry for the adjective ‘sweet’.

sweetness can also be known in terms of what it is not, which perhaps explains why it is so often deployed alongside bitterness or sourness in a figurative dichotomy.

Sweetness is also a synaesthetic term, capable of being applied to the other senses as well as taste, as in the example of ‘the sweet voice of a bird’ cited above. The OED records several very early uses of the word ‘sweet’ in reference to the different senses, and by the middle ages sweetness was able to represent something pleasing to all the senses. In classical aesthetics, taste and smell were generally ranked below touch, sight and hearing in a strict hierarchy of the senses. Unlike the other senses, taste and smell were associated purely with sensual rather than intellectual experience, an idea which was still very much in currency in the Victorian period. Alexander Walker, who published a popular physiognomy book, *Physiognomy founded on Physiology*, in 1834, figures a strict division between the organs, arguing that: ‘[t]he nose and the mouth are as evidently connected with animal purposes, as the eye and ear with intellectual ones’.⁷² Formulations like this, which emphasise the ‘animal’ and visceral quality of taste and smell, help to explain how gustatory and olfactory terms such as sweetness can come to stand for bodily and sensory experience in general. Yet while the word ‘smell’ carries unambiguously corporeal (and negative) connotations, the conventionally more positive term ‘taste’ transcends the realm of the senses to signify, in the words of the OED, ‘discernment and appreciation of the beautiful in nature or art; spec. the faculty of perceiving and enjoying what is excellent in art, literature, and the like’. Sweetness, unlike the other types of taste (saltiness, sourness and bitterness), shares the full range of associations connected to ‘taste’ itself. On the whole it is a positive term of approbation which operates across bodily, aesthetic and cultural levels.

Sweetness is therefore an expansive concept taking in a wide range of disparate phenomena, but it retains links to specific material things, and in recent times sugar has been

⁷² Alexander Walker, *Physiognomy founded on Physiology* (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1834), p. 239.

prominent amongst these. W. R. Aykroyd has suggested that in changing the material experience of sweetness, sugar also altered sweetness as an idea. He argues specifically that the concept of sweetness has been degraded because sugar is such a commonplace commodity.

‘Sweet’ and its derivatives have become perhaps the most overworked group of words in the English language. The degradation of ‘sweet’ may be largely due to its association with a common and everyday article of diet. When it recalled the rarer and more precious honey, it could appropriately be used in addressing God, the Saviour and the Saints. Nowadays, applied to everybody and everything, it conveys little more than sentimental approval. As an adjective it has sunk almost to the level of ‘nice’.⁷³

Aykroyd also notes that the adjectives ‘sugary’ and ‘sugared’ are often derogatory: ‘[e]ven when applied to foods and drinks and dishes, “sugary” may suggest excessive and offensive sweetness. “Sugared words” conveys a notion of beguilement, of an attempt on the part of the speaker to deceive by smooth speech’.⁷⁴ This sense of sugariness as being somehow inherently degraded due to its commercial and mass-market associations is noticeable in the Victorian period, affecting not only the definition of sugar as a literary trope but also the concept of sweetness.

In addition to Aykroyd, Mintz has also argued that sugar changed the material basis of sweetness in the period. According to him: ‘[t]he very idea of sweetness came to be associated with sugar in European thought and language’ after the commodity began to be widely consumed during the eighteenth century.⁷⁵ Aykroyd cites Lyle’s Golden Syrup, first produced in 1883, as an example of the way in which sugar’s ubiquity had supplanted other sources of sweetness in the public imagination by the end of the nineteenth century.⁷⁶ Treacle such as Lyle’s was made using sugar, but when ‘Golden Syrup’ came to be marketed it used a biblical citation which involved honey rather than sugar. The slogan ‘[o]ut of the eater came forth meat, and out of the strong came forth sweetness’ (Judges 14:14) appeared on the outside of the tin, referring to an episode in Judges in which Samson kills a lion only to later encounter a

⁷³ W. R. Aykroyd, *Sweet Malefactor: Sugar, Slavery and Human Society* (London: Heineman, 1967), p. 9.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Mintz, *Sweetness and Power*, p. 17.

⁷⁶ Aykroyd, *Sweet Malefactor*, p. 7.

nest of bees established in its carcass. The gruesome tale was further commemorated on the tin by a picture of the dead lion flanked by a swarm of honey-bees, while the whole was mounted by the accreditation: ‘Abram Lyle & Sons, Sugar Refiners’. The fact that the manufacturers saw no discrepancy in pairing the sweetness of sugar with a well-known reference to honey emphasises the extent to which the taste of sweetness had become interchangeable with sugar by this time.

By the end of the nineteenth century sugar had become so ubiquitous that all references to sweetness had been repositioned within a sugary aesthetic. In *From Honey to Ashes* (1966) Claude Lévi-Strauss argues that metaphors of tobacco and honey were central to the myths of primitive cultures.⁷⁷ Conversely, in *Cuban Counterpoint* (1940), Fernando Ortiz’s history of modern Cuba, the author pitches tobacco against sugar, arguing that both commodities were crucial in shaping the country’s social, political, and aesthetic life. Sweetness is an important concept in both texts, but their focus on different material forms of sweetness demonstrates the historical shift from honey to sugar as the main physical signifier of sweet taste. Mintz argues that: ‘[t]he affective weight of sweetness, always considerable, was not so much diminished as qualitatively changed by [sugar’s] abundance. The good life, the rich life, the full life – was the sweet life’.⁷⁸ Although sugar did not monopolise the meanings of sweetness in the nineteenth century, it did inflect the word ‘sweet’ with its own social and cultural associations.

It is this sugary aesthetic of sweetness that I plan to track in this thesis. In its flexibility, sweetness lends itself especially well to figurative and rhetorical configurations, and the concept is deployed in myriad ways in nineteenth-century literary culture. Mintz claims that sweetness has an unusually high symbolic ‘carrying power’ which has allowed it to maintain older associations while simultaneously acquiring new ones.⁷⁹ As the nineteenth century progressed the taste of sweetness became irrefutably bound to sugar, allowing the concept of

⁷⁷ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *From Honey to Ashes* (1966), trans. John and Doreen Weightman (London: Cape, 1973).

⁷⁸ Mintz, *Sweetness and Power*, p. 208.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 207-8.

sweetness to develop with an unusually precise materiality. But sweetness as an aesthetic category already had a rich and varied history and this in turn affected the cultural status of sugar. While Victorian writers commonly conflate sugar and sweetness, they also draw attention to their differences in order to explore a surprisingly wide range of literary, cultural and political questions. The way in which representations of sweetness and of sugar intersect but also distinguish themselves from each other in the period is the key relationship that I want to record and register.

The texts I discuss in Chapter 1 – although mostly originating from the late eighteenth century – are crucial to the way in which sugar and sweetness continue to be discussed throughout the Victorian period. Sugar's involvement in debates about slavery, which reached their peak in the 1790s, set the tone for how the product came to be perceived by the public, even as the issue of slavery became less contentious in the nineteenth century due to subsequent abolitionist victories. From the outset, sugar was implicated in debates about the slave trade, with many antislavery campaigners calling for an outright boycott of the product they saw as polluted with the blood of slaves. This so-called 'blood sugar' imagery became popular in the period. However, advocates of a more moderate abolitionist agenda – in particular those connected to the Abolition Society, which was formed in 1787 and contributed to William Wilberforce's parliamentary victories – evoked positive meanings of sweetness to link sugar to a different social and economic legacy, one in which the idea of freedom supported liberal ideology in which financial and moral imperatives were not opposed to one another but rather enhanced one another's progress. The chapter includes close readings of Laurence Sterne's *A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy* (1768), William Fox's influential 1791 pamphlet 'An Address to the People of Great Britain, on the Propriety of Abstaining from West India Sugar and Rum', Samuel Taylor Coleridge's lecture from 1795 'On the Slave Trade', James Ramsay's *Essay on the Treatment and Conversion of the African*

Slaves in the British Sugar Colonies (1784) and *An Inquiry into the Effects of Putting a Stop to the African Slave Trade* (1784), plus a variety of other pro- and antislavery writers, including William Beckford, Thomas Clarkson and William Cowper. While previous critical interest in this area has focused on the widely used ‘blood sugar’ imagery, I show how writers associated with the Abolition Society used a pre-existing discourse of sweetness to connect sugar to a more moderate political agenda, one that sought to separate the actual business of making sugar from the moral problem of slavery. Central figures in the Abolition Society such as Thomas Clarkson and James Ramsay proposed that the West Indian sugar economy could be run without using slave labour, and as such called into question the common defence of slavery by proslavery activists in terms of the national value of the sugar trade.

My second chapter, which focuses on Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette* (1853), shows how the issue of slavery remained a live one throughout the nineteenth century and continued to influence representations of sugar even after the official abolition of slavery in 1834. Not only does Paul Emanuel travel to Guadeloupe – historically the most important French sugar colony – but metaphors of sugar and slavery are used to explore the power relations between Lucy Snowe and Paul throughout the novel. At the same time as I demonstrate the continuing figurative impact of slavery on representations of sugar in the nineteenth century I show that the meanings of both sugar and sweetness were also bound up with discourses of consumption, and especially of female consumption, by this time. Comparing *Villette* to William Makepeace Thackeray’s *Pendennis* (1848-50), in which female appetite is linked adversely to sexual and moral weakness, I show how Brontë uses sugar in particular in order to figure an alternative role for female physicality in *Villette*. I include detailed readings of contemporary medical literature, in particular *Modern Domestic Medicine* (1826) by Thomas John Graham, a copy of which was owned by the Brontës and may well have provided the inspiration for Graham Bretton in the text. Brontë conforms to a medical discourse in which sugar had positive health

benefits and uses this to challenge conventional notions of femininity, such as those to which Thackeray largely subscribes and which present physical appetite as opposed to moral virtue. In figuring sugar as still tied to issues of slavery Brontë maintains earlier anxieties connected to abolitionism in which sugar was the site of concerns about the body, yet her focus on diet repositions these concerns in the context of consumption. *Villette*'s most lingering portrayal of sugar is as a domestic item, rather than a colonial one, a staple of the many puddings and snacks that had become prevalent by the mid-nineteenth century.

While for Brontë sugar was healthy when used in moderation, this positive view of the commodity did not go unchallenged for long. In my third chapter I show how sugar became increasingly associated with poor health in the 1850s and 1860s due to the growing scandal of food adulteration. Fears about adulteration became a major cause of public concern in the 1850s, and by the 1860s were influencing representations of literary standards. As numerous critics have shown, metaphors of reading and eating were often conflated in the nineteenth century. Within this context I argue that sugar became representative of bad literature as well as bad food in the period, marrying fears about the damaging effects of mercantile motivations on both these forms of commercial manufacture. Using a number of texts which document the rise of food adulteration in this period – including Arthur Hill Hassall's formative *Adulterations Detected*, which appeared in 1857 – I draw comparisons with the language of reviews of popular literature, most notably in *St James's Magazine*, the *Christian Remembrancer* and the *Quarterly Review*, all of which published damning appraisals of sensation fiction in the period. Reviewers and writers alike subscribed to a set of imagery in which sugariness was linked to degraded commercial imperatives and to concerns about the negative impact of popular literature on readers, particularly women. I also explore a number of literary works from the period in which these links are made explicit – including Joseph

Hatton's *Bitter Sweets* (1865), Wilkie Collins's *Man and Wife* (1870), George Eliot's *Brother Jacob* (1864), and Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market* (1862).

My final chapter explores how this new legacy of sugar as a denominator of poor literary taste was developed and expanded by Matthew Arnold, Algernon Charles Swinburne and Walter Pater, who engaged with sweetness as a literary trope in the 1860s and 1870s. Arnold's idea of 'sweetness and light' referenced imagery that was self-consciously apian, and therefore linked to honey, in order to mark a clear demarcation between the idea of culture Arnold hoped to invoke and contemporary popular culture, which was associated with sugar through its commodified nature and impulse to cater to the lowest literary taste. In making sweetness – through the concept of sweetness and light – part of his dual representation of the 'real' effects of culture, Arnold performs a conscious rehabilitation of the notion of sweetness as an aesthetic term, using this to differentiate his idea of culture from what he saw as the degraded standards of modern culture in general. Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy* (1869), in which he develops the concept of sweetness and light, engages with contemporary work by Swinburne and Pater which also explores the concept of sweetness. In *Poems and Ballads* (1866), Swinburne exploits the multivalent associations of sweetness as part of a general attempt to break down categories in his poetry. Sweetness becomes a central term in *Poems and Ballads* because it is an aesthetic construct linked to an identifiable material history, thus calling into question conventional boundaries between the physical and immaterial world. Pater's *The Renaissance* (1873), written after *Culture and Anarchy*, reacts against Arnold's idea of sweetness just as more generally the book positions itself in opposition to his philosophy. Using the concept of sweetness to introduce a discourse of physicality into creative and intellectual pursuits and the appreciation of the arts, Pater uses sweetness to demonstrate the feeling of true communion between the artist, his work, and his audience. His emphasis on sweetness as a concept capable of expressing physicality in particular allows Pater to use it to

represent non-normative forms of sexuality in *The Renaissance* (in particular, homosexuality), which he suggests lend an important aspect to many artists' work that has previously been neglected. While both Swinburne and Pater differentiate themselves to a large degree from Arnold in terms of their use of sweetness, all three subscribe to a new discourse of sweetness in which it is linked to but not defined by sugar.

Throughout the thesis I show how sweetness as an aesthetic category in the nineteenth century was intimately connected to the role of sugar in Victorian society. The relationship between sugar and sweetness that I trace in nineteenth-century writing shows that commodities, as well as accruing complex cultural meanings of their own, can at the same time exert a powerful influence on aesthetic and literary constructions. I also show that, while commodity history has an impact on aesthetics, aesthetic configurations reciprocally influence the cultural resonance of specific commodities. As much as sugar affected the meanings of sweetness in the nineteenth century, literary discourses of sweetness shaped the reception and representation of sugar.

Chapter 1

Sugar and the Politics of Consumption

During the 1780s and 1790s public debate about slavery reached a pitch, and protesters began to urge people to abstain from sugar in order to end the practice. Although sugar was by no means the only product made in the British West Indies using slave labour it did attract the most attention from antislavery campaigners keen to capitalise on the irony of its sweet taste, which they saw as incompatible with the brutal conditions of its production. William Fox's influential 1791 pamphlet, 'An Address to the People of Great Britain, on the Propriety of Abstaining from West India Sugar and Rum', attributes the continuation of slavery itself to the British desire for sugar, arguing that if consumers were to abstain from the commodity (and from rum, which is a by-product of sugar), then the trade in slaves would logically have to cease. Fox transforms the issue of slavery from one which fundamentally concerns production to a question of consumer ethics. 'If we purchase the commodity we participate in the crime', he argues: 'the slave-dealer, the slave-holder, and the slave-driver, are virtually the agents of the consumer'.¹

The 'Address' is in many ways typical of a new genre of work which became popular around this time and which made heavy use of what Timothy Morton has dubbed the 'blood sugar' topos.² So-called 'blood sugar' imagery presents food and drink made using sugar as polluted with the blood of slaves, a literal embodiment of the physical pain of production. Images which linked sugar to the blood of injured slaves were effective because they implied a greater responsibility for slavery than British consumers were otherwise used to imagining.

¹ William Fox, 'An Address to the People of Great Britain, on the Propriety of Abstaining from West India Sugar and Rum' (1791), in *Slavery, Abolition and Emancipation: Writings in the British Romantic Period*, ed. Peter J. Kitson and Debbie Lee, 8 vols. (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1999), ii, 153-65 (p. 156). All subsequent references to this pamphlet will be cited in the text.

² Morton, *The Poetics of Spice*, p. 173.

The concept of a piece of sugar saturated with the blood of an innocent captive refigures the consumer's enjoyment of the commodity as a kind of violence. Elsewhere in the 'Address' Fox depicts the transition from pleasure to torture quite literally:

The Legislature having refused to interpose, the people are now necessarily called on, either to reprobate or approve the measure; for West-India Slavery must depend upon their support for its existence, and it is in the power of every individual to increase, or to diminish its extent. The laws of our country may indeed prohibit us the sugar-cane, unless we receive it through the medium of slavery. They may hold it to our lips, steeped in the blood of our fellow-creatures; but they cannot compel us to accept the loathsome portion. (155)

The visceral nature of Fox's imagery underlines the way in which sugar became such a powerful symbol of the horrors of slavery due to its metaphorical potency. Fox himself stresses how it is the act of purchasing sugar – not eating it – that is the great moving cause of slavery, yet the imagery he presents of the sugar as, quite literally, 'steeped in [...] blood' suggests that it is the physicality of the commodity which is dangerous. The image connects the body of the suffering slave with that of the pleased consumer, and in so doing delivers a forceful criticism of the decadence of sugar consumption. Fox's representation of sugar exploits the commodity's material basis as a foodstuff (and a delectable one at that) to highlight the way in which consumer greed was, in his opinion, driving colonial exploitation. Clare Midgley credits Fox with having 'launched' the public abstention campaign, which became increasingly popular in the 1790s as a way for ordinary people to demonstrate their moral objection to slavery.³ Prominent abolitionist campaigner Thomas Clarkson estimated that by 1792 around 300,000 people were actively abstaining from sugar.⁴ The effect of this was to put sugar at the very centre of contemporary debates about slavery.

Fox's argument and imagery became widely known in the period and spawned a number of imitations. His 'Address' is one example of the host of political and literary writings about sugar and slavery which appeared in the late eighteenth century and which constitute the

³ Clare Midgley, *Women against Slavery: The British Campaigns 1780-1870* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 35.

⁴ Thomas Clarkson, *The History of the Rise, Progress, and Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African Slave-Trade by British Parliament*, 2 vols. (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees and Orme, 1808), ii, 350.

first major interaction between sugar and literature. This body of work set the tone for much subsequent writing about sugar, ensuring that links between the product and slavery as a concept became a key component of sugar's figurative inheritance. The idea of the slave's body being present in sugar which is then eaten by the consumer ensures that sugar is remembered in terms of its materiality as well as its links to controversial colonial practices. However, for all that blood sugar imagery had a powerful rhetorical impact on representations of sugar in the period and beyond, an alternative abolitionist discourse, in which sugar and slavery were separated, was more important politically. The Abolition Society – formed in 1787 with Granville Sharp as Chairman and William Wilberforce as their representative in parliament – was initially supportive of the campaign for abstention, but grew more cautious as the political climate in the 1790s became more suspicious of radicalism. Moral objections aside, many MPs were also reluctant to interfere with the West Indian sugar economy because it was an important source of national revenue. Yet by disassociating sugar from slavery in a practical sense – insisting that a profitable operation could be continued in the West Indies without resorting to slave labour – the Abolition Society were able to fight pro-slavery activists on their own terms. Central to their approach to sugar was a re-appropriation of the concept of sweetness. While proponents of blood sugar imagery used the commodity's involvement in slavery to distort the favourable associations of sweetness – for Fox, the sweet taste of sugar is in implicit contradiction to the product's 'loathsome' origin – more moderate campaigners evoked sweetness as a moral and aesthetic term in order to refigure the sugar trade as a positive social and economic force distinct from slavery.

The following chapter starts by giving an overview of the intertwined histories of slavery and the sugar trade. I then discuss the role of sweetness as an aesthetic and moral category in eighteenth-century literature of sensibility and how this tradition affects representations of both sugar and sweetness in abolitionist writing. Following on from this, I

proceed to analyse in detail the two main strands of abolitionist discourse: ‘blood sugar’ writing and the more moderate arguments of the Abolition Society. While blood sugar imagery has attracted much recent critical attention, there has been less of a focus on the more moderate treatment of sugar and sweetness in mainstream abolitionist writing.⁵ Yet this writing is a crucial influence on the aesthetics of sugar in this period because it shows how sugar and sweetness reciprocally influence each other. While the blood sugar topos implicates sweetness by association through its attacks on sugar, moderate abolitionists give the concept a more active role in their project to disassociate sugar from the stigma of slavery.

Sugar and the Atlantic Slave Trade

During the eighteenth century the Atlantic slave trade grew at a rate which outstripped all other branches of European commerce. By 1770 nearly two and a half million slaves had been transported to the New World colonies.⁶ To support this system, a so-called triangular trade developed in the seventeenth century between Europe, Africa and the Americas, carrying textiles, rum and other manufactured goods to Africa, native Africans to the Americas to work as slaves, and finally transporting the produce they cultivated there – sugar, coffee, tobacco, and cotton – back to consumers in Europe. In the early days of the slave trade most Africans were captured as prisoners of war but increasingly kidnapping became common.⁷ The experience of Olaudah Equiano, whose *Interesting Narrative* was published in 1789 and became a key text for abolitionists, was in many respects typical. Kidnapped and sold into domestic slavery in his native country of Africa, Equiano was then sent to Virginia where he worked as a slave for a lieutenant in the British navy. His account of the squalid conditions

⁵ For recent examples of literary criticism which has discussed blood sugar imagery see Coleman, ‘Conspicuous Consumption’; Kowaleski-Wallace, *Consuming Subjects*; Morton, *The Poetics of Spice*; Sussman, *Consuming Anxieties*; and Plasa, *Slaves to Sweetness*.

⁶ Robin Blackburn, *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery 1776-1848* (London: Verso, 1988), p. 3.

⁷ James Walvin, *Black Ivory: Slavery in the British Empire*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), p. 24.

slaves were transported in and of the life and work of slaves once they reached the colonies was read by a wide audience in the late eighteenth century. On boarding the slave ship that was to take him to America Equiano discovers ‘a multitude of black people of every description chained together, every one of their countenances expressing dejection and sorrow’; ‘[i]ndeed, such were the horrors of my own views and fears at the moment, that, if ten thousand worlds had been my own, I would have freely parted with them all to have exchanged my condition with the meanest slave in my own country’.⁸

Campaigners against slavery used a variety of means to highlight the suffering of African slaves in the Americas. James Walvin has argues that ‘[t]here was, quite simply, no political campaign to compare to abolition’.⁹ In the early days supporters relied on petitions, pamphlets, tracts, personal accounts (like Equiano’s) and public meetings to get their message across, but later became adept at lobbying parliament, while literature connected to the campaign became increasingly sophisticated in its rhetoric.¹⁰ Much of this literature highlighted the gruelling physical conditions under which slaves laboured in the colonies, where more often than not they were involved in cultivating sugar. In his *Essay on the Treatment and Conversion of the African Slaves in the British Sugar Colonies*, published in 1784, abolitionist James Ramsay describes the discipline of a sugar plantation as being ‘as exact as that of a regiment’. He reports that in busy times the safety of the slaves was regularly sacrificed to serve the planter’s commercial interests: ‘the danger of grinding off a drowsy negroe’s [sic] arm, or harassing him to death, is a consideration which [...] would hardly interrupt the grand work of sugar-making’.¹¹

⁸ Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative and Other Writings*, ed. Vincent Carretta, 2nd edn (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 55.

⁹ Walvin, *Black Ivory*, p. 262.

¹⁰ Blackburn, *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery*, p. 144.

¹¹ James Ramsay, *Essay on the Treatment and Conversion of the African Slaves in the British Sugar Colonies* (London: J. Phillips, 1784), pp. 69, 77.

The slave trade was abolished by the British parliament in 1807, and was followed in 1833 by the Act of Emancipation, which freed slaves throughout the Empire.¹² This double pronged attack on slavery and the slave trade took place in two key stages between 1787 and 1807 and 1823 and 1838, when, as per the provision of the 1833 legislation, those slaves who had remained in ‘apprenticeships’ following emancipation (i.e. a period of unpaid work for their employer – this was effectively indentured labour) were released.¹³ I am going to focus on the first of these periods, as abolitionists campaigned to end the slave trade. Although sugar continued to be a part of antislavery rhetoric well into the nineteenth century it no longer received the same attention as when the debates had been a novelty.

Theories about why political protests about slavery emerged so dramatically at this point are manifold but tend to fall into two camps: those that attribute the change to contemporary moral and intellectual developments, and those who subscribe to the so-called ‘decline theory’, a term used by Eric Williams to argue that diminishing financial returns in the colonies prompted the abolition of the slave trade. In 1944 Williams published the authoritative *Capitalism and Slavery*, which displaced earlier work by Reginald Coupland which had stressed the importance of the growth of a philanthropic tradition in combating slavery.¹⁴ Sugar is at the centre of Williams’s concerns: he argues that overproduction in the years immediately prior to the abolition of the slave trade, and again preceding emancipation in 1834 had a direct impact on parliament’s willingness to introduce antislavery legislation. According to Williams, the West Indian sugar economy was, in the first half of the nineteenth century, ‘so unprofitable that for this reason alone its destruction was inevitable’.¹⁵

¹² Although the Act of Emancipation was passed in the summer of 1833 it only came into effect throughout the British Empire one year later, in 1834. As a result of this, most historians refer to 1834 as the date of emancipation, a practice I will follow in this thesis.

¹³ Walvin, *Black Ivory*, p. 262.

¹⁴ See Reginald Coupland, *Wilberforce: A Narrative* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1923) and *The British Anti-Slavery Movement* (London: T. Butterworth, 1933). Coupland does, however, acknowledge some political and economic context for abolition.

¹⁵ Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1944), pp. 152, 135.

In 1977 Seymour Drescher posed the first major challenge to Williams's decline theory in *Econocide*, which interpreted rising sugar output in the colonies as a sign of a healthy sugar industry as opposed to an ailing one. Drescher argued that rather than the abolition process being driven by economic factors, instead these interests were sacrificed to wider humanitarian concerns.¹⁶ Drescher's hypothesis has since been adopted by a number of economic historians and continues to play an important role in contemporary understandings of the abolition debate.¹⁷ It has also inspired much recent new work by historians which focuses on the social changes within Britain that led to the success of the antislavery lobby. Much of this work places greater emphasis on the role of groups who had been traditionally alienated from the political process, such as women, the newly enfranchised middle class and religious groups such as the Quakers and evangelicals, both of whom formed key pressure groups to lobby for abolition despite being barred from parliament.¹⁸ In addition to these home-grown campaigns, Robin Blackburn has stressed the role of slaves themselves in antislavery victories, whose battle for rights in the colonies was an important part of the political process.

New research by David Beck Ryden has recently argued for a return to Williams's thesis. While acknowledging some errors in the earlier account, Ryden nonetheless agrees with its overall validity, claiming (as Williams does) that overproduction of sugar in the years immediately prior to the abolition of the slave trade was relevant to parliament's decision to outlaw the slave trade.¹⁹ Ryden's contribution – in *West Indian Slavery and British Abolition* (2009) – is to put sugar back in a central role in terms of historians' understanding of

¹⁶ See Seymour Drescher, *Econocide: British Slavery in the Era of Abolition* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1977).

¹⁷ David Eltis is one notable example of a historian who has endorsed Drescher's work. See Eltis, *Economic Growth and the Ending of the Atlantic Slave Trade* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

¹⁸ For information about the role of women in the British abolition movement see Midgley, *Women against Slavery*, and Moira Ferguson, *Subject to Others: British Women Writers and Colonial Slavery 1670-1834* (London: Routledge, 1992). David Brion Davis provides an astute analysis of the effect of middle-class ideology on antislavery in *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1966); see Roger Anstey, *The Atlantic Slave Trade and British Abolition 1760-1810* (London: Macmillan, 1975) for an account of Quaker and evangelical involvement.

¹⁹ David Beck Ryden, *West Indian Slavery and British Abolition, 1783-1807* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 14.

antislavery. While in Drescher's view a thriving sugar industry was stifled by the moral need to abolish slavery, Ryden's work marks a return to theories which place the relative health of the sugar industry at the centre of our understanding of abolition.

As one of a number of new, colonial products, sugar was still becoming known in the eighteenth century and its social, cultural, and political meanings were yet to be defined. For some, its physical sweetness provided a powerful rhetorical contrast to what they perceived as the moral bitterness of slavery, yet in other accounts sugar makes a far more prosaic appearance, as an ordinary, everyday product, whose trade formed an important branch of commerce. The ways in which sugar became involved in writing about slavery affected not only the conception of sugar itself but also the abstract idea of sweetness which was closely bound up with sugar in the period. In recent years many critics have considered the role of sugar in antislavery imagery, yet they generally assume that sweetness functions within this imagery as a figurative stand-in for the real product – sugar – at the centre of the slave trade. Such conclusions disregard the way in which the concept of sweetness and its pre-existing history actively influence the depiction of sugar in antislavery literature. I am going to start by examining this and the ways in which it impacted on the abolition debate, before moving on to consider how both positive and negative representations of sugar in the period have affected its reputation throughout the nineteenth century.

Concepts of Sweetness and Antislavery Rhetoric

In 1776 Adam Smith published *The Wealth of Nations*, his famous theorisation of free market economics. His analysis of slavery anticipates Williams by denouncing the system on purely economic grounds, although unlike Williams, who claims that overproduction of sugar provided the impetus to abolition, instead Smith argues that slavery is inherently inefficient:

‘the work done by slaves, though it appears to cost only their maintenance, is in the end the dearest of any. A person who can acquire no property, can have no other interest but to eat as much, and to labour as little as possible’.²⁰ His rejection of slavery is philosophical as well as economic, arguing that the state of slavery is counterintuitive to enterprise.

Slaves [...] are very seldom inventive; and all the most important improvements, either in machinery, or in the arrangement and distribution of work which facilitate and abridge labour, have been the discoveries of freemen. Should a slave propose any improvement of this kind, his master would be very apt to consider the proposal as the suggestion of laziness, and a desire to save his own labour at the master’s expense. The poor slave, instead of reward, would probably meet with much abuse, perhaps with some punishment. In the manufactures carried on by slaves, therefore, more labour must generally have been employed to execute the same quantity of work than in those carried on by freemen. The work of the former must, upon that account, generally have been dearer than that of the latter.²¹

Smith sympathises with the figure of the ‘poor slave’ in the extract; his regret that his ingenuity should be met with punishment or abuse, instead of reward, resonates with a vision he shared with abolitionists of a fairer version of society. Central to Smith’s ideas is the concept of the market as carrying its own morality: that market interventions could have humanitarian outcomes provided a moral basis for emerging free trade ideology. Smith’s theory suggests that social benefits emerge as a result of following economic principles.

To figure the market as a moral structure lessens the philosophical disparities many critics have noted between *The Wealth of Nations* and Smith’s earlier work, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, which was published in 1759.²² While *The Wealth of Nations* argues that economic self-interest is the basis of human motivation, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* proposes feeling as the main means by which action is stimulated. Smith’s idea of how feeling could be influential is set out in his theory of sympathy. For him, sympathy was the key to moral action – by observing others, and sympathising with them, people become aware of their

²⁰ Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations: Books I-III* (1776), ed. Andrew Skinner (London: Penguin, 1999), pp. 488-9.

²¹ Smith, *The Wealth of Nations: Books IV-V* (1776), ed. Andrew Skinner (London: Penguin, 1999), pp. 270-71.

²² For a fuller explanation of recent critical engagement with the ‘Adam Smith Problem’ see Stephen Copley, ‘Introduction: Reading the *Wealth of Nations*’, in *Adam Smith’s Wealth of Nations: New Interdisciplinary Essays*, ed. Stephen Copley and Kathryn Sutherland (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), pp. 1-23 (pp. 4-5).

own behaviour and thus more able to question its fairness and moral stance. Sweetness was an important part of Smith's concept of sympathy. In *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* he makes it the basis of the relief and pleasure that, he argues, such a sense of sympathy awakens.

How are the unfortunate relieved when they have found out a person to whom they can communicate the cause of their sorrow? Upon his sympathy they seem to disburthen themselves of a part of their distress: he is not improperly said to share it with them. He not only feels a sorrow of the same kind with that which they feel, but as if he had derived a part of it to himself, what he feels seems to alleviate the weight of what they feel. Yet by relating their misfortunes they in some measure renew their grief. They awaken in their memory the remembrance of those circumstances which occasioned their affliction. Their tears accordingly flow faster than before, and they are apt to abandon themselves to all the weakness of sorrow. They take pleasure, however, in all this, and, it is evident, are sensibly relieved by it; because *the sweetness of his sympathy* more than compensates the bitterness of that sorrow, which, in order to excite this sympathy, they had thus enlivened and renewed.²³

For Smith, sweetness is straightforwardly an indicator of positive emotional feeling in the passage, but the imagery is also highly physical, using tears to demonstrate suffering which is mental in origin. Elsewhere Smith acknowledges the physical origins of sweetness: '[w]hatever gratifies the taste is sweet, whatever pleases the eye is beautiful'.²⁴ Smith places sweetness at the centre of his account of feeling, and in this he had a precedent. Two years earlier, philosopher David Hume had connected sweetness to sentiment in his essay 'Of the Standard of Taste' (1757). '[N]o sentiment represents what is really in the object', Hume argues, '[a]ccording to the disposition of the organs, the same object may be both sweet and bitter'.²⁵

The Theory of Moral Sentiments was a foundational text of the cult of sensibility which arose in the eighteenth century, and in which sympathy was an important idea. The way in which sweetness is involved in Smith's concept of sympathy anticipates the key role that sweetness as an abstract concept was to play in much subsequent sentimental literature.²⁶

Sentimentalism was a feature of almost all literary genres in the mid-eighteenth century, but

²³ Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), ed. D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macfie (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), p. 15; my emphasis.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 165.

²⁵ David Hume, 'Of the Standard of Taste' (1757), in *Essays: Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed. Eugene F. Miller (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1985), pp. 226-49 (p. 230).

²⁶ Throughout this chapter I am using the terms sensibility and sentimentalism as interchangeable.

especially characterised fiction published between the 1740s and 1770s. Janet Todd identifies ‘sweet’ as one of only a handful of words that became particularly associated with the genre:

In general, vocabulary in a sentimental work is conventional, repetitive, mannered and overcharged. It is also hyperbolic; a few adjectives such as the eulogistic ‘sweet’, ‘grateful’ and ‘delicate’, and constructions such as ‘the best of mothers’ do much service, as do the perjoratives, ‘cruel’ and ‘base’, and the negatives ‘unkind’, ‘ungenerous’ and ‘unfeeling’.²⁷

Her argument is based on linguistic research carried out by Erik Erämetsä, whose study of sentimental vocabulary divides ‘typically’ sentimental words into two groups: the first including terms such as ‘goodness’, ‘benevolence’ and ‘esteem’, which illustrate, according to him, the didacticism and morality of the Enlightenment period. The second group of words Erämetsä identifies are those which are used in connection to the manifestation of feeling, and it is in this latter group that he finds a prominent place for sweetness. “‘Sweet’ was a typical all-round qualifier of words in sentimental literature’, he argues, quoting Samuel Johnson’s dictionary, which provides the synonyms mild, soft, gentle, graceful, and pleasing for the adjective.”²⁸

Historians and literary critics alike have noted the connection between sentimental fiction and the British anti-slavery movement, suggesting that Smith’s *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* exerted as important an influence on abolitionist debates as did his more direct rebuttal of slavery in *The Wealth of Nations*. In *The Politics of Sensibility* (1996) and *Slavery, Empathy, and Pornography* (2002), Markman Ellis and Marcus Wood respectively both argue that the cult of sensibility was one of a number of cultural phenomena that influenced abolitionist literature.²⁹ More recently, in *British Abolitionism and the Rhetoric of Sensibility* (2005), Brycchan Carey has explored this relationship in more detail. According to him, during

²⁷ Janet Todd, *Sensibility: An Introduction* (London: Methuen, 1986), p. 5.

²⁸ Erik Erämetsä, ‘A Study of the Word “Sentimental” and of Other Linguistic Characteristics of Eighteenth-Century Sentimentalism in England’, *Annales Academiae Scientiarum Fennicae*, Ser. B (Helsinki, 1951), p. 74.

²⁹ Markman Ellis, *The Politics of Sensibility: Race, Gender, and Commerce in the Sentimental Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Marcus Wood, *Slavery, Empathy, and Pornography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

the mid to late eighteenth century a ‘distinct and recognisable sentimental rhetoric’ became especially prevalent in the abolition debate.³⁰ Although the link between sensibility and abolitionism is widely acknowledged, so far there have been no suggestions that sweetness might be a connection between these different kinds of writing. I want to suggest, however, that sweetness as an abstract concept was an important way in which imaginative links were forged between the two.

Samuel Richardson employs the term ‘sweetness’ and its derivatives frequently in his work. Richardson uses the vocabulary in line with Erämetsä’s conclusion that ‘sweet’ was ‘a typical all-round qualifier of words’, but links it particularly to feminine qualities in *Clarissa*. ‘Lift up your sweet face, my best child, my own Clarissa Harlowe!’ Mrs Harlowe proclaims near the beginning of the novel as the family try to persuade Clarissa to marry Mr Solmes.³¹ Even later, when, as a result of her refusal, Clarissa falls from favour, her ‘natural sweetness’ still stands testament to her virtue.³² Her brother condemns her as a ‘fallen angel’, the ‘sweetness’ of whose face is in sharp contrast to the ‘obstinacy’ of her behaviour.³³ Although, unlike in her mother’s reckoning, in her brother’s opinion Clarissa’s sweetness is contrasted with the obstinacy of her character, in both examples sweetness is divorced from its literal (i.e. physical) meaning. Janet Todd has argued that, in Richardson, knowledge stays at the level of the body, but his use of sweetness in these examples complicates such an interpretation.³⁴ Even when used in a bodily context, in Richardson’s writing sweetness indicates morality. Although sentimentalism as a genre ostensibly privileged moral feelings over physical ones, this is contradicted by the way in which mental feelings are regularly expressed through bodily processes, such as fainting, shaking, flushing, and crying. Just as Smith appropriates the

³⁰ Brycchan Carey, *British Abolitionism and the Rhetoric of Sensibility: Writing, Sentiment, and Slavery, 1760-1807* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 1.

³¹ Samuel Richardson, *Clarissa, or The History of a Young Lady* (1748), ed. Angus Ross (London: Viking, 1985), p. 89.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 366.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 306.

³⁴ Todd, *Sensibility*, p. 79.

physical quality of sweetness for moral ends, so Richardson and other sentimental writers use sweetness as an index of moral value. While the abstract concept of sweetness alludes to a physical reality, it is also ultimately divorced from materiality, allowing Richardson to use it to suggest bodily discourses while eschewing their physicality. According to Marcus Wood, abolitionist writing's focus on physical sensations is indebted to the discourse of the body raised by sentimental literature. What was implicit in authors like Richardson was later drawn out by antislavery writers who were keen to make the connection between physicality and morality explicit. In making the bodies of slaves and consumers central to their discourse, abolitionists draw on the ways in which sentimental literature emphasises the embodied nature of human experience.

The sentimental vein in Richardson's texts was later refined by Laurence Sterne, whose own work also became one of the key expressions of the sensibility movement. Sterne appears to take on a Richardsonian use of sweetness, in which the quality is expressive of sentiment and affection. 'Tis sweet to feel by what fine-spun threads our affections are drawn together', Yorick muses in *A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy* (1768).³⁵ In another example Sterne expresses sweetness purely as a moral, and non-physical, construct:

The old man rose up to meet me, and with a respectful cordiality would have me sit down at the table; my heart was sat down the moment I enter'd the room; so I sat down at once like a son of the family; and to invest myself in the character as speedily as I could, I instantly borrowed the old man's knife, and taking up the loaf cut myself a hearty luncheon; and as I did it I saw a testimony in every eye, not only of an honest welcome, but of a welcome mix'd with thanks that I had not seem'd to doubt it [...] Was it this; or tell me, nature, what else it was which made this morsel so sweet-³⁶

In describing bread as sweet, Sterne subordinates physical sweetness to a moral idea. His sweetness is used to express sentimental affection for the nuclear family and its bonds: Yorick is nourished, Sterne implies in the passage, mainly by emotional, rather than actual, food.

³⁵ Laurence Sterne, *A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy* (1768), in *The Florida Edition of the Works of Laurence Sterne*, ed. Melvyn New and W. G. Day, 6 vols. (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2002), vi, 90.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 158.

However, if sweetness is largely disembodied in Richardson, Sterne approaches a more material definition. Although *A Sentimental Journey* is a relatively short text, twice Sterne mentions sweetness in direct connection to the nerves. ‘I knew not that contention could be rendered so sweet and pleasurable a thing to the nerves as I then felt it’, Yorick comments while exchanging snuff boxes with the monk in Calais.³⁷ In contrast to this example, in another episode Yorick uses sweetness to demonstrate a nervous affliction. Victim of a recklessly fast driver, Yorick’s complaint takes on a philosophical aspect as he contemplates the heightened pleasure his present fear will foster. This pleasure is expressed in terms of sweetness: ‘The deuce take him and his galloping too – said I – he’ll go on tearing my nerves till he has worked me into a foolish passion, and then he’ll go slow, that I may enjoy the sweets of it’.³⁸ What these examples demonstrate is the way in which Sterne regularly pushes sweetness beyond the realms of the physical. What starts as a taste ends up being deployed in a moral argument.

In several important ways Sterne’s work foreshadows a later abolitionist discourse of sweetness, but especially in terms of the connections he draws between sweetness and the body. There is one reference to slavery in *A Sentimental Journey*, albeit one occasioned by Yorick’s sighting of a caged bird. Yet the episode deploys antislavery rhetoric that was later to become familiar.

Disguise thyself as thou wilt, still slavery! said I – still thou art a bitter draught; and though thousands in all ages have been made to drink of thee, thou art no less bitter on that account. – ’Tis thou, thrice sweet and gracious goddess, addressing myself to LIBERTY, whom all in public or in private worship, whose taste is grateful, and ever wilt be so, till NATURE herself shall change [...].³⁹

Sterne’s personification of liberty as sweet while slavery is bitter anticipates abolitionist constructions of moral bitterness opposed to physical sweetness. His previous descriptions of the nerves as allied to sweetness anticipate the way in which later antislavery writing uses the body to explore the moral dimensions of slavery. Sterne’s writing captures a sense of the

³⁷ Ibid., p. 26.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 55.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 96.

sentimental potential of slavery and its political repercussions. It was a theme that was to find considerable currency in abolitionist poetry of the late eighteenth century.

Antislavery poetry continues the tradition developed by the cult of sensibility of using sweetness as a key term. In *The Sorrows of Yamba*, which appeared in 1795 and is generally attributed to evangelical poet Hannah More, ‘sweet’ is a common term of qualification.⁴⁰

Yamba’s baby is referred to as a ‘sweet infant’, while relief from her own anguish is figured as ‘mercy sweet’, and is ideologically opposed to her suffering:

O, ye slaves whom Massas beat,
Ye are stain’d with guilt within;
As ye hope for mercy sweet,
So forgive your Massas’ sin.⁴¹

Timothy Morton uses the same phrase – Yamba’s desire for ‘mercy sweet’ – to link the sweetness of Yamba’s speech to sugar: ‘[g]iven that sugar was the commodity, farmed by the slaves, the sweetness is here not without its portion of power’, he argues.⁴² Yet Morton’s assumption, which makes sweetness the straightforward representation of sugar, ignores the juxtaposition in the verse between the sweetness Yamba associates with spiritual mercy and her physical ordeal. Although sweetness appears to be an abstract idea in the verse, not linked to sugar or the body, the rhyme of ‘sweet’ with ‘beat’ in the first line flags up the opposition between moral sweetness and the physicality of sugar. The violence of ‘beat’ anticipates the way in which – through sugar – sweetness was associated with the brutality of colonial rule as much as the refined objections and cultivated sentiment of civilised society. The disjunction between sweetness and sugar is implicit in the rhyme. Another group of abolitionist writers, however, were keen to draw out this disjunction in more explicit ways.

⁴⁰ Some commentators have attributed joint authorship of this poem to Eaglesfield Smith. See Alan Richardson, Introduction to Hannah More and Eaglesfield Smith (?), ‘The Sorrows of Yamba; or, The Negro Woman’s Lamentation’ (1795), in *Slavery, Abolition and Emancipation*, iv, 224.

⁴¹ Hannah More and Eaglesfield Smith (?), ‘The Sorrows of Yamba’, in *Slavery, Abolition and Emancipation*, iv, 224-31 (p. 229).

⁴² Morton, *The Poetics of Spice*, p. 172.

Blood Sugar: The Consumer Protest against Slavery

‘Are drops of blood the horrible manure / That fills with luscious juice the teeming cane?’ asked Robert Merry, writing for the *European Magazine*, in 1788.⁴³ At the turn of the century it was common to portray sugar as containing the blood of slaves. Even before William Fox’s famous ‘Address’ was published in 1791 blood sugar imagery had become a recognised way of referring to the inhumanity of slavery and an important part of the campaign to abstain from sugar. Clarkson boasted that at the height of the abstention movement in 1791 the government’s income fell by £200,000, although he may have been exaggerating: Kenneth Corfield argues that abstention from sugar probably had no impact on imports of slave-grown sugar in the period.⁴⁴ It would be easy to dismiss the impact of late eighteenth-century boycotts of sugar because evidence concerning the extent of their uptake is unreliable, yet if the economic effect of sugar boycotts is hard to map, there can be little doubt concerning their imaginative legacy.

The visceral image of blood-tainted sugar is an important visual tool which allows Merry and others to make their point in a simple and effective fashion, without recourse to long chains of explanation. Yet this highly physical representation of sugar also draws on the moral and aesthetic connotations of sweetness, which these writers use to contrast the actual bodily suffering of slaves in the West Indies with the pleasurable sensations of taste experienced by British consumers, and to demonstrate what they see as the moral discrepancy between them. In the same period Robert Southey refers to tea taken with sugar as a ‘blood-sweeten’d beverage’, implying that the taste of the drink masks and is in direct contrast to the origins of

⁴³ Robert Merry, ‘The Slaves. An Elegy’ (1788), in *Slavery, Abolition and Emancipation*, iv, 101-2 (p. 102).

⁴⁴ Quoted in Coleman, ‘Conspicuous Consumption’, p. 344. Kenneth Corfield quoted in Midgley, *Women against Slavery*, p. 62. For the original work see Kenneth Allan Corfield, ‘English Abolitionists and the Refusal of Slave-Grown Goods 1780-1860’ (unpublished MA dissertation, Birkbeck College, University of London, 1983), p. 33.

the sugar, which are anything but sweet in a moral sense.⁴⁵ The physicality of the blood creates an intensely sensual image in which the sweetness of the sugar is directly juxtaposed with the bodily suffering of the slaves and the moral degradation of slavery. In this context the sweetness of the tea connotes both western consumers' greed and their lack of moral principle.

The comparison between sugar and blood is a key part of Fox's rhetorical strategy in the 'Address'. The text is constructed through a series of oppositions: pleasure and suffering, abstinence and indulgence, the civilised and the uncivilised. Sugar becomes a substitute for the slave's body, removing it from the dainty connotations of the tea-table and aligning it instead with cannibalism.

[S]o necessarily connected are our consumption of the commodity, and the misery resulting from it, that in every pound of sugar used, (the produce of slaves imported from Africa) we may be considered as consuming two ounces of human flesh [...] A French writer observes, "That he cannot look on a piece of sugar without conceiving it stained with spots of human blood:" and Dr. Franklin adds, that had he taken in all the consequences, "he might have seen the sugar not merely spotted, but dyed scarlet in grain." (156)

Fox here weighs out the 'human flesh' that he claims consumers of sugar are eating, and this attempt to quantify cannibalism continues throughout the text. In a series of bizarre calculations intended to measure the impact of a national boycott of sugar, Fox draws a direct comparison between the amount of sugar used and what he estimates would be the real cost in terms of human lives. Arguing that a family currently using 5lbs. of sugar per week would save one person from either slavery or murder if they were to abstain for 21 months, Fox goes on to claim that eight such families acting in this way over the course of 19½ years would prevent the slavery or murder of 100 people, and if 38,000 people were to abstain from sugar they would stop the slave trade entirely (156).

Peter Hulme has argued that '[c]annibalism is – as practice or accusation – quite simply the mark of greatest imaginable cultural difference and therefore the greatest challenge to our

⁴⁵ Robert Southey, 'Poems Concerning the Slave Trade' (1797-1810), in *Slavery, Abolition and Emancipation*, iv, 242-58 (p. 244).

categories of understanding'.⁴⁶ The threat of cannibalism is omnipresent in Fox's text, where it represents the ultimate destabilising of boundaries. To eat another human being is, by association, according to Fox, akin to consuming oneself. 'Every distinction is done away by the moral maxim, that whatever we do by another, we do [to] ourselves', he writes (156). Advocates of slavery used the popular belief that indigenous black people practiced cannibalism to dehumanise them, pitching this perceived barbarity as justification for the slave trade. Fox turns this accusation on the consumers of sugar rather than the slaves. Indeed, the further society advances, the more contemptible it is that, in its state of civilisation, it condones – even promotes – such brutality.

The lust of power, and the pride of conquest, have doubtless produced instances far too numerous, of man enslaved by man. But we, in an enlightened age, have greatly surpassed, in brutality and injustice, the most ignorant and barbarous ages: and while we are pretending to the finest feelings of humanity, are exercising unprecedented cruelty. (155)

With the boundaries between civilised and uncivilised all but demolished, Fox achieves one final switch towards the end of the text when he contrasts Africans with Englishmen, and imagines what the latter's reaction would be supposing their wives, husbands, parents, or children were to be 'swept away, and the fruit of their labour, produced with agonising hearts and trembling limbs, landed at the port of London' (160). Fox intensifies the impact of his cannibalistic imagery through the parallels he draws between Englishmen and Africans. By substituting flesh for sugar, Fox converts luxury into cannibalism and civilisation into savagery.

In June 1795 Samuel Taylor Coleridge gave a talk in Bristol entitled 'On the Slave Trade' (later published in *The Watchman* in 1796) which regurgitated many of Fox's arguments. Like Fox, Coleridge emphasises the responsibility of consumers for the continuation of slavery, and advocates a boycott of sugar to rectify the system: 'what is the first

⁴⁶ Peter Hulme, 'Introduction: The Cannibal Scene', in *Cannibalism and the Colonial World*, ed. Francis Barker, Peter Hulme, and Margaret Iversen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 1-38 (p. 20).

and constantly acting cause of the slave-trade? That cause, by which it exists and deprived of which it would immediately cease?’ he asks. ‘Is it not self-evidently the consumption of its products? And does not then the guilt rest on consumers?’⁴⁷ Altogether Coleridge’s proposals were more moderate than Fox’s, advising legislative prohibitions similar to those being put forward concurrently in parliament (which Fox dismisses: ‘the Legislature having refused to interpose’). But Coleridge also resorts to the same kind of charged language and the same blood sugar imagery used by Fox and others. Towards the end of the lecture he contemplates the ethical consequences of eating sugar through a reflection on the words of the mealtime prayer.

At your meals you rise up, and pressing your hands to your bosoms, you lift your eyes to God, and say, “O Lord! bless the food which thou hast given us!” A part of that food among most of you is sweetened with brother’s blood. “Lord! bless the food which thou hast given us?” O blasphemy! Did God give food mingled with the blood of the murdered? Will God bless the food which is polluted with the blood of his own innocent children? (138-9)

Coleridge uses language rich with the threat of contamination. The implication that a regular consumer could unwittingly fall out of God’s favour by ignoring the unsavoury origins of the condiment he regularly enjoys with his ordinary supper promotes simultaneous fears that you are what you eat and that vigilance is necessary in considering both the physical and moral qualities of foodstuffs. By consuming the blood of the slaughtered, the eater becomes their murderer too. Like Fox, Coleridge turns the public into cannibals, feasting on their ‘brothers’.

Unlike Fox’s text, which concerns rum and sugar only, Coleridge acknowledges that other colonial products deserve similar attention. ‘We receive from the West-India islands sugars, rum, cotton, logwood, cocoa, coffee, pimento, ginger, indigo, mahogany, and conserves’, he records: ‘[n]ot one of these articles are necessary; indeed with the exception of cotton and mahogany we cannot call them even useful’ (132). However, none of these items

⁴⁷ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, ‘On the Slave Trade’ (25 March 1796), in *The Watchman*, ed. Lewis Patton, vol. ii of *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970), pp. 130-40 (pp. 137-8). All subsequent references will be cited in the text.

are mentioned again except when Coleridge concedes: '[i]f only one tenth part among you who profess yourselves Christians [...] were to leave off – not *all* the West-India commodities – but only sugar and rum, the one useless and the other pernicious – all this misery might be stopped' (138; author's emphasis). Ultimately he chooses, like Fox, to focus his appeals only on sugar and rum, a decision he defends in a postscript.

It has been objected, that if we leave off sugar and rum, why not the other West-India commodities, as cotton and mahogany? [...] The whole objection resolves itself into this – If sugar and rum were the only West-India commodities, I could be honest and act like a Christian; but because I like cotton better than linen, and think mahogany genteeler furniture than oak, it is impossible. Secondly, the disuse of sugar and rum only would in a certain number of years prove the adequate means of abolishing the whole of the trade. And there is reason to believe that the additional disuse of cotton, mahogany, &c. would not accelerate the time; for when we might proselyte fifty to the disuse of sugar, we could not perhaps make five persons converts to the disuse of *all* the West-India commodities. (140; author's emphasis)

Coleridge cites pragmatic reasons to justify what are public, as well as personal, preferences. Later he argues that as sugar is more labour-intensive than other colonial crops it makes slavery 'necessary' (140). But underlying this practical rationale is a clash with Coleridge's moral objections to sugar, as 'food mingled with the blood of the murdered'. Even if the same practical considerations could not be equally applied to a boycott of other products, surely ethical problems of the same kind would still remain as a deterrent? In sidestepping this issue, Coleridge indicates that the vilification of sugar in his text takes place not purely on moral or economic grounds, but also due to the political and cultural status of sugar. Coleridge uses words like 'useless' and 'unnecessary' in relation to all the colonial produce he mentions, but sugar and rum are the only ones singled out to be tied to these meanings ('the one useless and the other pernicious').

The idea that sugar represented bad domestic economy, being an unnecessary, even a luxury product, was commonplace in the period and provides a context for Coleridge's assessment of the commodity. In 1792 the artist James Gillray produced a cartoon for *Punch*

featuring the royal princesses being urged by Queen Charlotte to stop taking their tea with sugar:



Fig. 2: James Gillray, 'Anti-Saccharites – or – John Bull and his Family leaving off the use of Sugar', in *Punch* (1792).

'O my dear creatures', the Queen proclaims, 'do but taste it! You can't think how nice it is without sugar:- and then, consider how much work you'll save the poor blackamoors by leaving off the use of it! –and, above all, remember how much expence [sic] it will save your poor papa!' The idea of sugar being too expensive for the royal family sends up its reputation as a luxury product while simultaneously critiquing the bourgeois pretensions of the average consumer. The political purpose of the boycott is subjugated to the financial benefits of giving up sugar and presumably the social cachet of abstention, while the Queen's supposedly feminine sympathy for the 'poor Blackamoors' is undermined by her concerns about household expense and naive assumption that renouncing sugar will 'save' them work. The jeering tone throughout emphasises the self-interested motives at the heart of the protest.

The connection between sugar, bad housekeeping, and declining moral standards persisted into the nineteenth century. Thomas Love Peacock's novel *Melincourt* (1817) features an abolitionist campaigner, Mr Forrester, who follows Fox and Coleridge's example in determining abstinence from sugar to be the most effective way to combat slavery. Although *Melincourt* is on the whole satirical and Peacock is gently mocking of Forrester's excessive verbosity and enthusiasm for his cause, the character nonetheless demonstrates that sugar's association with decadence and wasteful luxury was still very much current even after the abolition of the slave trade. Mr Forrester runs a local Anti-Saccharine Society and at one point in the novel hosts an Anti-Saccharine fête (essentially a large meal prepared without the use of West Indian produce). Although the main thrust of his abstinence relates to sugar as the product of colonial slavery, Mr Forrester's address to the company at the fête contains other moral objections to the product based on domestic issues, such as class, expense, a general distrust of luxury, and concerns about health.

"Sugar," said he, "is economically superfluous, nay, worse than superfluous: in the middling classes of life it is a formidable addition to the expenses of a large family, and for no benefit, for no addition to the stock of domestic comfort, which is often sacrificed in more essential points to this frivolous and wanton indulgence. It is physically pernicious, as its destruction of the teeth, and its effects on the health of children much pampered with sweetmeats, sufficiently demonstrate. It is morally atrocious, from being the primary cause of the most complicated corporeal suffering and the most abject mental degradation that ever outraged the form, and polluted the spirit of man."⁴⁸

Mr Forrester urges his guests to abstain from sugar because of its relationship with slavery, yet the abolition debate assumes less importance in his rhetoric than the dietary and economic factors which make the product morally questionable. Although Peacock does not resort to the blood sugar topos to make his point, as Coleridge and Fox do, he does place the moral burden of slavery on the consumer of sugar, and alludes to their hands being full with the blood of slaves. His rhetoric takes on a religious tenor, as he compares the unthinking consumer to

⁴⁸ Thomas Love Peacock, *Melincourt*, 3 vols. (London: T. Hookham, Jun. and Co, 1817), ii, 189.

Pontius Pilate: '[h]ow can the consumer of sugar pretend to throw on the grower of it the exclusive burden of their participated criminality? How can he wash his hands, and say with Pilate: "*I am innocent of this blood, see ye to it?*"'⁴⁹

Coleridge cites the unattainable status of many West Indian commodities for the lower classes as evidence of these products' limited value to the nation: 'not one of them [being] at present attainable by the poor and labouring part of society' (132). He connects the desire for such items to what he terms 'imaginary wants', and, as in the previous examples, where the desire for 'superfluous' products is also linked to some vague and degrading moral consequence, in this example Coleridge blames them directly for the slave-trade:

Whence arise our miseries? Whence arise our vices? From *imaginary* wants. No man is wicked without temptation, no man is wretched without a cause. But if each among us confined his wishes to the actual necessities and real comforts of life, we should preclude all the causes of complaint and all the motives to iniquity' (130-31; author's emphasis).

Coleridge's focus on sugar and rum specifically suggests that these products, even more than other colonial commodities, are unnecessary luxuries, objects of 'imaginary wants'.

As with Peacock's Mr Forrester, Coleridge's opinion of sugar as an unnecessary extravagance heightens his outrage at the brutality involved in its production. This contrast leads Coleridge, like Fox, to direct his criticism towards consumers, accusing them of hypocritically tolerating slavery for the sake of frivolous self-indulgence.

Provided the dunghill be not before their parlour window, they are well content to know that it exists, and that it is the hot-bed of their pestilent luxuries. –To this grievous failing we must attribute the frequency of wars, and the continuance of the slave-trade. The merchant finds no argument against it in his ledger: the citizen at the crowded feast is not nauseated by the stench and filth of the slave-vessel – the fine lady's nerves are not shattered by the shrieks! She sips a beverage sweetened with human blood, even while she is weeping over the refined sorrows of Werther or of Clementina. Sensibility is not benevolence. (139)

'Werther' and 'Clementina', from Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774) and

Richardson's *The History of Sir Charles Grandison* (1753) respectively, both suffer enormous

⁴⁹ Ibid., i, 53; author's emphasis.

emotional angst, which Coleridge contrasts with the real physical suffering of the slaves. The smell of the slave ships, the cries of the injured workers and the sacrifice of their blood are powerful metaphorical representations, yet their implications are not properly felt by the callous and insensitive consumers.

Abolitionist writers often addressed their appeals specifically to women on the basis of their supposedly greater sensibility, a compliment which simultaneously harboured a tougher criticism, as women might fail to live up to this high expectation. Within this context Coleridge's fine lady is a particularly good example of consumers' hardened sensibility due to the larger discrepancy between her literary sympathies and her actual indifference, and Coleridge's rhetoric reaches a pitch when contemplating her hypocrisy. The sweet taste of the tea that she drinks undermines her moral sweetness and implicitly 'refined' nature, figuring her instead as a bestial creature governed by her physicality. Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace has argued that sugar is a 'potent metaphor for the *female* body', and that the woman who refuses to eat it 'breaks the semiotic chain that aligns her with the very properties of sugar itself. Refusing to imbibe sweeteners, she indicates she is not all "sweetness," that she is not to be associated with mindless sensual pleasures'.⁵⁰ While Kowaleski-Wallace is right to identify connotations of sweetness as mindless, sensual, and feminine as formative to its construction, she fails to take into account the way in which the blood sugar discourse trades on the dual meanings of sweetness. Deirdre Coleman presents a far more nuanced reading of female sugar consumption in which she argues that images which are critical of women eating slave-grown sugar play on pre-existing positive associations of sweetness. The woman who eats sugar, according to Coleman, 'becomes what she eats, one of those "savages and brutes," then dangerously serves up to others the food she has polluted, disguised as sweetness'.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Kowaleski-Wallace, *Consuming Subjects*, pp. 40-41; author's emphasis.

⁵¹ Coleman, 'Conspicuous Consumption', pp. 355-6.

Coleridge sets up an opposition between the public's literary sensibility and their complicity in slavery which demonstrates that the multiple associations of sweetness are crucial to the blood sugar topos. Writers like Coleridge and Fox present the sweetness of sugar as dangerous and deceptive, masking the moral corruption they believe is embodied in the commodity due to the conditions of its production. However, this argument draws on and reworks the widespread understanding of sweetness, promoted throughout the eighteenth century by the literature of sensibility, as a positive moral term. Other abolitionist writers, particularly those linked to the more moderate campaign conducted by the Abolition Society, employed this model of sweetness in a different way. These authors use the sweet taste of sugar to link it rhetorically to the moral values encapsulated in the sentimental concept of sweetness, and to distinguish the product itself from the slave trade. While blood sugar writers focus intently on the domestic sphere and primarily on the individual human body, parliamentary abolitionists seek to rehabilitate sugar by locating it in a wider context of global economic and social improvement.

Against Blood Sugar: Parliamentary Abolitionism and the Abolition Society

Literary critics who have considered the role of sugar in abolitionist writing have focused overwhelmingly on the blood sugar topos. While this imagery was a crucial influence on subsequent representations of sugar and sweetness in the nineteenth century and beyond, I want to suggest that the writings of the Abolition Society also left behind a substantial rhetorical and political legacy. The Abolition Society was representative of a more mainstream brand of abolitionism which operated through parliament and which grew increasingly hostile to the extra-parliamentary consumer protest campaign. Instead of vilifying sugar, parliamentary abolitionists performed a conceptual separation between the commodity and the means by

which it was produced, condemning slavery while celebrating sugar. This positive approach to sugar appropriated the stance and terminology of proslavery writing about the product, and in so doing allowed abolitionist authors to confront and defeat the advocates of slavery on their own ground.

Parliamentary abolitionists' discussions of sugar and sweetness draw on a tradition that began with the earliest English text to offer a sustained analysis of West Indian sugar production, Richard Ligon's *A True and Exact History of Barbadoes*, written and published in 1657. Ligon arrived in Barbados in 1647 and witnessed firsthand the rapid expansion of the sugar industry in the 1650s. In his *History* Ligon presents sugar as emblematic of progressive and profitable economic activity and employs a vocabulary of sweetness to celebrate the sugar trade. Ironically, he uses honey as a metaphor for archaic and conservative economic practices, while sugar – despite being the product of slave labour – is figured as representative of new and exciting forms of capitalist entrepreneurship. The majority of Ligon's book comprises a straightforward account of Barbadian life – from the different types of wildlife on the island to the treatment of African slaves – but the text takes a more purposeful direction when Ligon begins to advise his audience (presumably young British middle-class men) on the benefits of moving to Barbados and setting up in the sugar trade:

But one will say, why should any man that has 14000l in his purse, need to run so long a risk, as from hence to the Barbadoes: when he may live with ease and plenty at home; to such a one I answer, that every drone can sit and eat the honey of his own hive: but he that can by his own industry, and activity, (having youth and strength, or friends,) raise his fortune, from a small beginning to a very great one [...] and this to be accomplished in a few years, deserves more commendation and applause.⁵²

The imaginative contrast Ligon presents between the new possibilities of wealth creation in the colonies and the drone-like existence of those who would rather 'sit and eat the honey of [their] own hive' is also a direct comparison between sugar – the means of these new entrepreneurial opportunities – and honey, which is representative of passivity and lack of ambition.

⁵² Richard Ligon, *A True and Exact History of Barbadoes* (London: 1657), p. 108.

Ligon uses honey and apian imagery to criticise those who refuse to participate in entrepreneurial capitalism, likening them to drone bees who don't work. Paradoxically, he also employs this imagery to describe slaves on sugar plantations and to downplay their contribution to the sugar trade, commenting that 'they may not unfitly be compared to bees; the one fetching home honey, the other sugar'.⁵³ The mindless drudgery of worker bees and slaves is later contrasted by Ligon to the achievements of the proactive plantation owner, who 'shall find his bread, gotten by his painful and honest labour and industry [...] sweeter by much, than his that only minds his ease, and his belly'.⁵⁴ Ligon's celebration of 'honest labour and industry' anticipates Adam Smith's focus on self-interest and the free market economy. Unlike Smith, however, Ligon has little interest in or sympathy for plantation slaves, as their status as unthinking worker bees excludes them, in his view, from the entrepreneurial capitalist economy. Ligon sees the sugar trade as the epitome of this economy, and the rewards of modern capitalism are encapsulated, appropriately, in his word 'sweeter'. Keith A. Sandiford has argued that sugar becomes a kind of all-encompassing symbol in Ligon's text, '[d]esirable in its sweetness and universal in its utility'.⁵⁵ This deployment of sweetness and sugar as signifiers of a progressive economic system recurs throughout the work of subsequent writers on sugar, both pro- and antislavery.

By the late eighteenth century the sugar trade was an important source of national revenue in Britain, and parliamentary abolitionists, unlike the blood sugar writers, were reluctant to implicate the industry in their attacks on slavery, fearing that this would undermine support for their cause. The abolitionists do not share Ligon's uncritical enthusiasm for sugar (nor, obviously, his views on slavery), but for political reasons they adopt a positive approach towards the commodity that is similar to Ligon's and that allows them to separate the sugar

⁵³ Ibid., p. 89.

⁵⁴ Ibid., pp. 108-9.

⁵⁵ Sandiford, *The Cultural Politics of Sugar*, p. 31.

industry from the slave trade. This strategy is used by Thomas Clarkson, a founding member of the Abolition Society, in his 1788 *Essay on the Impolicy of the African Slave Trade*:

The patrons of the trade have been long accustomed to advance, that it is of *great value to the nation*. [...] Do they mean that slaves taken from Africa become labourers in the colonies? that these labourers make sugar? that this sugar produces a revenue, and that the trade therefore is of great national importance? If this be their meaning, I reply, that it is *sugar* that produces the revenue, and not the slave. –That the cane can be cultivated by *free men*, and farther, that it can be cultivated, under certain regulations, without the importation of another African from the coast.⁵⁶

By severing what many assume to be the unbreakable connection between sugar and slavery, Clarkson lessens the economic risk of abolishing slavery by arguing that the viability of the sugar industry would not be affected by abolition.

Proslavery campaigners were not convinced by such claims. In a speech two years later merchant banker and proslavery MP Bryan Edwards predicted a series of economic outcomes that he argued would far outweigh any possible moral benefit of discontinuing the slave trade.

The effect on such of the planters as are possessed of confined or encumbered estates, will be instantly ruinous. The more opulent ones may hold out for a time; but even these will find a very inadequate and temporary resource in any advance of the price of their produce; for if the rise be considerable, it is more than probable that one or the other of these consequences will follow; either the consumption of the commodity will diminish, or Great Britain will admit a supply from the foreign sugar islands, which will encrease [sic] most rapidly as ours decline: either way, the price will soon fall back to its former level.⁵⁷

The image Edwards presents of a struggling empire, whose failure to take a more business-like approach empowers foreign interests, points to political as well as economic fears about the consequences of abolition. The relationship between sugar and slavery lay at the core of this debate. While the ‘blood sugar’ activists decried sugar on moral grounds, more moderate abolitionist thinkers were anxious to deny any close connection between the product and the

⁵⁶ Thomas Clarkson, *An Essay on the Impolicy of the African Slave Trade* (London: J. Phillips, 1788), p. 6; author’s emphases.

⁵⁷ Bryan Edwards, ‘A Speech Delivered at a Free Conference between the Honourable Council and Assembly of Jamaica [...] On the Subject of Mr Wilberforce’s Propositions in the House of Commons, concerning the Slave Trade’ (1790), in *Slavery Abolition, Emancipation*, ii, 325-47 (pp. 330-31).

slave trade, in order to counter the dire economic predictions of commentators such as Edwards.

Economic concerns and abolitionist arguments were by no means mutually exclusive in the eighteenth century. As we have seen, in *The Wealth of Nations* Adam Smith identified a free market economy as both financially and morally preferable to slavery, an argument that was to have a lasting impact on the antislavery debate. Smith also helped to shape this debate through his formative contribution to the theory of sensibility, which had such an important influence on abolitionist rhetoric. However, as Brycchan Carey has argued, the discourse of sensibility was as likely to be used by proslavery campaigners as their political opponents.⁵⁸

In his *A Descriptive Account of the Island of Jamaica*, published in 1790, the proslavery MP (and gothic novelist) William Beckford uses the indiscriminately positive language of sweetness popularised by the sensibility genre to present Jamaica, and its sugar plantations, as a pastoral idyll. Cows ‘embalm the morning air with their breathing sweets’, flowers ‘fill their cups with sweets’, while the island’s nightingale population ‘[seem] to contend in strength and sweetness of song’, ‘sweetness’ being a universally recognised form of approval in the text.⁵⁹ In Beckford’s account the sugar industry blends organically into the natural landscape: ‘[t]he hills, from their summits to the very borders of the sea, are fringed with trees and shrubs of a beautiful shape [...] and you perceive mills, works, and houses, peeping among their branches’.⁶⁰ Beckford describes one sugar plantation as:

like a little town: it requires the produce, as well as the industry of every climate; and I have often been surprised, in revolving in my mind the necessary articles that the cane requires and consumes, how intimately connected is every thing that grows, and every thing that labours, with this very singular, at one time luxurious, but now very necessary, as it is deemed to be a highly useful and wholesome, plant.⁶¹

⁵⁸ See Carey, *British Abolitionism and the Rhetoric of Sensibility*, pp. 107-43.

⁵⁹ William Beckford, *A Descriptive Account of the Island of Jamaica*, 2 vols. (London: T. and J. Egerton, 1790), ii, 21, 217, and i, 216.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, i, 7.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, i, 141.

His depiction of the plantation as ‘like a little town’ creates a sense of idyllic social unity which is in direct contradiction to the way in which Beckford figures the slaves as little more than things themselves: ‘every thing that labours’ is the same as ‘every thing that grows’ in the passage, making the enslaved workers interchangeable with sugar, and by implication only as valuable as what they produce. Beckford’s depiction of the ecology of Jamaica as one in which everything is ‘intimately connected’ makes the sugar industry as much a natural economic development as sweetness is part of nature. He rejects abolitionism on the grounds that it would damage the sugar industry, and upset the economies of both Jamaica and Britain, the main consequences being the loss of seventy million pounds worth of property and an annual diminution in tax revenue of three million pounds at least, plus a rise in the price of sugar.⁶²

Conscious that the economic concerns of writers like Edwards and Beckford were widely shared, the Abolition Society sought to appeal to moderate opinion, and to win parliamentary support, by adopting a gradual, cautious approach to abolition. Formed in 1787, the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade (to give it its full title) initially campaigned for the abolition of the slave trade only, rather than slavery itself, reasoning that complete emancipation would be an easier goal to achieve having once conquered this first obstacle. The Abolition Society was predominantly made up of Quakers, with a minority of Anglican members, including Clarkson and William Wilberforce, the Society’s representative in parliament.⁶³ Like Fox and Coleridge, Wilberforce stressed the collective responsibility for slavery: ‘[w]e are all guilty’, he insisted in 1789 during his first speech to parliament about the slave trade, ‘we ought all to plead guilty, and not to exculpate ourselves, by throwing the blame on others’.⁶⁴ However, unlike the blood sugar writers, he is reluctant to implicate the sugar industry in this accusation; in fact he barely mentions sugar in the speech. He is also careful to

⁶² Ibid., ii, 315-16.

⁶³ For a detailed account of the early history of the Society see Blackburn, *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery*, pp. 131-60; and Anstey, *The Atlantic Slave Trade and British Abolition*, pp. 255-85.

⁶⁴ William Wilberforce, *The Speech of William Wilberforce, Esq. Representative for the County of York, on Wednesday the 13th of May, 1789* (London: Logographic Press, 1789), p. 5.

avoid the inflammatory tone of more radical abolitionists: 'I wish *exceedingly*', he stresses, 'to guard both myself and the House from entering into the subject with any sort of passion'.⁶⁵

However, Wilberforce's moderate stance was still too extreme for his fellow MPs; in 1792 they voted, against Wilberforce's wishes, to insert the word 'gradually' into a motion he had put forward proposing the abolition of the slave trade. Although the House of Commons passed the amended act for 'gradual' abolition in 1792 – and subsequently agreed that the trade should end by 1796 – the motion was defeated in the House of Lords.⁶⁶ As events transpired, this motion was the closest the abolitionists came to victory until 1807, when the slave trade was finally abolished. In the intervening years the abolition debate was supplanted by issues of more pressing concern after war broke out with France in 1793. The war also affected public opinion about abolitionism, as fears about Jacobinism led to growing suspicion of the motives of social reformers. In this reactionary climate it became more important than ever for the Abolition Society to emphasise the mainstream nature of their agenda.

Despite the need to appear moderate and respectable, the Abolition Society were initially open to different modes of protest. As well as campaigning for legislative change in the Commons the Society also made efforts to gain popular support, which they believed would bolster their parliamentary cause. To this aim, they formed local offshoot groups that organised petitions, held public meetings, and, crucially, organised for much antislavery literature to be published and promoted in the press. Roger Anstey records that the Society spent over £1,000 on the 'printing of books' as one of their initial strategies, surmising that it would act as propaganda for their campaign.⁶⁷ In *A Summary View of the Slave Trade*, which Clarkson published in 1787 and which was one of the texts printed in large numbers by the Society, the author acknowledges the close connection between literature and the Society's political aims. 'Encouraged by the success which has attended the publication of sundry tracts

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 4; my emphasis.

⁶⁶ Blackburn, *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery*, p. 146.

⁶⁷ Anstey, *The Atlantic Slave Trade*, pp. 256-7.

against slavery', he records, 'this society was formed in order to excite still more the public attention to the *Slave Trade*, and to collect such evidence or information as may tend to its discouragement, and, finally, to its abolition'.⁶⁸ Despite the fact that the society relied (at least initially) on distributing literature to obtain sympathy for their cause, a strategy they shared with the 'blood sugar' activists, the cautious tone of Clarkson's polemic clearly differentiates the parliamentary abolitionists' careful approach from more radical campaigners.

The Reverend James Ramsay summed up the position adopted by the Society when he wrote in *An Inquiry into the Effects of Putting a Stop to the African Slave Trade* (1784): 'the utmost that reasoning can be expected to do, is gradually to correct and inform common opinion'.⁶⁹ Ramsay's work preceded the formation of the Society but his ideas were an important influence on their work. As Peter J. Kitson records, it was after a visit to Ramsay that Thomas Clarkson decided to abandon a Church career in favour of devoting himself entirely to abolitionist work, and he was also instrumental in alerting Wilberforce to the problem of slavery. Ramsay was involved with the Society from the outset. He helped Wilberforce to prepare for his first Commons debate, and himself appeared as a witness for the antislavery lobby when they presented evidence to parliament.⁷⁰ As a young man Ramsay had worked as a ship's surgeon in the West Indies and then later became an Anglican minister in St Kitts, where he married and remained for fifteen years before returning to England. Once home, he was urged by his friends to record his views on slavery and as a result published his *Essay on the Treatment and Conversion of the African Slaves in the British Sugar Colonies* in 1784. Ramsay's work immediately invoked the wrath of the powerful West India lobby, who tried to

⁶⁸ Thomas Clarkson, *A Summary View of the Slave Trade, and of the Probable Consequences of its Abolition* (London: J. Phillips, 1787), p. iii; author's emphasis. Anstey records that over 15,000 copies of *A Summary View* were printed by the Society – see Anstey, *The Atlantic Slave Trade*, p. 257.

⁶⁹ Ramsay, *An Inquiry into the Effects of Putting a Stop to the African Slave Trade, and of Granting Liberty to the Slaves in the British Sugar Colonies* (London: J. Phillips, 1784), p. 32.

⁷⁰ See Peter J. Kitson, Introduction to James Ramsay, *An Essay on the Treatment and Conversion of the African Slaves in the British Sugar Colonies* (1784), in *Slavery, Abolition and Emancipation*, ii, 4.

prevent it from being published.⁷¹ In response, Ramsay published another work that year, *An Inquiry into the Effects of Putting a Stop to the African Slave Trade, and of Granting Liberty to the Slaves in the British Sugar Colonies*. The *Inquiry* was made up of parts of the *Essay* that Ramsay removed before publication lest they prove too controversial, but even in this he sticks to a mainstream agenda. Ironically, in addition to attracting the ire of the proslavery lobby, Ramsay was also criticised in the period by some for his too hesitant denouncement of slavery. His biographer, Folarin Shyllon, notes that a contemporary issue of the *Monthly Review* lamented ‘the extreme caution [...] with which he speaks of that horrid trade’.⁷²

This caution leads Ramsay to propound a distinctly conservative model of abolitionism which defers to established social and political hierarchies (what concerns him most is the lack of religious instruction for plantation slaves). Moreover, Ramsay is as keen as Clarkson to dissociate the West Indian sugar economy from slavery. In the *Inquiry* he posits the idea of replacing the trade in slaves with a trade in African commodities, such as rice, cotton and tobacco, which could be traded by Africans instead of slaves in exchange for British products. Ramsay stresses the leading role Britain would continue to play in this new sugar trade. ‘[I]n its highest probable state of culture’, Ramsay argues, Africa ‘could not possibly interfere with the staple of Britain, so as to hinder an extensive and mutually advantageous trade from being carried on between the countries’.⁷³

Europe must ever be dependent on the West Indies or Africa for this now necessary of life, sugar. Europe is therefore the proper market for sugar, and it must be the interest of the planter to have a particular country in Europe, where he can lodge his produce, till he can send it to the place of consumption. And where trade is freest, and the merchants have the most money, and give the longest credit (in all which Britain hath the advantage) will be the best spot for fixing their staple.⁷⁴

Ramsay’s glorification of sugar as a ‘necessary of life’ and a ‘staple’, which is in stark contrast to Fox and Coleridge’s dismissal of it as an unnecessary luxury, also celebrates the idea of

⁷¹ Folarin Shyllon, *James Ramsay: The Unknown Abolitionist* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1977), p. 20.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 38.

⁷³ Ramsay, *Inquiry*, p. 15.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

Britain as a place where trade is ‘freest’ and merchants ‘have the most money’. The success of sugar is linked to the success of the country, as it becomes representative of both cultural and economic superiority.

David Beck Ryden has argued that Ramsay’s economic views were influenced by Adam Smith, particularly his belief in the merits of free labour.⁷⁵ A key part of Ramsay’s argument is that free labour is both morally and economically preferable to slavery. Like Smith, Ramsay associates slavery with a mercantilist Old World order, and he succeeds in extricating sugar from these unfavourable connotations and aligning it instead with the positive aspects of a free market economy which Smith finds so exciting, such as increased trade, wealth and competition. Ramsay uses the concept of sweetness to link sugar not only to greater financial success, but also to the idea of humanitarian improvement that is a crucial part of Smith’s concept of a market driven by its own morality.

[I]f our slaves were accustomed to taste only a *few* of the sweets of society, a *little* of the security of being judged by known laws, they would double their application to procure the comforts and conveniences of life; and, with their additional property, would naturally rise in their rank in society.⁷⁶

The image of the ‘sweets’ that the emancipated slaves could ‘taste’ makes sugar part of the forward trend of civilisation, as opposed to the backwards, archaic practice of slavery. The argument idealises the consumerism of western democracy – also emphasised by the way that sweetness is linked to productive capitalism in the phrase ‘sweets of society’ – in which the way to ‘rise [...] in rank’ is through ‘additional property’. Ramsay suggests that, for African slaves, improvement involves becoming more like modern capitalist Englishmen.

The use of the construction ‘the sweets of’ to denote the exclusively positive characteristics of a situation or state was by no means a new one by the late eighteenth century. The earliest citation given in the online Oxford English Dictionary is from Shakespeare’s *The Taming of the Shrew*: ‘the sweets of sweete Philosophie’. The OED also cites a line from

⁷⁵ Ryden, *West Indian Slavery*, p. 169.

⁷⁶ Ramsay, *Essay*, pp. 291-2; author’s emphasis.

Dryden's *Aeneid* (1697) which reads: '[t]he Gods have envy'd me the sweets of Life'. Other examples proliferate throughout the eighteenth century. Sterne, for example, uses the phrase 'the sweets of it' in *A Sentimental Journey* to signify Yorick's relief when his speeding coach slows down.⁷⁷ Although the construction was widely used it had a particular resonance in writing about sugar. James Grainger, in his long poem *The Sugar Cane*, published in 1764, uses the trope to present Africa as a place where the now enslaved sugar workers once enjoyed '[m]ild government, with every sweet of life'.⁷⁸ Grainger's poem as a whole reaches no firm conclusion about slavery, neither advocating nor condemning it, but in this line he laments the fact that the slaves have been removed from what he sees as their 'mild', uncomplicated, and pleasant way of life. In this sense, Grainger's 'sweet of life' appears to be the exact opposite of Ramsay's modern capitalist 'sweets of society'. However, Grainger's ambivalence about slavery, and about sugar, is demonstrated when he praises the product, in a manner very similar to Ramsay, as a sign of global trade and social progress. Sugar cane, '[w]afted to every quarter of the globe, / Makes the vast produce of the world your own', and links the West Indies to Britain by figuring the former as '[c]ane ocean-isles, / Isles on which Britain for their all depend'.⁷⁹ Using sugar as a symbol, Grainger refigures colonial expansion and exploitation as a means of uniting the globe through trade and commerce.

When Ramsay refers to the 'sweets of society' he is invoking a similar conception of sugar as emblematic of the benefits of progressive capitalism, but unlike Grainger he does so specifically to highlight the immorality of slavery, which robs slaves of political freedom and economic opportunity. This strategy, and the 'sweets of' construction, was frequently used by writers connected to the Abolition Society. In 'The Negro's Complaint' (1788), William Cowper plays on the ambiguity of 'sweet' as both the taste of sugar and a sentimental term. The ballad was written at the behest of the Society, which in fact commissioned several pieces

⁷⁷ See above, p. 50.

⁷⁸ James Grainger, *The Sugar Cane: A Poem* (London: R. and J. Dodsley, 1764), p. 134.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 120, 161.

from Cowper, who was one of the country's leading poets at the time.⁸⁰ In the poem, the word 'sweets' is used at the culmination of Cowper's argument in the third verse of the ballad, which focuses on sugar's role in slavery:

Why did all-creating Nature
 Make the plant for which we toil?
 Sighs must fan it, tears must water,
 Sweat of ours must dress the soil.
 Think, ye Masters iron-hearted
 Lolling at your jovial boards,
 Think how many backs have smarted
 For the sweets your Cane affords.⁸¹

The 'sweets' invoked by Cowper are at once physical and figurative: they represent abstract ideas of economic prosperity and domestic security while being at the same time literally tied to sugar. In a less extreme version of the blood sugar topos, Cowper also connects the 'sweets' of sugar to the bodies of the slaves, whose tears and sweat have enabled the cane to grow. On one level Cowper deploys the word 'sweets' as an ironic echo of 'sweat', a disparaging comment on the discrepancy between the slaves' pain and the vacuous comforts of their 'lolling' masters. At the same time, however, the sweets afforded by the sugar trade symbolise everything that the slave desires and is currently denied: the physical, political and economic security which would be granted to him if slavery were to be abolished.

This presentation of sweetness as a signifier of positive social progress is even more pronounced in Thomas Clarkson's *An Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species*, published in 1786 and based on a university essay with which Clarkson had won the members' prize for Latin at St John's College, Cambridge, in 1785. The set question for the competition was: 'anne liceat invitos in servitutem dare?', or whether it was legal to make men

⁸⁰ Anstey, *The Atlantic Slave Trade*, pp. 259.

⁸¹ William Cowper, 'The Negro's Complaint' (1788), in *The Poems of William Cowper*, ed. John D. Baird and Charles Ryskamp, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), iii, 13-14 (p. 13).

slaves.⁸² It was after completing this work that Clarkson discovered his vocation as an abolitionist. He uses language strikingly similar to that of Cowper and Ramsay:

But if nothing is dearer than *liberty* to men, with which, the barren rock is able to afford its joys, and without which, the glorious sun shines on them but in vain, and all the sweets and delicacies of life are tasteless and unenjoyed; what punishment can be more severe than the loss of so great a blessing?⁸³

Clarkson's commitment to abolitionism is evident in the passage's overriding focus on the importance of liberty. Like Ramsay and Cowper, Clarkson uses the language of sweetness, in this case 'the sweets and delicacies of life', to contrast the comforts of modern civilisation with the physical and spiritual impoverishment of slavery, and to imply that the slave trade has no place in a refined and progressive society. The intensely physical quality of Clarkson's imagery, in which 'the sweets and delicacies of life' are 'tasteless' due to the moral crime of slavery, calls to mind the sweet taste of sugar and implicitly aligns the commodity with the positive aspects of modern society. Moreover, the phrase 'sweets and delicacies' invokes the kind of luxuries, such as sugar, only readily available in a developed consumer society, and in this way Clarkson celebrates the commercial achievements of capitalist Britain at the same time as he condemns the slave trade. In line with the practice of other Abolition Society writers, Clarkson uses sweetness, and by association sugar, both to draw attention to the inequity of slavery and to signify the social and political progress to which abolition would contribute.

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A new society was formed in 1823, by Wilberforce and Clarkson amongst others, to work towards the full emancipation the original Abolition Society had hoped would follow the legislation which outlawed the slave trade in 1807. Although debates about slavery continued

⁸² See Peter J. Kitson, Introduction to Thomas Clarkson, *An Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species* (1788), in *Slavery, Abolition and Emancipation*, ii, 37-8.

⁸³ Thomas Clarkson, *An Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species, Translated from a Latin Dissertation* (London: J. Phillips, 1786), p. 81.

well into the Victorian period, they were at their most intense, and caused the most controversy, in the 1780s and 1790s. The way in which these debates implicated sugar in questions of slavery set the tone for much of the way in which sugar continued to be encountered as a literary and political trope throughout the nineteenth century, connecting it with a pre-existing discourse of sweetness which in turn affected representations of sugar. As sugar continued to be more and more widely used, sweetness became at an increasing rate a by-word for sugar, both as a taste and as an idea. This didn't mean that honey and fruits ceased to be known as sweet, only that the material definition of sweetness came to be more closely aligned with sugar. This in turn further implicated an aesthetic discourse of sweetness with sugar, as opposed to other naturally or unnaturally sweet products.

The 'blood sugar' topos makes sugar the linking factor between the satiated body of the pleased consumer and the suffering body of the slave. Moving ahead to the mid-nineteenth century writers such as Charlotte Brontë and William Makepeace Thackeray ascribe similar moral implications to sugar and sweetness and also make sugar the site of concerns about the body. These new concerns, however, relate to health and diet as opposed to slavery, and reflect the different ways in which sugar began to become relevant to the average Briton: as a staple ingredient of tea and many puddings, a domestic item, rather than a colonial one. Despite this transition, however, sugar is still the site of moral anxieties in both these writers, albeit concerning the body and (especially female) sexuality, an inward set of issues, as opposed to the wider ethical problems raised by global institutions such as slavery. Although sugar found new ways to be relevant by the mid-nineteenth century, early conceptions of sugar and sweetness laid out in the abolition debates continued to resonate in later perceptions of the product.

Chapter 2

All the Sweet Things: Women, Food, and the Mid-Victorian Novel

‘Why is *Villette* disagreeable?’ asked Matthew Arnold shortly after the novel was published in 1853. ‘Because the writer’s mind contains nothing but hunger, rebellion and rage, and therefore that is all she can, in fact put into her book’.¹ The phrase refers to hunger in a figurative rather than actual sense, yet is oddly appropriate for a different reason, highlighting Charlotte Brontë’s interest in bodily appetite in the novel, a work in which the heroine spends much of her time being hungry. It was not the first time Brontë had written about this issue, in fact Arnold’s description of her work as ‘hunger, rebellion, and rage’ could equally apply to her second novel, *Shirley* (1849), in which starving, out of work labourers protest against the machines that have replaced them. This hunger extends to the two main female characters in the novel – the eponymous Shirley and her friend Caroline Helstone – and it is these middle-class women who have most in common with Lucy Snowe, the narrator of *Villette*. While Shirley and Caroline’s starvation reflects their sympathy with the workers’ plight, their hunger, like Lucy’s, is also the result of unrequited love. The women’s lack of appetite symbolises their state of mind, empty and starved of affection, and in common with Arnold’s comments it emphasises the sense in which physical and emotional states of mind are interconnected in Brontë’s writing. Appetite is, for Brontë, a material reality, and one which is relevant not only as a signifier of emotional responses, but is a legitimate response in itself. In this respect, Brontë differs from many other mid-Victorian novelists, and I want to suggest that her interest in specifically female hunger in *Villette* is a reaction against sentimentalised portraits of femininity which paint women’s relationship to food as the locus of their success or failure in

¹ Matthew Arnold to Mrs Foster, 14 April 1853, in *The Brontës: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Miriam Allott (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974), p. 201.

adhering to conventional gender expectations. In many ways Brontë appears to conform to typical notions of femininity in *Villette*, including traditional interpretations of female appetite, which emphasise selflessness and spirituality, but I will suggest that in her representation of women's hunger for sugar she departs from these norms and begins to establish an alternative discourse of femininity in which physical appetites have a social role to play.

Far from being a generic problem, the issue of hunger in *Villette* is instead focused on specific foods and tastes. Throughout the novel Lucy consumes a wide variety of sweet dishes: these are in fact the only foodstuffs she ever admits to desiring. Both *Villette* and *Shirley* concern starvation as a key motif, but only in *Villette* does this appetite relate to sweet food in particular. Anna Krugovoy Silver has noted that Lucy's desire for food centres on sweets, but aside from this brief acknowledgement, so far the topic has received little critical attention.² Yet to consider the issue of appetite aside from its material representation is to fail to take into account the obvious importance Brontë herself ascribed to the minutiae of diet. She diligently records a variety of meals in her novels, and is exact about what is consumed. Meanwhile, her letters reveal a persistent interest in food, recording not only what she eats but also the care she takes in monitoring her diet. In her novels as well as her correspondence Brontë repeatedly connects good health with eating 'plain' food, whereas sweet food is linked to frivolous pleasure and enjoyment. 'Plain household bread is a far more wholesome and necessary thing than cake, yet who would like to see the brown loaf placed on the table for dessert?' Brontë wrote in a letter of 1853, the same year as *Villette* was published.³

The values and attributes Brontë ascribes to sweet food in *Villette* were informed by several other contemporary discourses, in particular the legacy of slavery, established literary conventions about female appetite, and medical debates about sugar. While Brontë avoids

² Anna Krugovoy Silver, *Victorian Literature and the Anorexic Body* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 100.

³ Charlotte Brontë to Elizabeth Gaskell, January 1853, in *The Letters of Charlotte Brontë*, ed. Margaret Smith, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995-2004), iii, 115.

discussing the issue of slavery directly, as in *Jane Eyre* questions of imperialism and colonial exploitation form an important background to the action of the novel. Moreover, her frequent use of slavery as a metaphor for her characters' experiences inevitably influences her representations of sugar. The female characters in *Villette* all display a complex relationship with sugary food, and Brontë's detailed depictions of female appetite constitute a challenge to prevailing literary representations of women, which denied female hunger and instead sentimentalised qualities such as spirituality, self-denial, and abstemiousness. I will consider Brontë's portrayal of women in relation to the work of William Makepeace Thackeray, the contemporary writer who exerted the biggest influence on Brontë, and who both conformed to and departed from this conventional view of women, sometimes condemning female appetite and at other times acknowledging the legitimacy of women's physical desires. Like many mid-nineteenth century writers, Thackeray displays contradictory attitudes towards women's bodies, on the one hand celebrating slim figures, on the other reproaching them as unhealthy. Brontë treads a fine line between these two points of view, often conforming to conventional expectations of body shape. However, she also draws on contemporary medical opinions about the health benefits of sugar to put forward an alternative view of female appetite, one in which women can legitimately enjoy the bodily desires symbolised by sweet food. In her portrayal of the three main female characters in *Villette* – Lucy Snowe, Paulina Mary Home de Bassompierre, and Ginevra Fanshawe – and their relationship to sugary food, she begins to question patriarchal values and their assumptions about the body.

Villette's Colonial Subplot

The conclusion of *Villette*, in which Paul, having become engaged to Lucy, departs for the French colony of Guadeloupe where he will spend several years looking after the business

interests of a friend, proved to be one of the most controversial parts of the novel – and not least because of Brontë's reluctance to provide an unambiguous ending to the episode. The final passages of *Villette* depict a fierce storm which 'did not cease till the Atlantic was strewn with wrecks', and although Brontë stresses (albeit disparagingly) her intention to 'leave sunny imaginations hope', the implication is that Paul perishes in the tempest.⁴ This outcome Brontë felt to be not entirely unsatisfactory, telling her publisher George Smith in 1853 that she held drowning and matrimony to be 'the fearful alternatives' for Lucy's future life.⁵ 'I am not leniently disposed towards Miss Frost', she had told Smith in an earlier letter, 'from the beginning I never intended to appoint her lines in pleasant places'.⁶ Several early reviewers found the conclusion disappointing. One writer for the *Literary Gazette* reveals that they 'scarcely can forgive the authoress that we are left in doubt whether [Paul] returns in safety from Guadeloupe' while another, writing for the *Examiner*, suggests expunging the offending material from the next edition in order to close on a happy ending.⁷

The business interest that Paul is destined to look after in Guadeloupe is the management of a sugar plantation. The 'large estate' owned by a member of his circle in the capital of Guadeloupe, Basseterre, would almost certainly have been used for this purpose, placing Paul in charge of hundreds of enslaved workers (667). Although slavery on the island, a key colonial possession for the French, ended in 1848, five years before *Villette*'s publication, this postdates the time Brontë spent in Brussels and on which the novel is based. Along with her sister, Emily, Brontë first travelled to Belgium in 1842, and although they were forced to come home early later that year after the death of their aunt Elizabeth Branwell, she later returned to Brussels by herself, where she remained until 1844. The appearance of

⁴ Charlotte Brontë, *Villette* (1853), ed. Herbert Rosengarten and Margaret Smith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), p. 715. All subsequent references will be cited in the text.

⁵ Charlotte Brontë to George Smith, 26 March 1853, in *Letters*, iii, 142.

⁶ Charlotte Brontë to George Smith, 3 November 1852, in *Letters*, iii, 78.

⁷ From an anonymous review, *Literary Gazette*, 5 February 1853; and from an anonymous review, *Examiner*, 5 February 1853, in *The Brontës: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Allott, pp. 180, 177.

Guadeloupe in the plot of a novel full of references to sugar and metaphorical allusions to slavery suggests that the links between sugar, slavery and colonialism were still powerful in the middle of the nineteenth century, even after slavery had been abolished throughout the British Empire in 1834. In common with the abolitionist writers I discuss in Chapter 1, Brontë uses the tropes of sugar and slavery, sometimes in conjunction and sometimes in opposition to each other, to explore complex social and political relations between individuals and cultures. Indeed, the spectre of slavery in an Englishwoman's novel about (mostly) English people abroad written at a time when abolitionist reforms in Britain had receded well into the territory of history emphasises the continuing global significance of the practice – especially because slavery was still legal in Guadeloupe during the time Brontë spent in Brussels. But the history of Guadeloupe carried implications for Britain as well as for continental Europe. As Helen M. Cooper points out, by the time that Brontë was writing *Villette*, Guadeloupe had been a site of English-French rivalry for two hundred years.⁸ France first occupied the island in 1650, establishing a profitable sugar economy, and although it was annexed by England a hundred years later in 1756 at the start of the Seven Years' War, it was handed back after the Treaty of Paris in 1763.⁹ In choosing to connect the copious sugar consumption in *Villette* with the institution of slavery Brontë incriminates not only continental Europe but also Britain by extension. Whoever you are and whatever your nationality or race, to eat sugar in the novel is not a neutral act but one bound up intimately with discourses of power.

Susan Meyer has argued that Paul's 'dominating relationship with a colonial people is represented as a substitute for his relationship with the rebellious heroine', and in this sense Brontë uses the concept of slavery in *Villette* as a metaphor to explore other social issues such

⁸ Helen M. Cooper, Introduction to Brontë, *Villette*, ed. Helen M. Cooper (London: Penguin, 2004), p. xliv.

⁹ For a detailed colonial history of Guadeloupe, see Eric Williams, *From Columbus to Castro: The History of the Caribbean 1492-1969* (London: Deutsch, 1970).

as class and gender.¹⁰ The idea of Africa was an important concept for all the Brontë children, whose early forays into fiction explored the fictional African kingdom of Angria. Meyer points out that the name echoes both the words ‘angry’ and ‘Africa’, suggesting that through the imaginary concept of Africa the juvenile texts were able to convey their rage about other social conditions closer to home.¹¹ This is in line with Brontë’s later writing practice: she made no apology for her failure to address directly the issue of slavery in *Villette*. She wrote to George Smith in 1852 of her intention to ‘voluntarily and sincerely veil my face before such a mighty subject as that handled in Mrs Beecher Stowe’s work – “Uncle Tom’s Cabin”’.¹² But Brontë did make ample use throughout her literary and private writing of metaphors involving slavery. In 1852 she told Ellen Nussey that she was ‘fettered – incapable’ of continuing to write *Villette*, while elsewhere in her correspondence she makes explicit references to slavery, for instance describing Emily’s situation as a teacher at Law Hill school in Halifax as ‘slavery’, or noting that Mrs Robinson, the former employer of her other siblings Anne and Branwell, is an ‘infatuated slave’ of the wealthy man she wants to marry for security.¹³ Furthermore, Brontë strongly associates the idea of slavery with her feelings for M. Heger, who together with his wife owned the Pensionnat where Charlotte and Emily studied in Brussels, and who is widely acknowledged to be the model for Paul in *Villette*. Most biographers now assume that Charlotte was in love with him.¹⁴ She wrote to him frequently after returning to England, until he eventually ceased to reply. ‘[N]ot to know how to get the mastery over one’s own thoughts, to be the slave of a regret, a memory, the slave of a dominant and fixed idea which has become a

¹⁰ Susan Meyer, *Imperialism at Home: Race and Victorian Women’s Fiction* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), p. 60.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

¹² Charlotte Brontë to George Smith, 30 October 1852, in *Letters*, iii, 75.

¹³ Charlotte Brontë to Ellen Nussey, 24 September 1852, in *Letters*, iii, 67; 2 October 1838, in *Letters*, i, 182; and 18 August 1848, in *Letters*, ii, 104.

¹⁴ Juliet Barker, *The Brontës* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1994), p. 419.

tyrant over one's mind', she confided to the man she called 'my master', was becoming for her an indomitable challenge.¹⁵

Carl Plasa has argued that *Jane Eyre* 'excludes the subject of British colonial slavery at the level of the literal' but that it is widely present as a discourse. A 'metaphorical language of enslavement and mastery' pervades the text in a way that is comparable to many other nineteenth-century texts written in similar historical circumstances.¹⁶ Although Plasa only considers the earlier novel in depth, I think that there is a case to be made for *Villette* here too. Paul is regularly described in terms which compare him to a slave-driver throughout the novel. Calling him a 'conqueror' and 'imperially menacing', Brontë frequently compares him to that other despot, Napoleon, claiming that 'his absolutism verged on tyranny' (675, 547, 506). While Graham Bretton is presented as someone who would have 'benignity towards the lowest savage' (539), Paul's depiction anticipates the conclusion of the novel when his tyrannical instincts will be realised by his literal instalment in the role of oppressor in Guadeloupe. '[T]anned and fiery' (531), the man described elsewhere as 'savage' (492) is shown as having temperamental as well as physical qualities in common with his colonial subjects.

Other metaphors of slavery are used sometimes indiscriminately throughout the text – for example when Lucy describes the girls of the Pensionnat as being 'reared in slavery' (177), a reference to the Catholic Church – but many of them flag up issues of gender. Lucy tells Ginevra that she wouldn't purchase her for sixpence, an image which figures her as a slave and contradicts Graham's assertion that he is the 'free man' (359) after being released from his attachment to her, which indicates that he was enslaved to Ginevra. Yet elsewhere, Ginevra relates to the concept of being enslaved, declaring that she doesn't 'think of fettering' (127) herself to a man, and Lucy implies that her subservience to her employer, Madame Beck, has been slavery. Seeking to prevent Paul's growing affection for Lucy, Madame Beck imprisons

¹⁵ Charlotte Brontë to Constantin Heger, 18 November 1845, in *Letters*, i, 436.

¹⁶ Carl Plasa, *Textual Politics from Slavery to Postcolonialism: Race and Identification* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), p. 63.

her under the pretence of writing letters in her own quarters at the very time when he is due to be visiting the school – ‘she softly closed the two doors of her chamber; she even shut and fastened the casement’ (641). Yet Lucy subverts the idea of slavery in order to show that her rebellion is unavoidable. ‘[M]y hand was fettered, my ear enchained, my thoughts were carried off captive’, she explains, at the sound of Paul’s arrival, and she resists Madame Beck’s attempt literally to detain her (642). Although Brontë uses the concept of slavery to demonstrate different kinds of limitations throughout all her novels, it seems to be especially used in order to indicate restrictions on women.

Although imagery surrounding slavery doesn’t deal directly with sugar in the novel, the fact of Paul’s departure to Guadeloupe at the end connects them; and because slavery and sugar production are associated at this literal level in the novel, sugar itself takes on some of the characteristics that Brontë associates with slavery as a metaphor. In this sense, sugar carries with it a very strong legacy of slavery in terms of how it is represented in *Villette*, and imagery concerning sugar often deals with the same issues as that concerning slavery. While slavery is frequently used as a metaphor to demonstrate the oppression of women and their lack of options in patriarchal society – especially when, like Lucy, they don’t have a man to look after them – sugar also becomes an object which is to some extent capable of representing the tension between socially prescribed ideals of femininity and women’s own needs and desires. In eating and coveting sugar, female characters subvert male expectations of femininity. While the novel’s images of slavery express the futility of women’s un-emancipated lives, sugar as an actual thing in the text suggests physical needs which overrule this ideology.

Moreover, by figuring the consumption of sugar as a rebellion against patriarchal authority, Brontë places this resistance in the context of a feminist legacy which was closely entwined with abolitionism. As numerous historians and literary critics have pointed out, strong links developed between feminism and abolitionism in the first half of the nineteenth

century. Moira Ferguson argues that, beginning in the seventeenth century women ‘displaced anxieties about their own assumed powerlessness and inferiority onto their representations of slaves’.¹⁷ As a result, abolitionism became a popular cause among women. Clare Midgley, who has charted British women’s campaigns, records that although women’s contributions have been persistently devalued they were nonetheless a significant part of the growing protest against slavery.¹⁸ Furthermore, through their involvement in abolitionist campaigns women learned about activism, and then applied this to feminist issues. As Midgley points out, many of the women most active in the antislavery movements of the 1860s went on to become leaders of later feminist campaigns.¹⁹ In resisting patriarchal norms through eating sugar – rather than abstaining from it, as many antislavery protesters did to signal their rejection of slavery – Brontë subverts traditional abolitionist practice but still manages to signal her connection to it. This connection is important because it demonstrates that Brontë is using sugar and slavery to discuss feminist issues. While in her juvenilia Brontë fails to relate to the Africans she depicts, aligning herself instead with the (male) forces of white imperialism, psychological readings of her novels suggest that she did connect raced subjects to white British women, the most well known example being Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s famous analysis of Bertha Mason as Jane’s *Eyre*’s alter ego.²⁰ More recently, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has challenged this interpretation on the grounds that it reduces colonial subjects to a position of secondary importance within a predominantly feminist discourse, but her rationale for this conclusion – that since its origins western feminism has been complicit with imperial ideology – confirms rather than challenges the idea of a link between slavery and gender in Brontë’s writing.²¹

¹⁷ Ferguson, *Subject to Others*, p. 3.

¹⁸ Midgley, *Women Against Slavery*, p. 3.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 172.

²⁰ Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979).

²¹ See Spivak, ‘Three Women’s Texts’, p. 243.

For Brontë, who at the beginning of her career figured Jane Eyre as a slave, Lucy Snowe's cravings for sugar imply a resistance to the demands of a newly emerging capitalist society which refuses to recognise women's physical or emotional needs by reclaiming the pleasures of consumption for female, rather than male, enjoyment. Terry Eagleton has argued that the conclusion of *Villette* is 'calculatedly unresolved': allowing happiness to survive as 'an ideal possibility which might validate the suffering channelled into its achievement', yet unable to completely dismiss the reality of that suffering.²² Just as *Villette* ultimately supports the status quo, so Lucy's lack of access to sugar at the end of the novel indicates that Paul's needs have supplanted her own. At the conclusion of the text Paul claims her hospitality for himself, instructing her to serve him chocolate in her 'pretty gold and white china service' (704). The shift marks a transfer of power contingent on the couple's engagement and assumption of traditional gender roles. The china is part of Paul's gift to Lucy when he installs her in new lodgings in the Faubourg Clothilde, and reiterates the point made elsewhere in the novel that male financial power is paid back in female subservience. This applies as much to Lucy as to Paulina, both of whom serve their betrothed the sugary food which Brontë specifically identifies as being representative of sexuality. The women's readiness to administer ('[w]ith what shy joy I accepted my part as hostess', Lucy reveals – 705) signifies their willingness to submit to conventional power dynamics, and serve the men both food and sex.

Brontë, Thackeray, and Female Appetite

Brontë's ambivalent stance towards traditional gender roles, and her interest in the links between food and sexuality, is anticipated in the work of her favourite contemporary writer, William Makepeace Thackeray. Brontë counted Thackeray as amongst only a handful of

²² Terry Eagleton, *Myths of Power: A Marxist Study of the Brontës*, 2nd edn (London: Macmillan, 1988), p. 73.

writers that she considered truly great novelists. ‘Curren Bell – even if he had no let or hindrance and if his path were quite smooth, could never march with the tread of a Scott, a Bulwer, a Thackeray, or a Dickens’, she told William Smith Williams, a contact at her publishers and frequent correspondent, in 1849.²³ Despite Brontë’s expansiveness, however, and respect for Bulwer, Scott and Dickens, it was Thackeray whom she properly idolised: she even hung an engraving of him, alongside a portrait of her other hero, the Duke of Wellington, in the parsonage dining room.²⁴ Dickens was generally felt to be the most important writer of the day, but from the publication of *Vanity Fair* in 1847-8 Thackeray came to be seen as his main rival, some people even considering him superior in realism and style.²⁵ For Brontë herself Thackeray became an important measure of her own literary efforts, representing the very best of modern writing and a standard to which she continually aspired. For this reason, she referred to him as ‘that greatest modern Master’ and even dedicated the second edition of *Jane Eyre* to him in recognition of his influence on her work.²⁶

Despite Brontë’s self-confessed admiration of Thackeray, his writing also frustrated her, particularly in its representation of women, which she felt to be limited and critical. ‘As usual – he is unjust to women – quite unjust’, she declared to George Smith in 1852 after reading *Henry Esmond* (1852), an opinion she had apparently formed quite some time earlier, since she had told Elizabeth Smith in 1850 that he deserved to be ‘tried by a jury of twelve matrons’ for *Rebecca and Rowena* (1849).²⁷ The discrepancy Brontë saw between her respect for Thackeray as a writer and his unsatisfactory portrayal of women undoubtedly informed her

²³ Charlotte Brontë to William Smith Williams, 8 May 1849, in *Letters*, ii, 207.

²⁴ *The Oxford Companion to the Brontës*, ed. Christine Alexander and Margaret Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 504.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 494.

²⁶ Charlotte Brontë to William Smith Williams, 28 January 1848, in *Letters*, ii, 23; for the Preface to the second edition see Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (1847), ed. Jane Jack and Margaret Smith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), pp. xxix-xxxii. At the time, the dedication caused a scandal because the subject of *Jane Eyre* touched on similar issues in Thackeray’s life – in 1842 he had, similarly to Rochester, effectively ended his marriage when his wife was permanently admitted into an asylum, although according to archaic divorce laws he was unable to officially part from her. Brontë was unaware of this fact, which she was mortified to discover.

²⁷ Charlotte Brontë to George Smith, 14 February 1852, in *Letters*, iii, 18.

own attempts to depict women in her work, even as over time she became more and more disillusioned with her idol. ‘Alas for Mr Thackeray’s promises! Alas for the faith of authorship enshrined in him!’ she told Smith on receiving the first volume of *Henry Esmond*.²⁸ While Brontë’s work assigns powerful physical and emotional feelings to women as well as men, Thackeray conforms to a more conventional literary depiction of women. Although Thackeray’s work has in general been received well by feminists, more than Brontë he subscribes to a dominant cultural view in which women were not associated with physical desires and impulses.²⁹ As such his work formed an important part of a literary tradition in which female appetite took on moral characteristics.

Brontë challenges this tradition in *Villette*, ascribing legitimacy to women’s bodily appetites and needs, but rather than being totally opposed to Thackeray’s depiction of women, the novel draws on other aspects of his approach to gender. While for the most part Thackeray conforms to conventional representations of women, which emphasise their bodilessness and spirituality, unlike many of his contemporaries he begins to depart from these norms. Using Thackeray’s *Pendennis* (1848-50) as a case study – an example I have chosen due to its discussion of women and sugar consumption – I will discuss the ways in which the literary climate Brontë was working in viewed the relationship between women and hunger, and where their appetite for sugar fits into this. Thackeray uses sugary food in *Pendennis* both to demonstrate dangerous appetites in women but also to show how women are motivated by their physical needs as much as men. Thackeray’s work both highlights the literary climate Brontë was reacting against and suggests that Thackeray may have partly prompted this rebellion.

Brontë was first introduced to Thackeray in 1849, after which they met several more times and Brontë attended Thackeray’s 1851 summer lecture series on eighteenth-century

²⁸ Charlotte Brontë to George Smith, 7 February 1852, in *Letters*, iii, 16.

²⁹ For a detailed analysis of Thackeray’s relation to contemporary feminist theory see Micael M. Clarke, *Thackeray and Women* (Dekalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 1995), pp. 19-23. Clarke also argues that Thackeray’s representation of women is on the whole sympathetic.

English humorists.³⁰ In 1850 he even held a dinner in her honour. But the friendship was ultimately disappointing for both of them. Thackeray's daughter Anne, for example, recalled the dinner in question as 'gloomy and silent [...] the conversation grew dimmer and more dim'.³¹ This personal animosity was paralleled in the way they came to feel about each other's work. Just as Brontë was underwhelmed by *Henry Esmond*, Thackeray was critical of *Villette*. 'I don't make my *good* women ready to fall in love with two men at once', he wrote to a friend in 1853, referring to Lucy Snowe replacing her love for Graham Bretton with a new affection for Paul Emmanuel.³² As well as disapproving of her main character's actions in the novel he also made disparaging speculations based on the novel's subject matter about Brontë's own sexuality. Writing to another female correspondent he dismissively attributes Charlotte's interest in Lucy's emotional struggles to what he assumed to be her own sexual frustrations, opining that the novel's portrayal of unrequited desire was undeniably the result of 'a noble heart longing to mate itself and destined to wither away into old maidenhood with no chance to fulfil the burning desire'.³³ Although there were many other factors which influenced the decline of their relationship – she thought him too flippant while he found her too dull, for instance – their consistent disagreements about gender issues were a crucial factor in their waning friendship. These disagreements are encapsulated in Brontë's representation of women in *Villette* and Thackeray's sharply critical response to it.

Charlotte was an avid reader of Thackeray, and her view of *Pendennis* conformed to her general criticism of the author.³⁴ Writing to Elizabeth Gaskell in 1851 she praised a review

³⁰ George Smith invited Thackeray to his house to meet Charlotte on 4 December 1849, and in a letter from 1850 she records another call Thackeray made six months later in which he sat 'above two hours' with her one morning – see Charlotte Brontë to Ellen Nussey, 12 June 1850, in *Letters*, ii, 414. Brontë attended Thackeray's lecture series on eighteenth-century English humorists during her visit to London in May-June 1851 – see *The Oxford Companion to the Brontës*, ed. Alexander and Smith, p. 503.

³¹ Appendix 3: Anne Thackeray Ritchie on Charlotte Brontë, in *Letters*, ii, 754-6 (755).

³² William Makepeace Thackeray to Mrs Carmichael-Smyth, 25-28 March 1853, in *The Brontës: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Allott, p. 198; author's emphasis.

³³ William Makepeace Thackeray to Lucy Baxter, 11 March 1853, in *The Brontës: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Allott, p. 198.

³⁴ *The Oxford Companion to the Brontës*, ed. Alexander and Smith, p. 55.

of the novel in the *Prospective Review* which argued that Thackeray showed an ‘unhealthy incertitude of moral judgement from which he takes refuge in sneers’.³⁵ Arthur Pendennis’s story – which is a kind of *bildungsroman* charting his growth from spoilt schoolboy to a reformed character ready to accept his responsibilities – is developed through his attachments to several ‘unsuitable’ women, whom he pursues then rejects before being worthy to receive the love of his mother’s adopted daughter Laura Bell, a ‘suitable’ match because she has been trained by his devoted parent. Although there are numerous reasons why Arthur rejects his former flames it is noticeable that two out of three of them have large appetites which are used to represent them in an unflattering light. As a young man Arthur’s first love is an Irish actress with a drunken father named Emily Fotheringay. ‘She has no heart and no head’, Mr Bows, her erstwhile tutor complains, ‘but the fact is, she does like her dinner’.³⁶

Throughout the novel, evidence of appetite in women is presented as a sign of weakness. Emily’s hearty appetite is a reminder not only of her sexual unsuitability for Pen but also of her material priorities. While Pen’s passion for the actress is based on the emotional sensitivity of her performances, she breaks off the match after being falsely told by his relatives that Pen is penniless. In *Little Dorrit* (1857) Dickens describes what Pen might have faced were he to have actually married Emily. Returning to England after an absence of many years, Arthur Clennam’s first encounter with his former sweetheart, Flora, is tinged with the knowledge that he no longer finds her attractive: ‘[o]nce upon a time Clennam had sat at that table taking no heed of anything but Flora; now the principle heed he took of Flora was, to observe, against his will, that she was very fond of porter, that she combined a great deal of sherry with sentiment, and that if she were a little overgrown, it was upon substantial grounds’.³⁷

³⁵ Charlotte Brontë to Mrs Gaskell, 3 November 1851, in *Letters*, ii, 709, n1.

³⁶ William Makepeace Thackeray, *The History of Pendennis* (1848-50), ed. Peter L. Shillingsburg, 2 vols. (New York, NY: Garland Publishing, 1991), i, 128.

³⁷ Dickens, *Little Dorrit* (1857), ed. Harvey Peter Sucksmith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), p. 150.

Later Pen falls in love with the daughter of another local family. Blanche Amory appears to be an appropriate match, at least in terms of social class (unlike Emily Fotheringay), but is unsuitable in terms of temperament. While cultivating a heightened sensibility in public, she is cruel and unfeeling in private, berating her mother and boxing her younger brother's ears. Part of this hidden persona is her very substantial appetite: '[w]hen nobody was near, our little Sylphide, who scarcely ate at dinner more than the six grains of rice of Amina [...] was most active with her knife and fork', the narrator confirms, figuring Blanche's affected lack of appetite as a further sign of her duplicity.³⁸ While Flora and Emily's appetites are liable to arouse only disgust in the eyes of their former admirers, Blanche negotiates this tricky social terrain by eating in private so that she may reject her food in public. By not eating in company, Blanche can appear to conform to social conventions that denied women's physical appetites, while still taking sustenance and pleasure from her private feasts. In this respect what disappoints Arthur Clennam about Flora at the dinner table may well have as much to do with her lapse in etiquette – which fails to acknowledge that women should not be seen eating – as with the appetite she indulges. Pen's ability to eventually see past Blanche's disguises is a sign of his improved judgment. While it may have been obvious that a working-class actress was unsuitable for him within the strict social confines of the novel, his ability to distinguish the more subtle characteristics that make Blanche inappropriate testifies to his growing maturity.

As John Carey has argued, eating is a key feature of Thackeray's writing, which involves numerous dinners and feasts.³⁹ Furthermore, the food involved on such occasions was carefully selected by the author for its literary effect; as Barbara Hardy points out, Thackeray was acutely aware of the value, origin, and nature of the food diners in his novels consume.⁴⁰ Within this context it is no surprise that Thackeray connects Blanche's private binging

³⁸ Thackeray, *Pendennis*, i, 371.

³⁹ John Carey, *Thackeray: Prodigal Genius* (London: Faber and Faber, 1977), pp. 79-102.

⁴⁰ Barbara Hardy, *The Exposure of Luxury: Radical Themes in Thackeray* (London: Peter Owen, 1972), p. 130.

specifically to sugary food. As *The Bazaar Book of Decorum* from 1870 makes clear, puddings and sweets were most often associated with young women's private bingeing habits.

It is not that they [...] absolutely starve themselves to death, for many of the most abstemious at the open dinner are the most voracious at the secret luncheon. Thus the fastidious dame whose gorge rises before company at the sight of a single pea, will on the sly swallow cream tarts by the dozen, and caramels and chocolate drops by the pound's weight.⁴¹

A family servant, the revealingly named Mr Lightfoot, confirms that Blanche conforms to this trend:

And then you should see Miss at luncheon, when there's nobody but the family! She makes b'leave she never heats, and my! you should only jest see her. She has Mary Hann to bring her up plum-cakes and creams into her bed-room; and the cook's the only man in the house she's civil to.⁴²

By drawing on the conventional associations of sugary food with eating for enjoyment instead of essential nourishment, Thackeray makes it an important symbol of female hypocrisy in the novel, as his women disguise their real physical desires in order to appear more virtuous. Lightfoot's revelation that the cook is the 'only man in the house' Blanche is 'civil' to has a humorous implication when it is disclosed that the cook is in love with her and is trying to woo her through his culinary creations. The humour derives from the fact that although Blanche affects a heightened sensibility she is actually a glutton, but it also highlights the fact that her interaction with others is as fake as the lack of appetite she puts on, being used only to deceive people.

As Helena Mitchie has noted, eating in the bedroom 'makes even more explicit the unconscious equation of food and sex'.⁴³ That the food Blanche asks Mary Hann to bring her is specifically sweet food (plum-cakes and creams) strengthens the sexual connotations of the repast, since, as Joan Jacob Brumberg has argued, sugary food was associated with sex

⁴¹ Quoted in Gail Turley Houston, *Consuming Fictions: Gender, Class, and Hunger in Dickens's Novels* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1994), p. 49.

⁴² Thackeray, *Pendennis*, ii, 223.

⁴³ Helena Mitchie, *The Flesh Made Word: Female Figures and Women's Bodies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 20.

throughout the Victorian period.⁴⁴ In 1838 Alexander Walker warned parents not to give their children chocolate because it was thought to ‘accelerate precocity’, while Edward H. Clarke proclaimed in 1873: ‘[w]e live in the zone of perpetual pie and doughnut; and our girls revel in those [...] abominations’.⁴⁵ Blanche, meanwhile, is ‘very fond of sugar-plums’.⁴⁶ Thackeray’s choice to link Blanche to sugary food in particular emphasises her sexuality, already highlighted by her pleasure in food in general. John Carey has argued that for Thackeray food was especially expressive of sexuality: ‘his writing taps, through food, a reservoir of sensuousness which would have been unthinkable, in the Victorian period, had he dealt directly with sexual experience’.⁴⁷

In connecting Blanche to sweet food Thackeray draws out the links between bodily, economic and sexual appetites in the novel. Although Pen rejects Blanche after becoming aware of her falsity, he is later persuaded to propose to her by his materialistic uncle the major, who through a series of complicated plot manoeuvres plans to blackmail Blanche’s stepfather to give Pen a decent dowry and the family seat in parliament, based on his knowledge of the illegitimacy of his marriage (since Blanche’s father, Lady Clavering’s previous husband, is still alive, this makes her current marriage to Sir Francis Clavering invalid). Unaware of the major’s plot, Pen goes along with the plan, but on discovering the truth refuses the major’s help. Vowing to keep his promise to Blanche and marry her, Pen is jilted a second time when the calculating ‘Sylphide’ is unwilling to accept him without a fortune and position. The case is a clear parallel to Pen’s engagement to ‘the Fotheringay’, which was also broken off because the girl in question declined to take him due to his lack of money (although in that case, Emily was fooled into thinking Pen penniless). While the economic materialism of both girls is

⁴⁴ Joan Jacobs Brumberg, *Fasting Girls: The Emergence of Anorexia Nervosa as a Modern Disease* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), p. 176.

⁴⁵ Alexander Walker, ‘Intermarriage’ (1838), and Edward H. Clarke, ‘Sex in Education: A Fair Chance for the Girls’ (1873), in *Desire and Imagination: Classic Essays in Sexuality*, ed. Regina Barreca (London: Meridian, 1995), pp. 17, 162.

⁴⁶ Thackeray, *Pendennis*, ii, 274.

⁴⁷ John Carey, *Thackeray: Prodigal Genius* (London: Faber and Faber, 1977), p. 85.

represented by their physical greed, Thackeray uses sugar as a symbol of the way in which they both disguise their highly pragmatic reasons for desiring marriage beneath a sentimental attitude – a kind of ‘sugar coating’ of their true motivations. After becoming engaged to Blanche not for romantic but for pragmatic reasons, Pen sends her a box of bonbons ‘wrapped up in ready-made French verses’.⁴⁸ The materialism of Blanche’s physical appetite is linked, through the chocolates, to the economic materialism of their prospective marriage. Bearing in mind the strong associations French literature had with false sentiment in the period, the gift also clearly symbolises Pen’s acknowledgement of Blanche’s duplicitous character as well as his determination to overlook her flaws for the sake of social nicety.

The beginning of Pen and Blanche’s engagement presents, ironically, a clear parallel to the end of his engagement to ‘the Fotheringay’, during which Emily’s lack of feeling for Pen and practical motivations for desiring the match are symbolised in her brisk packing away of his romantic paraphernalia: she ‘wrapped up Pen’s letters, poems, passions, and fancies, and tied them with a piece of string neatly, as she would a parcel of sugar’.⁴⁹ The contrast between Pen’s gushing emotional declarations and the pragmatism of Emily’s cool response to the break-up highlights the way in which economic and physical forms of greed converge in a world where conspicuous consumption dulls individual moral sentiment. Pen himself is one of the biggest consumers Thackeray creates. Although a reformed character later in life, in the early stages of his career he squanders most of his fortune at university by investing in the fashions of the day and hosting extravagant dinners. The subtitle of Thackeray’s *The History of Pendennis* is: ‘[h]is fortunes and misfortunes, his friends and his greatest enemy’, the enemy being himself and his inability to resist temptation. The title page depicts this struggle, showing Pendennis literally caught between the lure of the wider world and his domestic duties, as a virtuous Victorian wife and tantalising siren compete on either side for his affections.

⁴⁸ Thackeray, *Pendennis*, ii, 267.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, i, 113.

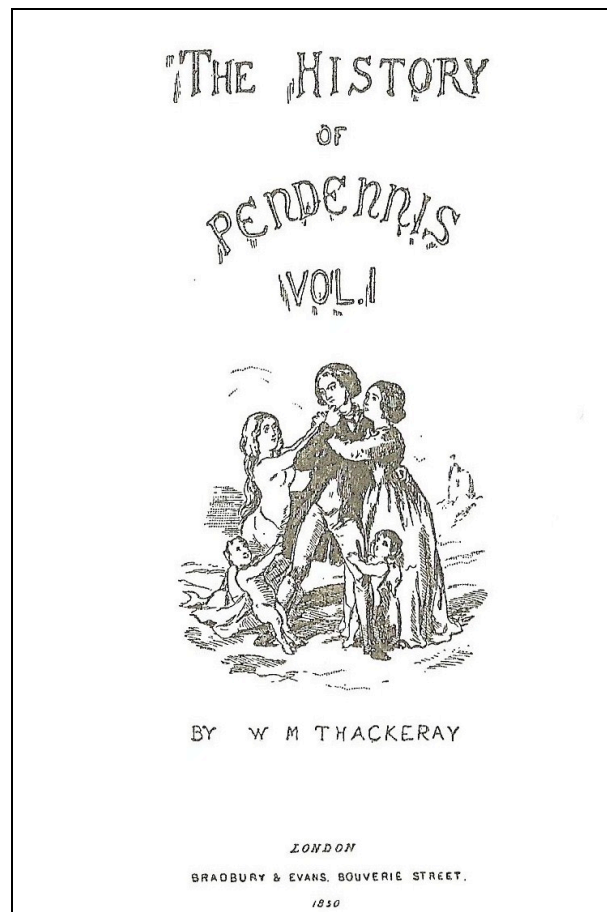


Fig. 3: Facsimile of title page to Thackeray's *Pendennis* (1848-50), volume I (first edition).

Pulled closer by the wife figure, Pen nevertheless looks longingly at the siren. In *Pendennis* Thackeray creates a character who is called on to resist his appetites but who never succeeds in suppressing them entirely.

The inability of human beings to resist the call of their baser appetites is to a greater or lesser extent a problem shared by all the characters in *Pendennis*. Whether for food, money, power, love, or admiration, no one is completely spared the frailties of human passion: even the 'good' women in the novel – Pen's mother, and Laura, his eventual wife – are guilty of having spoilt him when he was younger. In this sense Thackeray's depiction of female appetite is less important as a specific criticism of women's physicality than as part of a wider critique of the lunacy of social restrictions which try to deny people's natural tendencies. Thackeray makes

clear the extent to which Blanche's secret feasting was common in the period, categorising her 'piece of hypocrisy' as typical of 'other young ladies of fashion'.⁵⁰ The practice was resorted to by women from all walks of life: Dickens depicts the decidedly unladylike Mrs Todger caught in the kitchen 'dodging among the tender pieces [of meat] with a fork, and eating of 'em' in *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1844).⁵¹ The trend for this kind of behaviour demonstrates both the importance of the cultural emphasis on women's bodilessness in the period but also its basis in fantasy. While Dickens ascribes an appetite only to women he presents as not being suitable for marriage, Thackeray's satirical depiction of Blanche's undercover gorging is as much a criticism of the restrictive nature of dominant cultural prerogatives as it is of her morals and character.

Peter Shillingsburg points out that although Thackeray is conventional in dividing his female characters into 'good' and 'bad' women, it is the 'bad' ones – Blanche Amory, Becky Sharpe, Beatrix Esmond and Ethel Newcome – that grab the reader's attention.⁵² In this way Thackeray departs from conventional literary depictions of women as spiritual and non-physical creatures while still conforming to the social discourse that condemned female physicality as immoral. Thackeray's 'good' women routinely display heightened spiritual and moral sensibilities: Pen's eventual wife, Laura, refuses to marry him until he has reformed aspects of his character, showing that she puts a higher value on moral qualities than material ones. Revealingly, Thackeray also ascribes a fuller figure to Laura, who is described as a 'pink, healthy, bouncing country lass', thus emphasising her sexual attractiveness, without associating this with her own physical desires, since he does not present her eating in the novel (in fact, Pen is embarrassed when she witnesses him eating ravenously after his illness). Laura's figure represents, therefore, her sexual attractiveness to men, rather than her own physicality, and

⁵⁰ Ibid., i, 371.

⁵¹ Charles Dickens, *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1844), ed. Margaret Cardwell (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), p. 144.

⁵² Peter L. Shillingsburg, *William Makepeace Thackeray: A Literary Life* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), p. 107.

throughout his writings Thackeray tends to emphasise women's desirability over their own desires. He often does this by figuring women as food, which makes clear their tendency to be consumed while denying them the enjoyment of consumption. In one particularly suggestive example, from 'The Painter's Bargain', a story published in *The Paris Sketch Book* of 1840, he depicts a butcher's daughter whose father describes her as 'as lovely a bit of mutton [...] as ever a man would wish to stick a knife into'.⁵³ Another story, 'A Little Dinner at Timmins's', which first appeared in 1848, depicts the serving girls at a confectionery shop as being 'so beautiful' due to the 'the act of perpetually living amongst such a quantity of good things', a description which has the effect of aligning the girls with the confectionery.⁵⁴

Whereas for Thackeray women are ultimately the objects, rather than the subjects, of consumption, Brontë challenges this approach by making her female characters in *Villette* hungry for sugary food. Like Thackeray, Brontë uses sugar to demonstrate a female appetite that is based purely on the enjoyment of food, but unlike him she celebrates rather than censures this consumption. Thackeray implies that the social restrictions which try to deny people's natural appetites are ridiculous, but *Pendennis* and his comments on *Villette* show that he still ascribed, on the whole, to conventional expectations of male and female appetite, especially in relation to his 'good' women, as he himself referred to them. As we have seen, despite Thackeray's influence on Brontë's work, she felt that he was routinely 'unjust' to his female characters, and it seems likely that his restrictive views about women and food formed part of this injustice. In *Villette*, Brontë uses her portrayal of food, and especially sweet food, to put forward an alternative model of female appetite as both necessary and healthy.

⁵³ Thackeray, 'The Painter's Bargain', in *The Paris Sketch Book*, ed. George Saintsbury (London: Oxford University Press, 1910), pp. 62-77 (p. 62). The story first appeared in *Fraser's Magazine* in December 1838.

⁵⁴ Thackeray, 'A Little Dinner at Timmins's' in *Ballads and Contributions to Punch, 1842-50*, ed. George Saintsbury (London: Oxford University Press, 1910), pp. 439-70 (p. 457).

‘Eat, Drink, and Live’: Sweet Food in *Villette*

Brontë makes desire for sugary food a central feature of *Villette*. In the novel, men and women share an equal proclivity for sweet tastes. All the major male characters might be described as having a sweet tooth, and this is also true of most of the women. While Lucy, Ginevra and Madame Beck all share an appreciation of sugary treats, Paulina chooses to define herself by specifically rejecting sweet food. Furthermore, *Villette* is unusual in the sheer weight of sugary food it describes. Chocolate, brioche, cake, petit pâté à la crème, creams, ices, baked fruit, marmalade, sweet wine, bonbons, sweets, jams and comfits – the novel is as full of references to both real and imaginary sugary food and drink as it is of instances of it being eaten, drunk, craved, and enjoyed. What does all this consumption of sugar contribute to the novel? Brontë’s portrayal of sugar in *Villette* is riddled with contradictions, yet through some of her female characters she appears to conform to a conventional discourse of diet in which sugary food is linked to negative portrayals of femininity and sexuality. Both Ginevra Fanshawe and Paulina Mary Home de Bassompierre act as alter egos to Lucy in the novel, and their respective attitudes towards sweet food, which Paulina avoids and Ginevra pursues, provide an important context in which Lucy’s own response to sweet things can be understood.

Sweet food is the only food Lucy openly admits to craving in *Villette*. Knowing of her passion, Paul regularly supplies her with a variety of sugary treats during their unconventional courtship. He leaves bonbons in her desk, shares his brioche and baked apples with her, and fetches her cream cakes when he suspects that she would like some. At another point, during one of their frequent arguments, Paul makes sweetness representative of all Lucy’s desires as he accuses her of being excessively guided by her passions. ‘You look’, he says, ‘like one who would snatch at a draught of sweet poison, and spurn wholesome bitters with disgust’ (332). Yet Lucy resists Paul’s moralistic discourse of sweetness by insisting on the irrefutable fact of

sweetness as a sensation. ‘Indeed’, she replies, ‘I never liked bitters; nor do I believe them wholesome. And to whatever is sweet, be it poison or food, you cannot, at least, deny its own delicious quality – sweetness’ (332). She resists Paul’s attempts to figure sweetness as poison because it is desirable and in doing so rejects the idea that bodily needs are opposed to moral virtue. However, most importantly, Lucy’s statement shows that the pleasure embodied in the taste of sweetness has a value of its own.

Paulina and Ginevra, Lucy’s two main confidantes in the novel, have equally as intense relationships with sugar: in both cases their consumption (or non-consumption) of sweet food becomes representative of their relative morality and success at living up to conventional gender expectations. Ginevra, described elsewhere as ‘the child of pleasure’ (198), is overtly associated with sugar in the novel as part of her portrayal as shallow, superficial, and overly interested in bodily pleasure.

Work or suffering found her listless or dejected, powerless and repining; but gaiety expanded her butterfly’s wings, lit up their gold-dust and bright spots, made her flash like a gem, and flush like a flower. At all ordinary diet and plain beverage she would pout; but she fed on creams and ices like a humming-bird on honey-paste: sweet wine was her element and sweet cake her daily bread. Ginevra lived her full life in a ball-room; elsewhere she drooped dispirited. (198)

The religious connotations of the phrase ‘sweet wine was her element and sweet cake her daily bread’ link Ginevra’s capacity for pleasure to a wider discourse of anti-Catholic sentiment in *Villette*. Throughout the novel Catholicism is criticised as pandering to the sensory needs of the body as opposed to the spiritual needs of the mind: ‘the CHURCH strove to bring up her children robust in body, feeble in soul, fat, ruddy, hale, joyous, ignorant, unthinking, unquestioning. “Eat, drink, and live!” she says. “Look after your bodies; leave your souls to me”’ (177). Although English, Ginevra embodies this Catholic philosophy. During her first meeting with Lucy she explains that her education in continental Europe has left her unable to tell the difference between Catholicism and the Protestantism more usually followed by the English. Brontë’s portrayal of an ‘obese and aged archbishop’ later in the book reinforces the

links she draws between the physicality of the religion and overindulgent, spiritually compromising excess (610). A letter she wrote in 1851 may have provided the stimulus for this image of Catholic authority. Writing to her father, Brontë describes Cardinal Nicholas Wiseman as ‘a big portly man’, who ‘came swimming into the room smiling, simpering, and bowing like a fat old lady’.⁵⁵

In common with the proponents of her adopted religion, Ginevra also exhibits an excessive physical appetite in the text, regularly swapping her breakfast coffee with Lucy for extra rolls in the morning, and in consequence, like them, she boasts a fuller figure. Her preference for sugary food provides an important context for her weight, because sugar was widely believed to be fattening in the mid-nineteenth century. ‘[I]t undoubtedly contributes [...] to the production of fat’, wrote one writer for *All The Year Round* in 1861, a claim which was backed up by contemporary scientific and medical theory.⁵⁶ In *The Chemistry of Common Life* (1855) James F. W. Johnston links sugar’s propensity to cause weight gain to imperial ideology, claiming that plantation slaves ‘become fat in crop time on the abundant juice of the ripening cane’.⁵⁷ This argument was a common one in the period and it stresses the idea of Empire as a paternalistic construct, which nurtures and looks after its subjects. As in the writings of mainstream abolitionists at the turn of the century, sugar is presented as a useful and beneficial product. Words like ‘abundant’ and ‘ripening’ suggest that plentiful supplies of sugar allow the slaves to flourish, an emotional effect which is demonstrated by their fat and healthy bodies. In *Villette*, however, Brontë figures Ginevra’s weight as excessive, a sign that she is morally unhealthy: her overabundant flesh is a physical demonstration of her inability to stay within normal, healthy boundaries. She grows visibly bigger prior to her elopement with her secret lover, a failure to control her body which is indicative of moral and sexual weakness.

⁵⁵ Charlotte Brontë to Patrick Brontë, 17 June 1851, in *Letters*, ii, 640.

⁵⁶ Anonymous, ‘Sweets’, *All The Year Round* v (1861), 246-9 (p. 246).

⁵⁷ James F. W. Johnston, *The Chemistry of Common Life*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons, 1855), i, 250.

This is in keeping with popular perceptions of heaviness in the Victorian period which were linked to greater sexual promiscuity. Jill L. Matus has shown that contemporary studies associated fat with prostitution, which suggests that Brontë intended weight to be a sign of Ginevra's sexual appetites.⁵⁸ Yet Ginevra's full figure and sexual desirability are also attractive on a more socially acceptable level, as Graham falls in love with her 'plump, and pink, and flaxen attributes' (395). In some respects, Ginevra's appearance embodies the aspects of female physicality Victorian culture most admired, and so her body is a material representation of cultural prerogatives which celebrated physical health and desirability in women while at the same time censoring female sexuality.

The way in which sugar is linked to corpulence, sexuality, and the perceived physicality of the Catholic religion extends to the depiction of Belgian culture in general in the text, and as the inhabitants of Vilette are linked to sugar, greed, and fat, the food becomes associated with the same 'ignorant, unthinking [and] unquestioning' qualities linked to excess appetites and excess flesh in the novel. In one of the most dramatic scenes Lucy accuses Madame Beck, the proprietor of the Pensionnat, of being a 'sensualist', who takes excessive care of bodily pleasures, including those derived from sweetness: '[m]ake your own bed warm and soft; take sedatives, and meats and drinks spiced and sweet, as much as you will' (646). Sugar is also linked to poor morality through the behaviour of Madame Beck's daughters. While the eldest child, Désirée, combines unruliness with her sweet tooth – 'she would plunder the preserves, drink the sweet wine' (129) – her younger sister, Fifine, is described by Lucy as 'a frank gourmande; anybody could win her heart through her palate' (131). When Graham in his capacity as a doctor treats Fifine for a broken arm he orders *eau sucrée* (sugared water) to calm her, and offers her more of the sweet liquid as a reward for when his operation is over. The students of the Pensionnat Beck are characterised by a similar enjoyment of food. Lucy makes

⁵⁸ Jill L. Matus, *Unstable Bodies: Victorian Representations of Sexuality and Maternity* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), p. 139.

an inverse connection between intellectual capacity and appetite in the novel, earmarking one of her least intelligent students as the greediest: ‘the quantity of household bread, butter, and stewed fruit, she would habitually consume at “second déjeuner” [lunch] was a real world’s wonder – to be exceeded only by the fact of her actually pocketing slices she could not eat’ (306).

In *The Professor* (1857), also set in a Belgian school, William Crimsworth (the tutor in question) describes one student as ‘all [...] curve and roundness’, another as ‘stout’, and a third as ‘sensual now, and in ten years’ time she would be coarse’, a picture remarkably similar to Lucy Snowe’s class of schoolgirls who boast ‘contours as robust and solid as those of a stout Englishwoman of five-and-twenty’ (305).⁵⁹ Although *The Professor* was only published posthumously, it was written prior to *Villette* and is a key inspiration for the later novel.⁶⁰ *The Professor*’s romantic plot develops along similar lines to that of *Villette*, in which Lucy at one time sees the ‘dumpy, motherly, little body’ Madame Beck as rival for Paul’s heart (164). In *The Professor* Crimsworth rejects the ‘little and roundly formed’ Mdlle. Reuter in favour of small, slight, and English Francis Henri, whose figure ‘might have suited seventeen’ and whose race, he records, is ‘less gifted with fullness of flesh’.⁶¹ In later years, he does not regret his choice. When Crimsworth is informed that his old flame ‘weighs twelve stones now’, this is justification enough for having rejected her.⁶²

Brontë’s portrayal of the Belgian diet in *The Professor* and *Villette* is characterised by an excess of sugary food. Crimsworth observes Mesdames Reuter and Pelet consuming ‘confitures, cakes and coffee [...] with no delicate appetite’, while Monsieur Pelet takes ‘a

⁵⁹ Brontë, *The Professor* (1857), ed. Herbert Rosengarten and Margaret Smith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), pp. 85-6.

⁶⁰ Brontë probably began to write *The Professor* in 1844. It was finished by 1846 but rejected several times thereafter. In 1851 she suggested to Smith, Elder and Co. that she revise the manuscript, an idea which they rejected, and subsequently she embarked on *Villette*, which is itself a kind of reworking of the story.

⁶¹ Brontë, *The Professor*, p. 122

⁶² Ibid., p. 268.

couple of huge lumps of continental sugar' with his coffee.⁶³ Lucy's first meal at the Pensionnat Beck is typical of her stay there, comprising of 'some meat, nature unknown, served in an odd and acid, but pleasant sauce; some chopped potatoes, made savoury with, I know not what: vinegar and sugar, I think; a tartine, or slice of bread and butter, and a baked pear' (92). Brontë suggests that sugar is characteristic of the continental diet because she associates it with qualities that she believes are typical of these countries, such as a lack of discipline and an overt focus on pleasure. Paul's preference for sweetened food is said to be 'southern' in style, an image which geographically removes his sweet tooth from the sturdy, northern temperament and connects it instead to the lazy, sunny indolence associated with Catholic hubs such as Italy and Spain (501).

The most famous depiction of fat in *Villette* is Lucy's response to the painting of Cleopatra, which acts as a displacement of sensuality and sexuality onto an eastern, rather than a southern, 'other'. The picture (in Lucy's words):

represented a woman, considerably larger, I thought, than the life. I calculated that this lady, put into a scale of magnitude suitable for the reception of a commodity of bulk, would infallibly turn from fourteen to sixteen stone. She was, indeed, extremely well fed: very much butcher's meat – to say nothing of bread, vegetables, and liquids – must she have consumed to attain that breadth and height, that wealth of muscle, that affluence of flesh. She lay half-reclined on a couch: why, it would be difficult to say; broad daylight blazed round her; she appeared in hearty health, strong enough to do the work of two plain cooks; she could not plead a weak spine; she ought to have been standing, or at least sitting bolt upright. She had no business to lounge away the noon on a sofa. She ought likewise to have worn decent garments; a gown covering her properly, which was not the case: out of abundance of material – seven-and-twenty yards, I should say, of drapery – she managed to make inefficient raiment. Then, for the wretched untidiness surrounding her, there could be no excuse. (284-5)

Lucy's viewing is interrupted by Paul because he deems the Cleopatra an inappropriate subject for women to see. In fact he has no reason to fear for the health of Lucy's morals: her minute calculations of the amount of food the Cleopatra must have eaten, her exact weight, and the yards of material protecting her modesty demonstrate the extent to which she has internalised

⁶³ Ibid., pp. 73, 92.

conventional bourgeois social values with their emphasis on cleanliness, self-discipline, and prudence. The passage corroborates other links the novel has set up between sexual and physical appetites which, as I have also shown in relation to Thackeray's work, were common in the period. The picture that Brontë purportedly refers to is Edouard de Biefve's *Une Almée* (*A Dancing Girl*), which was exhibited in the Salon de Bruxelles in 1842 during the time that Brontë was staying in the city.⁶⁴ As Matus records, the term 'almeh' was a well known synonym for a prostitute at the time; the possibility that de Biefve intended to show this is enhanced by the fact that he portrays the woman not dancing but rather lying on a couch provocatively.⁶⁵ The original depicts a slimmer, more covered-up figure than the Cleopatra of Brontë's description, which suggests that the connection between female weight and profligacy was one she was particularly keen to stress. The size of Cleopatra and her moral shortcomings are linked to race in the passage, as Lucy describes her as a 'huge, dark-complexioned gypsy-queen' (286). If Belgians can just about be tolerated by Lucy despite their disagreeable habits, then she has no patience for the grossness of races she ultimately regards as inferior to her own due to their physical and cultural difference. The novel is notable for the disgust it shows towards female fat, yet its persistent interest in sugar and sweet food mean that issues of weight are addressed throughout the text.

Ginevra's weight, and the way in which it sexualises her body, figures her as a commodity in the novel. '[I]t was no trifling business to bear the burden of her loveliness', Lucy complains sarcastically, on being paired with Ginevra during a walk: 'I wished to goodness there had been less of the charming commodity' (548). The phrase connects Ginevra to the image of Cleopatra, whom Lucy also compares to a commodity due to her size (although in this case, Lucy's depiction of the Cleopatra as a 'commodity of bulk' is altogether less flattering). Like Thackeray, Brontë frequently compares women to food in her novels,

⁶⁴ See Brontë, *Villette*, ed. Cooper, p. 574, n9.

⁶⁵ Matus, *Unstable Bodies*, p. 137.

indicating that consumption has objectified their bodies. In *Shirley* she connects the objectification of women with their status as consumers. Caroline Helstone's loss of appetite accompanies her contemplation of a single and sexless future, and Mr Helstone's bemusement at her 'wasted' flesh fails to take account of the inability of bourgeois accretion to satisfy Caroline's emotional needs.

These women are incomprehensible. They have the strangest knack of startling you with unpleasant surprises. To-day you see them bouncing, buxom, red as cherries, and round as apples; to-morrow they exhibit themselves effete as dead weeds, blanched and broken down. And the reason of it all? that's the puzzle. She has her meals, her liberty, a good house to live in, and good clothes to wear as usual: a while since that sufficed to keep her handsome and cheery, and there she sits now a poor little pale, puling chit enough. Provoking!⁶⁶

'Red as cherries', and 'round as apples': in Mr Helstone's imagination healthy women become the food the starving women deny themselves. Brontë's depiction of Ginevra's cheeks as 'round as apples' (333) in *Villette* conforms to this trend, while Lucy is 'served [...] as a dripping roast' by an unscrupulous cab driver to a 'throng' of waiting watermen (67).

Brontë, however, refutes men's commodification of women in *Villette* by resisting their attempts to depersonalise them. Ginevra, for example, rejects Graham's objectification of her by reclaiming the concept of sweetness for her own use. Sweetness is at the heart of Graham's understanding of femininity, which he feels Ginevra embodies. "'Ginevra!' He thought her so fair, so good; he spoke so lovingly of her charms, her sweetness, her innocence' (274). Yet the qualities he celebrates are the ones he feels she represents, as opposed to her true character. The very same qualities that Graham (wrongly) perceives in Ginevra and considers exemplary of her virtue are for her exhausting to replicate.

[T]he man is too romantic and devoted, and he expects something more of me than I find it convenient to be. He thinks I am perfect: furnished with all sorts of sterling qualities and solid virtues, such as I never had, nor intend to have. Now, one can't help, in his presence, rather trying to justify his good opinion; and it does so tire one to be goody, and to talk sense, - for he really thinks I am sensible. I am far more at my ease with you, old lady - you, you dear crosspatch - who take me at my lowest, and know

⁶⁶ Brontë, *Shirley* (1849), ed. Herbert Rosengarten and Margaret Smith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), p. 212.

me to be coquettish, and ignorant, and flirting, and fickle, and silly, and selfish, and all the other sweet things you and I have agreed to be a part of my character. (126)

In rejecting this version of herself, Ginevra makes sweetness representative of the things that she likes rather than the qualities of Graham's ideal woman. For her, 'all the [...] sweet things' are actions which give her personal pleasure, as opposed to Graham's thing-like portrayal of women which expects them to be without appetites and desires. The two opposing concepts of sweetness set up different interpretations of femininity. Ginevra rejects Graham's attempts to 'consume' her in order to become a consumer herself. Scornful of Graham's overtures, which are flattering but ultimately unfulfilling, Ginevra eventually marries Colonel de Hamal, the lover she tells Lucy that she likes, '[a]s I like sweets, and jams, and comfits' (205).

Paulina, on the other hand, personifies a type of female sweetness that is conventional, and in which sugar serves as an important part of her denial of physicality. As a child, Paulina eats so little that she is a cause for concern for Mrs Bretton, and her body reflects her lack of appetite. Paulina's undeveloped figure is stressed by her first appearance in the novel as an infant, but as an adult she remains child-like, so that upon their re-acquaintance in Villetle Graham initially mistakes her for a child. Since the 1970s, most notably since the publication of Gilbert and Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* in 1979, feminist studies have been concerned with what Leslie Heywood has called the 'anorexic logic' of nineteenth-century culture: the effect by which qualities traditionally associated with the illness – such as self-discipline, spirituality and a lack of sexuality – become celebrated female virtues, and Paulina embodies these qualities.⁶⁷ At the same time, nineteenth-century society maintained two apparently contradictory positions with regard to female appetite. Women were at once expected to cultivate a spiritual demeanour, immune to the demands of hunger or sexuality, and maintain a healthy figure fit for childbearing. Helena Mitchie has described the paradoxical

⁶⁷ Leslie Heywood, *Dedication to Hunger: The Anorexic Aesthetic in Modern Culture* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996), p. xii.

demands of nineteenth-century culture in terms of the hourglass figure, an ideal which ‘in effect, prescribes that women live in two bodies at the same time: they must have the breasts and hips of a sensuous woman and the waistline of a schoolgirl’.⁶⁸

While Brontë’s own reservations about female fat in her novels have been amply explored so far, it is worth pointing out that she, too, conformed to the dual expectations of women’s bodies to be both physically developed and undeveloped. In her letters she persistently refers to being ‘fat’ in a positive sense representative of optimum health. ‘I am as well as need be, and very fat’, she writes to Ellen Nussey in 1839, while her reports of family friends and servants frequently use the word as a synonym for wellness: ‘I found Papa very well – Tabby better – and Martha quite fat and strong’ she writes in 1849, and another letter, from 1851, describes her father’s friend William Morgan as ‘fat [and] well and hearty’.⁶⁹ Despite these positive references to fat Brontë is careful to impose strict limitations on what she believes are ‘healthy’ and ‘unhealthy’ weights, allying these closely with the emotional qualities associated with thinner body shapes and which according to the dominant cultural mindset were socially superior. In another letter to Ellen from 1840 Brontë confirms the view given of overweight women in her novels – that they are lazy, silly, and spiritually and intellectually lacking – in the portrait of her cousin Eliza Williams:

my cousin Eliza is a young lady intended by nature to be a bouncing good-looking girl Art [sic] has trained her to be a languishing affected piece of goods [...] her face tells that she <was> ‘is’ naturally goodnatured –though perhaps indolent –in a manner she is something of a sanctified Amelia Walker –affecting at times a saintly child-like innocence so utterly out of keeping with her round rosy face and tall, bouncing figure – that I could hardly refrain from laughing as I watched her [...].⁷⁰

The association Brontë clearly feels between ‘saintly child-like innocence’ and a smaller, thinner figure is so strong that she finds the disparity between her cousin’s appearance and her

⁶⁸ Mitchie, *The Flesh Made Word*, p. 22.

⁶⁹ Brontë to Ellen Nussey, 24 October 1839, in *Letters*, i, 202. Brontë to Nussey, November 1849, in *Letters*, ii, 274. Brontë to Nussey, 1 September 1851, in *Letters*, ii, 685.

⁷⁰ Brontë to Nussey, 14 August 1840, in *Letters*, i, 225.

character ridiculous. Eliza's jovial fat permits her to be 'goodnatured', in Brontë's opinion, but restricts her from worthier pursuits of the mind.

Bearing in mind the obvious tensions that Brontë herself seemed to feel when it came to women's bodies, I want to suggest that she attempts to resolve these tensions in her portrait of Paulina. Paulina manages to avoid the negative physical and moral associations of both eating and not eating by refusing to eat sugar specifically. This denial allows her to disavow pleasure in the taste of food while continuing to eat. Although when Paulina initially arrives in Bretton as a child she refuses to eat at all, this behaviour is soon supplanted in the text when her distaste for food in general fades, excepting sweet food, which she continues to refuse. During the course of the novel Paulina turns down a variety of sweet food and drink, actions which seem to present her in a submissive role, but are actually far from passive. Indeed, Paulina seems to create opportunities to reject sweetened food and beverages in the novel, and to use these to her advantage as proof of her willingness to privilege male needs over her own. While effusive in her own denial of sugary food, she is unwavering in her desire to obtain it for Graham. As a child, Paulina's bond with Graham is based on a dynamic in which she procures sugary food for him but declines to partake of it herself, and their whole relationship goes on to be premised on such exchanges. She fetches him breakfast, sharing it with him but refusing to touch the marmalade, and pesters Mrs Bretton to give Graham cake.

"Ma'am," she would whisper to Mrs. Bretton, –"perhaps your son would like a little cake – sweet cake, you know – there is some in there" (pointing to the side-board cupboard). Mrs. Bretton, as a rule, disapproved of sweet cake at tea, but still the request was urged, –"One little piece – only for him – as he goes to school: girls – such as me and Miss Snowe – don't need treats, but *he* would like it." (32; author's emphasis)

Paulina's assertion that girls don't 'need' treats allows her to eschew taste as part of female appetite while privileging this feature of hunger for men. When Paulina doesn't eat at the beginning of her stay Mrs Bretton describes the phenomenon in terms which emphasise her rejection of flavour rather than of food itself, telling Lucy that she 'tastes nothing', rather than

that she doesn't eat (14). Her enduring memory of Paulina, however, is as a deliverer of food to Graham. 'Have you forgotten how you would come to my elbow and touch my sleeve', she reminds her, once they are reunited in Villette, 'with the whisper, "Please, ma'am, something good for Graham – a little marmalade, or honey, or jam?"' (406).

Given sugar's association with sex in the novel, Paulina's denial of her physical pleasures is also implicitly a suppression of her own sexual feelings, but she also exploits sugar's capacity to suggest sexuality. The most detailed conversation between Paulina and Graham when they are reacquainted as adults in Villette calls to mind the structure of their previous encounters, since like them it is premised on an exchange of sweet food. However, crucially, this new scenario distinguishes itself from old patterns since it turns around Paulina asking Graham to give her something sweet, and rather than using her denial of sugar to demonstrate lack of physicality in the episode, instead Paulina indicates the depth of her newly awakened sexual desires through her appetite for it. In the episode Paulina asks Graham to share with her some of his 'old October', a particularly strong type of ale. The passage recalls her childlike qualities at the same time as drawing attention to her sexual maturity.

"I should like a little," said Paulina, looking up; "I never had any 'old October:' is it sweet?"

"Perilously sweet," said Graham.

She continued to look up exactly with the countenance of a child that longs for some prohibited dainty. At last the Doctor relented, took it down, and indulged himself in the gratification of letting her taste from his hand; his eyes, always expressive in the revelation of pleasurable feelings, luminously and smilingly avowed that it *was* a gratification; and he prolonged it by so regulating the position of the cup that only a drop at a time could reach the rosy, sipping lips by which its brim was courted.

"A little more – a little more," said she, petulantly touching his hand with her forefinger, to make him incline the cup more generously and yieldingly. "It smells of spice and sugar, but I can't taste it; your wrist is so stiff, and you are so stingy." (404; author's emphasis)

Despite Graham's submission to Paulina, granting her a taste of the illicit beverage, she rejects it as 'anything but sweet [...] [y]our old October was only desirable while forbidden' (404).

Sweetness is able to show Paulina's amenability to the physical requirements of marriage and

motherhood while simultaneously allowing her to demonstrate the denial of bodily appetites she must ultimately be expected to maintain according to models of respectable femininity, as represented by Lucy and Mrs Bretton in the passage, who, we are told, ‘wouldn’t approve’ (404) of the beverage (drawing an apt parallel between this event and Mrs Bretton’s former disapproval of ‘sweet cake at tea’). The episode allows Paulina to demonstrate, if not her outright denial of physicality – forms of which are associated with good social and physical health in the novel – then an ability to self-regulate which will ensure that her sexuality remains within socially acceptable bourgeois limits, yet is also reminiscent of the discipline and denial of anorexia.

Paulina’s reactions to sugar allow her to negotiate the otherwise irreconcilable demands of idealised femininity with its dual emphasis on both reproductive health and sexual abstinence. In many ways these conflicting impulses are part of a wider structure of ambiguity in the novel which calls into question the moral distinctions Brontë appears to be making between socially acceptable eating and physicality on the one hand, and the sensual self-indulgence of female pleasure on the other. Throughout *Villette*, contradictory accounts emerge and are repeatedly left unresolved. ‘The reader is requested to note a seeming contradiction in the two views which have been given of Graham Bretton – the public and the private’, Lucy relates: ‘[b]oth portraits are correct’ (281-2), while Paul’s physiognomic examination of Lucy delivers an equally inconclusive result. ‘Bad or good?’ Madame Beck wants to know, to which he responds that Lucy character consists ‘without doubt’, ‘[o]f each kind’ (91). The ‘science’ of physiognomy – the study of faces – was popular in the Victorian era, and is another instance of how outward appearance becomes representative of inner worth in the novel.⁷¹

In a similar display of ambiguity, although Brontë seems to privilege Paulina’s faithful rendition of the ideal qualities of Victorian womanhood – self-discipline, spirituality, and a

⁷¹ For a thorough discussion of Charlotte Brontë’s interaction with physiognomy see Sally Shuttleworth, *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian Psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 57-70.

lack of physicality – the portrait is complicated by the parody she performs on Paulina elsewhere. For early reviewers the character was, as Kate Millett describes her, ‘the golden one, the perfect woman’,⁷² and they lamented the fact that, as one anonymous review in the *Athenaeum* put it, ‘the narrator steps into the part of heroine [and] we are once again invited to follow the struggles and sufferings of a solitary woman’.⁷³ But Brontë felt the portrait of Paulina to be a failure, admitting that ‘the fault lies in its wanting the germ of the real’.⁷⁴ When she initially appears in the novel as a child Lucy compares her to a doll (10, 20), and on their becoming reacquainted in Villetle, her first encounter with the adult Paulina is with her reflection in a mirror. Both of these instances draw attention to Paulina’s disembodied quality and her lack of substantiality as a character. Crimsworth finds the idea of marrying a doll in *The Professor* repellent – ‘a pretty doll [...] might do well enough for the honey-moon – but when passion cooled, how dreadful to find a lump of wax and wood laid in my bosom’.⁷⁵ Elsewhere, Paulina’s attempts to personify idealised femininity are presented in highly satirical terms. Lucy views her efforts to wait on Graham as disruptive: ‘[i]n his absence she was a still personage, but with him the most officious, fidgety little body possible’ (31-2); ‘[c]andidly speaking, I thought her a little busy-body’ (19). Ginevra also calls Paulina a ‘conceited doll’, and tells Lucy that she ‘played’ at being hostess (386). Such portraits of Paulina, as a doll and a child, undermine her position as the ‘perfect woman’, or at least suggest that contemporary cultural ideals of femininity both infantilise and objectify.

Throughout *Villette* Brontë sets up a comparison between Paulina and Ginevra which contrasts them in terms of their eating habits, body shapes and moral worth, yet they are also linked by the role they both cast Lucy in as confidante and by their competition for Graham’s affection. Graham’s rejection of Ginevra for Paulina seems to restore the moral structure the

⁷² Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1969), p. 142.

⁷³ Anonymous review of *Villette* in the *Athenaeum*, 12 February 1853, in *The Brontës: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Allott, p. 188.

⁷⁴ Barker, *The Brontës*, p. 709.

⁷⁵ Brontë, *The Professor*, p. 108.

novel appears to privilege, yet through subtle hints Brontë continues to question this hierarchy, figuring an alternative discourse in which Ginevra is ‘a sort of heroine’ (222). In the end Brontë closes off Paulina’s narrative with a conventional, if lukewarm, portrayal of her future: ‘[s]he kept her husband’s love, she aided in his progress – of his happiness she was the corner stone’ (632). It is, in other words, the expected denouement for the ‘perfect woman’, whereas Brontë instead seems to relish mocking conventional expectations when it comes to her portrayal of Ginevra Fanshawe’s future life. ‘In winding up Miss Fanshawe’s memoirs, the reader will no doubt expect to hear that she came finally to bitter expiation of her youthful levities’, Brontë writes. However, far from bitter, Ginevra’s portrayal rather seems to illustrate the directive that she ‘ever stuck to the substantial’ (689). The account of her subsequent career is less sentimental than realistic. ‘[S]he got on’, Lucy concludes, ‘suffering as little as any human being I have ever known’ (691). Ginevra is also the better friend to Lucy, continuing to write to her long after she gets married. While the portraits of Ginevra and Paulina both prove to be inconclusive, Brontë resists succumbing to conventional understandings of women’s relationship to food. In her portrayal of Lucy Snowe’s appetite for sugary food, however, she goes further, proposing an entirely different model of female hunger.

‘Every Excess is Injurious’: Lucy’s Moderate Consumption of Sugar

Despite the obvious differences in the ways that Paulina and Ginevra relate to sugar, for both of them it is the epitome of unhealthy and excessive appetites. However, Brontë posits an alternative discourse of sugar in her portrait of Lucy, one which emphasises the health benefits of the foodstuff. As I have already pointed out, Lucy is one of the most voracious consumers of sugar in the novel and relies heavily on a gustatory vocabulary in which sweetness plays a vital role. Lucy’s hunger equates to wellbeing in *Villette*, whereas her lack of appetite indicates both

poor physical and psychological health. Within this structure her cravings for sugary food become connected to a wider discourse of health, in which physical, emotional, and social factors are interconnected. Throughout *Villette*, Lucy eats at times when she feels contented: indeed weight is as much shorthand for her state of mind as it comes to mean physical health for Brontë, as I have shown in the previous discussion of the word ‘fat’ in her letters. ‘Picture me then idle, basking, plump, and happy’, Lucy intones by means of filling in some of the gaps in her autobiographical account at the beginning of the story, an image which nevertheless fails to disguise her no doubt very real hardships (46). She feels ‘healthy hunger’ (66) on escaping the confines of her rigid employer Miss Marchmont, and, recovering from a nervous illness later in the novel, under the supervision of her godmother Mrs Bretton, experiences ‘a craving for nourishment’ (245) not unconnected to her relief at having been rescued by friends: ‘[f]ood or drink never pleased me so well as when it came through her hands’ (257). Psychological pain, on the other hand, is accompanied by loss of appetite. Lucy ends her service with Miss Marchmont, during which ‘we could not bring half an appetite between us’ (66), looking ‘not [...] well, but on the contrary, thin, haggard, and hollow-eyed’ (57), whereas her attendance on the nameless disabled girl she is left to look after in the Pensionnat she describes as depriving her ‘often of the power and inclination to swallow a meal’ (220).

When Lucy is hungry, however, it is for sugary food. Confined in the attic on the day of Madame Beck’s birthday celebrations she grows ‘excessively hungry’ thinking about the cakes and other party food just then being consumed below in the garden.

Now I thought of the collation, which doubtless they were just then devouring in the garden far below. (I had seen in the vestibule a basketful of small *pâtés à la crème*, than which nothing in the whole range of cookery seemed to me better). A *pâté*, or a square of cake, it seemed to me would come very *apropos*; and as my relish for these dainties increased, it began to appear somewhat hard that I should pass my holiday, fasting and in prison. (189; author’s emphasis)

Her desire for the food is sated when, on releasing her from the attic, Paul immediately understands which sweet treats she is craving. ‘How he guessed that I should like a *petit pâté à*

la crème I cannot tell’ (190; author’s emphasis) she wonders. Paul himself fetches the longed for snack which she eats ‘[w]ith considerable willingness’, ‘keeping the *petit pâté* till the last, as a *bonne bouche*’ (191; author’s emphasis). The incident is the beginning of a series of exchanges in which, as I have mentioned earlier, Lucy and Paul share sweet food – not least because Paul regularly leaves gifts of chocolate comfits in Lucy’s desk. His violation of this private interior supports other instances in the novel in which the physical pleasure of sugary food is evocative of sexual licence. Lucy pretends not to notice the sweets, but the birthday present she gives Paul – a hand-made case in which to keep his own chocolate supply – implies that she encourages his advances.

At other points in the text Lucy gives sugary food to Paul, and their reciprocal exchange of these gifts allows her to express an appetite of her own. He demands that she give him chocolate on ensconcing her in her new apartments at the end of the novel, and another time she fetches him baked apples: a recipe Brontë specifically describes as containing sugar. Lucy brings Paul the dessert after he has shared his own lunch with her, a brioche, which is a kind of sweet bread, made with butter, eggs and flour.

He had now finished his half of the brioche: feeling sure that on so trifling a fragment he could not have satisfied his appetite, as indeed I had not appeased mine, and inhaling the fragrance of baked apples afar from the refectory, I ventured to enquire whether he did not also perceive that agreeable odour. He confessed that he did. I said if he would let me out by the garden-door, and permit me just to run across the court, I would fetch him a plateful; and added that I believed they were excellent, as Goton had a very good method of baking, or rather stewing fruit, putting in a little spice, sugar, and a glass or two of vin blanc – might I go?

“Petite gourmande!” said he, smiling. “I have not forgotten how pleased you were with the *pâté à la crème* I once gave you, and you know very well, at this moment, that to fetch the apples for me will be the same as getting them for yourself. Go, then, but come back quickly.” (514)

In *Modern Cooking for Private Families* (1845), Eliza Acton opines that brioche is one of the most unwholesome types of food available. ‘[M]ore illness is caused by habitual indulgence in the richer and heavier kinds of cake than would easily be credited by persons who have given no attention to the subject’, she claims: ‘[a]mongst those which have the worst effects are

almond, and plum *pound* cakes, as they are called; all varieties of the *brioche* and such others as contain a large quantity of butter and eggs'.⁷⁶ Acton's representation of brioche as one of the 'richer and heavier' types of cake contradicts Lucy's disingenuous concern that Paul cannot have satisfied his appetite 'on so trifling a fragment' – the brioche may be small, but it is rich and filling.

Paul's depiction of Lucy as a '[p]etite gourmande' undermines her high-minded intellectual justifications for sampling the dish and allies her instead with the petit pâté à la crème through the use of the word 'petit' to describe them both. The episode seems to link Lucy with the other descriptions in the novel I have mentioned where women are compared to food. However, unlike these previous instances, Lucy is aligned with food that she wants to eat, as opposed to becoming the food that men want to eat: as Paul makes clear, she is fetching the baked apples for herself, not for him. Normally, such a desire would only be socially acceptable were it to be in connection with providing food for a man, as in Paulina and Graham's relationship, which is based on Paulina fetching food for Graham but not eating it herself. Instead, Lucy exhibits her own needs, and her desire for sugar shows they are bodily as well as emotional. Not satisfied even after the rich brioche, Lucy craves further forms of sweetness.

The idea that Lucy's needs are grounded in the body is strengthened in *Villette* by imagery in which food, and especially sweet food, becomes a central metaphor for her emotional feelings. '[I]t was all of sweetness in life I had to look for' (384), she notes as she waits to hear from friends, while elsewhere she describes how her 'want of companionship maintained in my soul the cravings of a most deadly famine' (221). To be lonely or dissatisfied is, for Lucy, to be hungry, while sweet tastes signify happiness and fulfilment. Letters, which offer Lucy a release from life at the boarding school, are frequently compared to food in the

⁷⁶ Acton, *Modern Cooking for Private Families*, p. 447; author's emphases.

novel. In particular, Lucy's thoughts about her correspondence with Graham are articulated in gustatory imagery, the subtext of which is her unacknowledged love for him. When she first receives a letter from him, she contrasts her receipt of it to her previous state of mind, which had been gloomy and sad, returning to the Pensionnat reluctantly after spending the holidays with Graham and his mother. Then she found brief conciliation in the temporary oblivion of sleep, an escape from painful emotions which she connects to the idea of eating as psychological sustenance, and through which sweetness signifies a peculiar sense of comfort. 'My hunger has this good angel appeased with food, sweet and strange' (329), Lucy ventures, figuring sleep as a blessing because it has allowed her to transcend her problems. The image is enduring because she returns to it later when it is contrasted with the 'substantial, satisfying' meat of Graham's letter:

I held in my hand a morsel of real solid joy [...] not a mess of that manna I drearily eulogised awhile ago – which, indeed, at first melts on the lips with an unspeakable and preternatural sweetness, but which, in the end, our souls fully loathe; longing deliriously for natural and earth-grown food, wildly praying Heaven's Spirits to reclaim their own spirit-dew and essence – an aliment divine, but for mortals deadly. It was neither sweet hail, nor small coriander-seed – neither slight wafer, nor luscious honey, I had lighted on; it was the wild savoury mess of the hunter, nourishing and salubrious meat, forest-fed or dessert-reared, fresh, healthful, and life-sustaining. (342)

The reference to 'manna' is ostensibly an allusion to Exodus 16:31, when God dropped manna (tasting of 'wafers made with honey') from the sky to the children of Israel who were starving in the wilderness, yet it also recalls Lucy's ostensibly divine encounter from earlier in the chapter, and the inadequacy of that imaginary sweetness to satisfy her.⁷⁷

Yet as much as the idea of sweetness as an unsatisfactory substitute is reinforced in the passage it is also undermined in the novel in general by competing versions of gustatory imagery concerning sweetness which both complicate and contradict the distinction between 'real solid joy' and insubstantial sweetness. Elsewhere Lucy compares Graham's letter to a 'sweet bubble – of real honey-dew' (350), making the differences she sets up between

⁷⁷ See Brontë, *Villette*, ed. Cooper, p. 578, n21.

‘healthful’ meat and ‘preternatural’ sweetness far hazier. Ultimately the ‘food’ that Graham provides proves unsatisfactory, as the other references to Lucy’s hunger as she waits for his letters bear out. Paul, on the other hand, supplies letters that are ‘real food that nourished, living water that refreshed’ (713), as opposed to the merely ‘real solid joy’ of Graham’s communications, as a phrase itself paradoxical. Paul’s attack on Lucy earlier in the novel and claim that she would ‘snatch at a draught of sweet poison, and spurn wholesome bitters with disgust’ condemns sweetness on the same basis that Lucy rejects it in favour of Graham’s ‘salubrious meat’, for its distortive, unnatural quality, yet their joint opposition to the idea of sweetness in an aesthetic sense isn’t borne out by their actions – they both consistently favour sweet food in the text. Metaphors of hunger in the novel emphasise Lucy’s need for tangible material support such as Paul eventually provides for her, in terms of an income and lodging. As if to underline this, Lucy’s ‘crust’ of correspondence from Graham is as perishable as the actual food it is compared to. Brontë sets up a direct correlation between this fantasy food and Lucy’s physical state, in which its imaginary nature finds a literal reflection in her emaciation. The ‘food’ from Graham ‘[does] not nourish’ Lucy: ‘I pined on it, and got thin as a shadow’ (384).

The positive relationship *Villette* sets up between sugar consumption and health is corroborated by contemporary medical theory to which, as I will show, Charlotte Brontë had access. Health and medicine were important topics for the family due in part to the early deaths of all seven of the children and their mother, many of which were preceded by long and painful illnesses.⁷⁸ ‘One need look no further than the grim facts of Charlotte Brontë’s own life’, Miriam Bailin has argued, ‘to account for the ubiquity in her novels of states of fever, debility,

⁷⁸ For a full list of illnesses the family suffered from and their causes of death see Barker, *The Brontës*. Charlotte is widely believed to have died from the complications of a late pregnancy following her marriage to Arthur Bell Nicholls in 1854. She died in 1855 at the age of 38: see Barker, pp. 769-72.

hypochondria, and morbid decline'.⁷⁹ The family owned two medical manuals: *Domestic Medicine* (1769) by William Buchan and *Modern Domestic Medicine* (1826) by Thomas John Graham, of which they had a first edition. This latter work is likely to have been the inspiration behind Charlotte Brontë's choice of name for Dr John Graham Bretton in *Villette*. A copy of Graham's *Modern Domestic Medicine* remains at the Brontë Parsonage Museum in Haworth, its well-worn pages and plentiful annotations testament to its frequent use. It was, according to Sally Shuttleworth, the Reverend Brontë's 'medical bible': in naming her own doctor character after the 'treasured medical tome', Brontë was, Shuttleworth argues, 'giving embodiment to the system of medical surveillance which had governed her own life'.⁸⁰

Brontë's letters often meditate on the subject of health and are full of references both to her own well-being and that of others around her. She was well underway with *Shirley* when Branwell fell ill in 1848, but finished writing it only after all three of her remaining siblings had died within a year of each other.⁸¹ By the time *Shirley* was published and she had begun to write *Villette*, Brontë was an only child, and concerns about sickness and ill health pervade the novel.⁸² As well as Lucy's illnesses, Graham's doctoring is a constant presence: the culmination of worries about health which Brontë had frequently expressed in other works. Caroline's long illness dominates much of *Shirley* while Jane is taken ill twice in *Jane Eyre*, both times following on from traumatic incidents: once at Gateshead when she faints after having been confined to the 'red room' and again after she flees Thornfield. Frances's fears in *The Professor* that she will 'fall ill and be unable to pay my way' are an apt anticipation of

⁷⁹ Miriam Bailin, *The Sickroom in Victorian Fiction: The Art of Being Ill* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 48. See also Beth Torgenson, *Reading the Brontë Body: Disease, Desire, and the Constraints of Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005) for more information about Charlotte Brontë's relationship to health and its effect on her writing.

⁸⁰ Shuttleworth, *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian Psychology*, p. 222.

⁸¹ Branwell died in September 1848, followed by Emily in December. Anne died in May 1849. Juliet Barker records that Charlotte had written two thirds of *Shirley* by the time that Branwell was taken ill but afterwards barely worked on it during the period of Emily and Anne's illnesses. See Barker, *The Brontës*, p. 600.

⁸² For a detailed description of Charlotte Brontë's composition of *Villette* see the Introduction to *Villette*, ed. Rosengarten and Smith.

Lucy's sickness in *Villette*, brought on by the physical and emotional exhaustion of carrying out her duties.⁸³ Significantly, both times Lucy recovers in the novel follow her release from an oppressive employer (Miss Marchmont and then later Madame Beck). Her happy ending is, like Frances's, precluded by a release from paid employment in order to work for herself.

It is testament to the popularity of the Brontë's main medical textbook, *Modern Domestic Medicine* (first published in 1826), that it had run to nine editions by 1844. Sugar appears in the diet section of the book, where it is listed as a condiment:

Sugar is nutritious, antiseptic, and laxative. In moderate quantities it is wholesome, but being very fermentable, is apt, in some constitutions, to produce a flatulency, heat, and thirst. Rickety children, chlorotic girls, hysterical women, and all those who are troubled with acidity and weakness in the stomach and bowels, should use it sparingly; and those who are anxious to preserve their teeth white and sound, should not make free with it.⁸⁴

Although the issue of moderation was a common feature of nineteenth century diet and medical advice, Graham's injunctions focus unduly on the need for regulating sugar intake; and the extract suggests that this is because the product is volatile. Sugar is 'fermentable', a label which implies unstable and unpredictable behaviour, and it produces ungovernable effects on the body, such as flatulence and excessive heat and thirst. It is especially unsuitable for rickety children, chlorotic girls, hysterical women, and all those with existing stomach complaints because these groups' constitutions are the most out of balance, and therefore they have the greatest need to regulate their bodies.

However, the passage presents sugar as erratic only when taken in excess. When consumed responsibly, sugar is connected with positive health implications, both in terms of diet – it is 'nutritious' and 'wholesome' – and medicine, its effects being antiseptic and laxative. Since the disadvantages Graham stresses are mostly associated with weak and unwell people, sugar appears advantageous to healthy people, with the important qualification that it

⁸³ Brontë, *The Professor*, p. 191.

⁸⁴ Thomas John Graham, *Modern Domestic Medicine* (London: Simpkin and Marshall, 1826), p. 146; author's emphasis.

should be consumed only in moderation. His injunction that sugar is bad for the teeth is repeated in the family's other medical textbook, *Domestic Medicine* by William Buchan, which continued to be influential well into the Victorian period.⁸⁵ Buchan refers to sugar in a section on toothaches, in which he advises that sugar and other sweetened products are harmful to the teeth when taken in '[g]reat quantities'.⁸⁶ The view was already a popular one in the mid-nineteenth century. In *The Physiology of Common Life*, published in 1860, George Henry Lewes counters these claims by suggesting that sugar strengthens the bones and teeth by transporting phosphate of lime to them. However, since this is as part of a longer extract aimed at praising the physiological benefits of the product, his comments are perhaps less significant for their departure from contemporary dental advice than for their adherence to a general medical belief that sugar had positive health benefits.⁸⁷

Lewes includes a section on sugar in *The Physiology of Common Life* in which he conforms to Graham's main advice about the food – that it is nutritious and wholesome when consumed in moderate quantities. He echoes Graham's opinion that it is apt to produce flatulence, and argues that this is especially the case in dyspeptics. Since dyspepsia is another condition (like the hysteria and chlorosis which Graham cites) which has both physical and mental symptoms – it can mean either having indigestion or being bad tempered – Lewes attributes the same kind of moral scale to the consumption of sugar as Graham does, a scale which privileges wellness over ill health both in emotional and physical terms. Despite Lewes's insistence on a scientific analysis of the benefits of sugar his final resort comprises a philosophical defence: '[A] surer argument is founded on the instincts of mankind', he argues,

⁸⁵ Shuttleworth, *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian Psychology*, p. 79.

⁸⁶ William Buchan, *Domestic Medicine: or, a Treatise on the Prevention and Cure of Diseases*, 2nd edn (London: W. Strahan and T. Cadell, 1772), p. 454.

⁸⁷ George Henry Lewes, *The Physiology of Common Life*, 2 vols. (Leipzig: Tauchnitz, 1860), i, 96.

‘[i]f we all so eagerly eat sugar, it is because there is a natural relation between it and our organism’.⁸⁸

Lewes expanded on these ideas when he contributed to a survey of literature and science published in 1863 in the *Cornhill* (of which he was an editor at the time).

Puddings and fruit tarts are not, therefore, simply flatteries of the palate, but digestive agents [...] The reviewer alludes to the fondness of artisans for confectionery, and of patients just discharged from the hospital asking for ‘sweets’ in preference to ‘substantial food,’ as examples of a correct instinct. There is no doubt that in children, in whom the requirements of growth call for a rapid and efficient transformation of food into tissue, the demand for sweets is very imperious; and parents should understand that the jam-pot will diminish the butcher’s bill, and increase the amount of nutrition extracted from beef and mutton.⁸⁹

The assumptions Lewes makes about sugar being especially beneficial to the sick replicate his argument in *The Physiology of Common Life* about how the desire for sugar is testament to its usefulness. This focus on the health benefits of sugar demonstrates how far conceptions of the product had changed over the first half of the nineteenth century. While the blood sugar abolitionists condemned sugar as an unnecessary luxury, mid-nineteenth-century medical writers identify it as a vital part of a healthy diet, a view anticipated by the arguments of moderate abolitionists, who presented sugar as a staple of modern life. Perhaps more importantly, Lewes’s views find a counterpart in Buchan, who also recommends sugar as part of the invalid’s diet.⁹⁰

Lewes’s particular emphasis on the value of sugar as a digestive agent illustrates another important way in which sugar was understood physiologically in the period, which Graham hints at when he holds sugar responsible for flatulence. An issue of *All The Year Round* from 1861 claims that sugar is ‘not only a condiment; it is a most important article of diet, and aid to digestion’.⁹¹ The anonymous author of ‘Sweets’ concurs with Graham that sugars are fermentable, and in line with Lewes lists a number of physiological roles for them in

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ [Lewes], ‘Our Survey of Literature and Science’, *Cornhill* vii (1863), 132-44 (p. 141-2).

⁹⁰ Buchan, *Domestic Medicine*, p. 197.

⁹¹ Anonymous, ‘Sweets’, p. 249.

the body, including supplying the carbon necessary for breathing, and helping to produce bile. He echoes Lewes's opinion that sugar's effect on phosphate of lime is an aid in bone formation and conforms to the popular view that sugar was bad for the teeth. Bizarrely, however, he claims that this is only true for white people, based on the evidence of factory workers employed in British sugar refineries. Plantation slaves, however, he maintains, enjoyed 'proverbially fine white sound teeth': a claim which naturalises their racial suitability for slavery.⁹² Like James F. W. Johnston in *The Chemistry of Common Life*, the writer of 'Sweets' presents the experience of slaves as evidence of his views on sugar, indicating that the product was still closely linked to slavery in the popular imagination in the mid-nineteenth century. As I have discussed, sugar is linked rhetorically to slavery in terms of gendered power relations in *Villette*, but the primary focus in the novel is always on the consumption rather than the production of sugar. The predominant discourse of sugar in the text is one which draws on contemporary medical theory and which emphasises the positive connection between sugar and good health. This can clearly be seen when Lucy's craving for sugary food coincides with her physical and emotional recoveries: although Graham's *Modern Domestic Medicine* recommends that sugar be administered only to the well, Brontë, like Lewes and Buchan, extends this account to include the convalescent.

The paradoxical position sugar seems to occupy in *Villette* as an indicator of both poor moral and good physical health is resolved in the context of a medical literature which values sugar only when consumed in moderation. Both Buchan and Graham emphasise the importance of a regular diet, and above all one which is temperate. In Buchan's words: '[u]nwholesome food, and irregularities in diet, occasion many diseases [...] Every intention, in the cure of diseases, may be answered by diet alone'.⁹³ Graham is equally strict. Of the two errors he feels people are most likely to make surrounding food, concerning quality and

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Buchan, *Domestic Medicine*, p. 76.

quantity, quantity is in his opinion the most detrimental. ‘Every excess is injurious’, he writes, and may even produce ‘the most serious and fatal disorders’.⁹⁴ As Bruce Haley has shown, Victorian conceptions of health were inseparable from the idea of wholeness and the well-regulated body. Furthermore, these medical theories placed great emphasis on external factors such as hygiene, diet, sleep, and air quality.⁹⁵

In order to maintain this balance, Victorians were under extraordinary pressure to regulate their bodies through what they ate. Brontë, for one, saw diet in medical terms. ‘During the week you were here at Haworth’, she wrote to Ellen Nussey in 1852, while she was composing *Villette*, ‘I did myself harm by eating indiscriminately – but I am resolved to be more careful now – and indeed I have no alternative if I wish to be well’.⁹⁶ Women in particular were urged by contemporary medical tomes to pay the closest attention to diet. In *The Philosophy of Female Health* (1845), Samuel Mason argues that:

[i]nattention to diet, to air, or to exercise is a cause which, in the female, acts more especially upon the uterine functions [to which Mason attributes the majority of women’s health complaints]. We know that we can often trace a number of female disorders of a very lamentable description to confinement, sedentary occupations, or to scanty unwholesome diet.⁹⁷

Mason’s counsel often concerns diet: he recommends (in common with much other nineteenth-century dietary advice) that it should be light, nutritious, and well-regulated. In the context of contemporary medical theory which emphasised moderation, especially in relation to women and especially concerning diet, the anxieties that *Villette* demonstrates in relation to sugar – particularly concerning Ginevra and Paulina – could well be resolved in the example set by Lucy’s moderate intake, which, since she mostly receives sugary food from Paul, is also regulated by male cultural authority.

⁹⁴ Graham, *Modern Domestic Medicine*, pp. 130-31.

⁹⁵ Bruce Haley, *The Healthy Body and Victorian Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), p. 17.

⁹⁶ Charlotte Brontë to Ellen Nussey, 24 January 1852, in *Letters*, iii, 12. In another letter written to Ellen the previous year, Charlotte again mentions diet in relation to health: ‘I shall go to London with nothing to boast of in looks – however careful I am in diet’; Brontë to Nussey, 22 May 1851, *Letters*, ii, 620-21.

⁹⁷ Samuel Mason, *The Philosophy of Female Health* (London: H. Hughes, 1845), p. 62.

In a novel in which appetite becomes the main metaphor for the protagonist's health and wellbeing, Lucy's cravings for sugar transform the foodstuff's other roles. It becomes allied with her recovery and successful integration into bourgeois social codes, rather than, as in the discourse surrounding Paulina and Ginevra, being emblematic of some wider cultural failing in connection with femininity. The positive implications of Lucy's consumption point to a healthier understanding of women: one in which physical, sexual, and emotional needs are not anathema to their ability to perform marital and maternal responsibilities, but play a crucial part in social and political cohesion, a discourse that is constructed by the positive, physical role of sugar in the text and its connection to health. As Miriam Bailin has shown, Brontë persistently presents illness as 'a register of deviance or alienation from social and personal norms'.⁹⁸ Bailin's argument is confirmed by the changes to Lucy's social status in the text. Her engagement to Paul, preceded by a courtship based exclusively on exchanges of sugary food and bitter words, is the text's ultimate confirmation of the social value of women's physicality. In consuming sugar, Lucy adheres to the advice that Brontë would have read in Graham and Buchan's medical manuals which stress the necessity of consuming sugar moderately, while the way in she regulates her intake removes it from previous associations which connect consumption of sugary food to other unbridled appetites. On receiving the *petit pâté à la crème* she craves on her release from the attic, Lucy sets clear boundaries to her desire for sweet food. Her feast is '[t]o my great joy [...] limited to coffee and cake: I had feared wine and sweets, which I did not like' (190). Lucy's desire for the moderately, but not overtly, sweet substances indicates control over her body and associates sugar with other qualities linked to ideal femininity, such as self-discipline, but which more commonly arise in contexts where women deny themselves food.

⁹⁸ Bailin, *The Sickroom in Victorian Fiction*, p. 48.

The final meal Paul and Lucy share takes place in Lucy's new rooms, and consists of chocolate, rolls, fresh fruit and salad: 'what we both liked better than a feast' (705). The fare is self-evidently simple, yet healthy, including a degree of sweetness alongside fresh fruit and salad and bread for sustenance. In *Modern Cooking for Private Families*, Acton describes such a meal as a typical dessert: '[f]or common occasions, a few dishes of really fresh fruit tastefully disposed and embedded in large green leaves, will be all that is required for a plain summer or autumn dessert'.⁹⁹ In this sense, Lucy's confession that the food is 'what we both liked better than a feast' literally means that dessert is the food they both like best, in common with their other meal in the schoolroom which – comprising of a brioche followed by baked apples – effectively consists of two different types of pudding. However, since neither meal is excessive, Lucy and Paul avoid the associations of sugary food with greediness.

Just as Brontë conforms to a medical discourse which prescribes that sugar should only be consumed in moderation, so the sexual appetites which it is capable of representing are only healthy in *Villette* within the bourgeois social norms of marriage. Lucy's eventual engagement to Paul legitimises both their courtship and the sugary food which facilitated it. Anna Krugovoy Silver has argued that the importance of the food Paul and Lucy share being sweet lies in the ability of sugary food to represent sexual desires, and that once the couple become engaged at the end of the novel these feelings are transferred to Paul's correspondence and this becomes the 'real food that nourished' Lucy. For Silver, sweetness as a taste is merely representative of other, more legitimate, emotional responses: the 'sweetness of shared love' is, Silver argues, what Lucy is really craving when she desires sugary food.¹⁰⁰ Yet as I have shown, the involvement of sugar in an alternative discourse of health provides a context in which sugar plays a far more meaningful and material role in the novel, offering a means of legitimising Lucy's bodily desires.

⁹⁹ Acton, *Modern Cooking*, p. 471.

¹⁰⁰ Silver, *Victorian Literature and the Anorexic Body*, p. 103.

As the 1850s drew to a close, positive views of sugar as an active ingredient of a healthy lifestyle were being replaced by suspicions concerning shop-brought food and sugar in particular. The danger of food adulteration, including that of sugar, became a key public health issue during the 1850s, meaning that the physical constitution of sugar could no longer be taken at face value. As in the abolitionist literature of the 1790s, sugar again came to signify something unpleasant in disguise, as the spectre of adulteration increasingly gained a hold on the popular consciousness. This concern affected the way in which literary writers discussed sugar and sweetness, both of which increasingly came to be used as metaphors for the deceptive and degraded aspects of contemporary culture. In many ways *Villette* represents a high point in the cultural reception of sugar: it marks the first time it became, as a mass-market commodity, part of a positive discourse of health. Brontë's conclusions about sugar remain, however, ambiguous, and they reflect wider ambiguities which continue throughout the century. Sugar ends up as an unstable sign in a novel which consistently deals in uncertainty: at disparate times it flags up questions of feminine morality, issues of health, or discourses of tyranny and oppression. But above all Brontë uses sugar as a literary trope to transcend the dominant conception of female appetite established in the mid-nineteenth century, and to draw attention to valid emotional needs for women that are rooted in physical desires.

Chapter 3

Caterers for the Public Taste: Sugar and the Literary Marketplace

In 1863 William Banting, an overweight undertaker, published a diet manual which advised people to cut down on sugar if they wanted to lose weight. His *Letter on Corpulence* became an instant success as readers identified with Banting's embarrassing problem. 'Of all the parasites that affect humanity I do not know of, nor can I imagine, any more distressing than that of obesity', he discloses, citing public 'sneers' as a chief reason for his resolution to lose weight.¹ As a result of Banting's *Letter* dieting enjoyed a boom in the 1860s. To be fat began to be seen as old-fashioned, while the popularity of Banting's diet was confirmed when the term 'banting' became a common way to refer to dieting.² Banting named sugar as only one of a number of articles including bread, milk, butter, beer, and potatoes which he felt had caused his obesity. He believed that although these goods could be beneficial in youth they were 'prejudicial' in advanced life, and therefore he recommended that those over a certain age who had weight problems should avoid them.³ However, as Banting warms up to his theme, he progressively puts an increasing focus on sugar (or 'saccharine matter') as the 'great moving cause' of obesity.

My impression from the experiments I have tried on myself of late is, that saccharine matter is the great moving cause of fatty corpulence. I know that it produces in my individual case increased weight and a large amount of flatulence, and believe, that not only sugar, but all elements tending to create saccharine matter in the process of digestion, should be avoided. I apprehend it will be found in bread, butter, milk, beer, port wine, and champagne; I have not found starchy matter so troublesome as the saccharine, which, I think, largely increases acidity as well as fat.⁴

¹ William Banting, *Letter on Corpulence*, 3rd edn (London: Harrison of London, 1864), pp. 7-8.

² K. Theodore Hoppen, *The Mid-Victorian Generation, 1846-1886* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), p. 347.

³ Banting, *Letter on Corpulence*, p. 17.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

In the 1860s people began to see sugar as a primary cause of fat, perhaps as a result of its becoming more affordable, which meant that consumption rose.⁵ Between the 1850s and the 1860s, sugar changed from being seen as nutritious in moderate quantities to being connected with unhealthy practices, both in a physical and a moral sense. This view of sugar as being bad for you also found expression in the idea of sugariness as damaging to the nation's moral health, which became a popular conceit in debates about reading during the decade. The unhealthiness of sugar became connected to the unhealthiness of certain literature, and sensation fiction in particular. As such the idea of sweetness became implicated in debates about literary quality which were prominent in this period.

As numerous literary critics have shown, the idea of eating was closely connected to the idea of reading throughout the Victorian period. Although many studies do take into account the use of different foods within this larger rhetorical framework, most of this work has not explored the complex role played by specific flavours and tastes. During the 1860s, as debates about the literary value of sensation fiction intensified, imagery which used food to represent moral wholesomeness became more pronounced and at the same time sugar became an important signifier of cultural tastes which were governed by commercial imperatives. 'I often say I am like a pastry-cook', Thackeray told Trollope in 1859, 'the public love the tarts [...] and we must bake and sell them'.⁶ The way in which sugar came to be a particularly potent symbol of this existing discourse surrounding food and reading can be partly explained by its public profile in the period. From the mid 1850s onwards the commodity became involved in a controversial debate about food adulteration in which it was lambasted as one of the most dangerous of shop-brought ingredients. As I will go on to show, this material history – which connected sugar to ill-health, danger, and disguise – affected its figurative representation. In so

⁵ Banting dismisses the criticism that the diet he recommends is too expensive for the poor, with the rebuttal that 'a very poor corpulent man is not so frequently met with, inasmuch as the poor cannot afford the simple inexpensive means for creating fat'. Ibid., p. 41.

⁶ Anthony Trollope, *An Autobiography*, ed. David Skilton (London: Penguin, 1996), p. 91.

doing it tapped into the legacy of the abolition writers who had 70 years earlier first identified the sweet taste of sugar as masking unsavoury secrets about its origins. An article which appeared in *St James's Magazine* in 1862 accused sensation writers of being irresponsible 'caterers for the public taste'.⁷ If sugar represented positive modes of health for Charlotte Brontë in the 1850s, by the 1860s it had become indicative of overindulgence and poor health, both in terms of physical and intellectual consumption.

As Nicholas Daly notes in a recent study about sensation fiction, 'sensation' itself is a term which connotes 'a physiologically based theory of reader/viewer response'.⁸ The fact that debates about sensation literature dominated discussions of cultural degradation in the 1860s made physical vocabularies a key part of this dialogue. Furthermore, as an exclusively shop-bought product that was difficult to bake with, making sugary confections more likely to be ordered in than other dishes, sugar had strong associations as a commercial and mass-produced commodity. 'A commercial atmosphere floats around works of this class', Henry Mansel noted about sensation novels in 1863: '[t]he public wants novels, and novels must be made – so many yards of printed stuff, sensation-pattern, to be ready by the beginning of the season'.⁹ The genre struggled for cultural respectability due to its popular appeal, while issues of class were never far from the surface in the sustained attacks by its detractors. Bradley Deane has even gone so far as to argue that the sensation novel is not so much a subgenre in itself but the product of acute class anxiety.¹⁰ As Daly puts it: '[t]he shrill response in some quarters to sensation drama, sensation novels, sensation songs, sensation paintings, and so on, encoded

⁷ Anonymous, 'The Philosophy of "Sensation"', *St James's Magazine* (1862), in *Varieties of Women's Sensation Fiction: 1855-1890*, ed. Andrew Maunder, 6 vols. (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2004), i, 16-26 (p. 17).

⁸ Nicholas Daly, *Sensation and Modernity in the 1860s* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 4.

⁹ [Henry Mansel], 'Sensation Novels', *Quarterly Review* (1863), in *Varieties of Women's Sensation Fiction*, i, 32-56 (p. 33).

¹⁰ Bradley Deane, *The Making of the Victorian Novelist: Anxieties of Authorship in the Mass Market* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 61.

fears that at a time when political power appeared to be shifting towards the working class, the sphere of culture was not functioning to secure class distinction'.¹¹

Having first considered the extent to which a sugary aesthetic affected debates about literary quality, I will then go on to examine the impact of the scandal of food adulteration on the representation of sugar itself in the period. Other developments, such as the publication of William Banting's diet advice which urged people not to eat sugar, contributed to the sense in which the commodity was linked to bad health during what Andrew Radford has called 'the sensation decade'.¹² The terms on which sugar became known and used figuratively in this period were strongly affected by the circumstances of its material history.

Metaphors of Sugar in Discussions of Popular Taste

Perceptions of popular literature in the mid-nineteenth century were strictly categorized in terms of both gender and class, and sweetness had a role to play in both these configurations. As Pamela Gilbert has put it, 'masculine literature' is 'wholesome physic', but its feminine counterpart consists of 'poisonous sweets'.¹³ What Gilbert refers to is the way in which a discourse of sweetness had become aligned with literature that was seen as low-grade, popular and overwhelmingly feminine in the Victorian period. '[P]opular literary culture emerges in the nineteenth century as this unhealthy, feminine partner to an incompletely differentiated but healthy, masculine culture of which it is the degraded, commodified reflection', she argues.¹⁴ While Gilbert's focus is on the effect of disease and sex as well as eating on representations of the body in fiction, Catherine Sheldrick Ross has argued in more detail for a specific link between low-grade literature and food. In the context of this culinary discourse, which was

¹¹ Daly, *Sensation and Modernity*, pp. 6-7.

¹² Andrew Radford, *Victorian Sensation Fiction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 28.

¹³ Pamela Gilbert, *Disease, Desire, and the Body in Victorian Women's Popular Novels* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 29.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

pervasive in debates about literary culture, the degraded and insubstantial ‘sweetness’ of popular literature was frequently represented through images of sugar. Sheldrick Ross identifies two main metaphors of reading that have historically shaped public views of reading, both of which are particularly in evidence during the nineteenth century. One is reading as a ladder (in which moral and intellectual improvement drives an upward movement on the ladder), and the other is reading as eating. As Sheldrick Ross shows, these two competing metaphors are often intertwined. Quoting the critic Noah Porter, who compared the appetite for fiction to that of the appetite for ‘confectionery and other sweets’ in 1877, she contends that: ‘[i]f reading matter is food, then nourishing food such as the “spare diet of statistics” and “the simple beverage of plain narrative” are up on the ladder of up/down; sugar and “confectionery” are down, as are “poisoned stimulants.”’¹⁵ The link Sheldrick Ross identifies between sugar, poison, and popular literature was prevalent during the period. The idea that sensation fiction in particular ‘poisoned’ the mind was commonplace: in 1863 one reviewer even accused authoress Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s books of diffusing ‘moral poison’.¹⁶

In *The Woman Reader: 1837-1914* Kate Flint cites several examples in which sugary food is implicated in the consumption of poor quality literature. In *Maternal Counsels to a Daughter* (1855), Matilda Pullan compares the appetite for fiction to that of a child for cakes. It must, she argues, ‘be restrained within due bounds, or it will be injurious. No pastry will ever be a proper substitute for a solid joint’.¹⁷ The comparison serves to highlight sugary foods as a flimsy substitute for wholesome, nourishing sustenance, and this contrast occurs throughout the period. ‘Poetry should not form the staple of our reading, any more than sugar-plums of our food’, Lucy Soulsby advises in *Stray Thoughts on Reading* (1895).¹⁸ In another example Flint

¹⁵ Catherine Sheldrick Ross, ‘Metaphors of Reading’, *Journal of Library History, Philosophy and Comparative Literature* xxii (1987), pp. 147-63 (p. 149).

¹⁶ Anonymous, ‘Thackeray and Modern Fiction’, *London Quarterly Review* (1863), in *Varieties of Women’s Sensation Fiction*, i, 76-81 (p. 80).

¹⁷ Kate Flint, *The Woman Reader 1837-1914* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), p. 51.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

gives from 1893, a writer for the journal of the Mother's Union makes a literal comparison between sweet food and popular literature:

The practice of self-indulgence by young women was rather aptly illustrated at the Conference of Schoolmistresses the other day at Southsea, where a speaker described a young woman's idea of a comfortable Saturday morning by saying 'she liked to be in bed with a shilling shocker and a shilling's worth of sweeties.' This is the sort of reckless waste of hard-earned money which can best be arrested by the suggestion in early life of something better worth doing.¹⁹

The writer condemns 'sweeties' in terms very similar to those used by radical abolitionists to attack sugar a century before. Both foodstuffs are figured as pointless luxuries that waste the money and even corrupt the morals of their consumers. As Flint also notices, the writer places equal emphasis on the ingestion of the sugar and the 'shilling shocker' in the passage. The book becomes interchangeable with the 'shilling's worth of sweeties': not only do they cost the same amount but they are also consumed at the same time, suggesting that the same moral weakness accounts for the purchase of both of them.

Another article which appeared in *Woman at Home* in 1896 (and which is also cited by Flint), written by Lady Laura Ridding, also uses food as the framework of its argument, again linking sugary food to popular literature which lacks the merits of other, more 'wholesome' reading:

The strawberry ices of literature glow on every railway book stall in the shape of the lighter magazines, the society and comic papers, fashion journals, sensational stories. These are harmless occasional reading, but a mind glutted with them needs medicine as much as a greedy child after a surfeit of sugar-plums.²⁰

In keeping with the purpose of Flint's book, these examples refer to the unique anxieties associated with women readers, and their writers' willingness to use sugar as the symbol of corrupted literary tastes suggests that these metaphors were closely bound up with questions of gender. As many contemporary commentators noted, sensation fiction – a genre in which women authors were more than usually prominent – was also read largely by women. The

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 50.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 52.

Literary Gazette claimed in 1865 that roughly one fourth of the previous year's novels (the literary form most associated with sensation) 'came from the pen of female writers', while according to an issue of the *Saturday Review* from 1866 'young ladies' made up 'the largest novel-consuming class of the day'.²¹

A little-known sensation novel from the mid 1860s – *Bitter Sweets* (1865) by Joseph Hatton – is an apt example of the way in which images of sugar were used in the period as shorthand for low-grade literature and other forms of devalued sentiment. Ironically, while being itself exactly the kind of sensation fiction criticised by Mansel and others (and unlike many other examples of the genre sadly devoid of literary merit), *Bitter Sweets* uses the same discourse of healthy versus unhealthy literature so effectively utilised by contemporary critics to attack what Hatton perceives as intellectually unwholesome literature. 'Our purpose has been to produce a tale of sweets and bitters, healthy in tone and matter', Hatton states in the Preface to the novel.²² In adopting the same discourse of health that critics used to condemn sensation fiction, Hatton disconnects his own writing from this category and aligns it instead with more elevated and elevating forms of literature. He also draws attention to the continuing flexibility of sweetness as an aesthetic trope. While both sugar and sweetness were associated in the 1860s with the kind of unwholesome literary attributes that were seen as the opposite of Hatton's 'healthy [...] tone and matter', the 'sweets' of his construction draws on an older conception of sweetness as linked to positive moral qualities.

Hatton returns to the motif of sweets and bitters throughout the novel. He uses the terms to mean 'good' and 'bad' respectively: sweetness indicating happy events and bitterness unhappy ones. '[T]houghts which were of the sweet and the bitter' (i, 119); 'sweets which may come again after the bitters' (i, 131); '[w]hat had been his bitters compared to the sweets of

²¹ Anonymous, 'Works of Imagination in 1864', *Literary Gazette* (1865), in *Varieties of Women's Sensation Fiction*, i, 130-33 (p. 131); and Anonymous, 'Novels Past and Present', *Saturday Review* (1866), in *Varieties of Women's Sensation Fiction*, i, 151-6 (p. 153).

²² Joseph Hatton, *Bitter Sweets: A Love Story*, 3 vols. (London: Tinsley Brothers, 1865), i, viii. All subsequent references will be cited in the text.

that blissful time!’ (iii, 210) – Hatton repeats the terms without nuance or qualification. Yet while the concept of sweetness fulfils a traditionally positive role within the novel, Hatton also conforms to the contemporary usage of sugary imagery to represent literary and moral degradation. He separates sugar and sweetness as aesthetic configurations, appearing to see no contradiction between his use of sweetness to demonstrate positive qualities and his interpretation of sugar as a symbol of meretricious worthlessness.

Joseph Hatton wrote fiction prolifically from the time that *Bitter Sweets* was published in 1865. He also engaged in journalism in the period (eventually becoming editor of the *Sunday Times* from 1874-1881) and wrote extensively for the stage before he died in 1907. *Bitter Sweets*, however, is a fairly uninspiring novel. The latest edition in the Bodleian Library, Oxford, is from 1877, suggesting that the book has never been very highly regarded (the first edition in the Bodleian still had its pages uncut before I came to read it). Andrew Maunder, who includes the novel in his ‘Bibliography of Sensation Fiction’, describes the plot economically as: ‘[a] lover murders his rival (or thinks he has)’.²³ The story revolves around several families living in the small seaside town of Helswick. Anna Lee, an heiress, rejects the proposal of local businessman Harry Thornhill and falls in love with his friend, Paul Massey, instead. Less worthy of Anna’s love than Harry, Paul starts an argument while they are sailing which results in Harry falling overboard. When the body fails to be found, Harry is presumed dead and Paul believes that he is responsible for his murder. His terrible secret begins to destroy him, and eventually he dies as a result of the strain – although not before Harry has revealed himself to be alive and restored order to the community. The main subject of the novel seems to be the idea that imprudent romantic choices made when young can have a devastating impact on the lives of all around you, a suitably sensational theme. Anna’s failure to realise Harry’s noble qualities end up, in Hatton’s view, ruining not only his chances of

²³ Maunder, ‘Bibliography of Sensation Fiction’, in *Varieties of Women’s Sensation Fiction*, i, 328.

future happiness, but also, as a result of his supposed murder, those of herself and Paul. This theme is paralleled in the lives of another local family, the Greys, where the mother's flirtations before marriage lead her rejected suitor to pursue a relentless vendetta against her and her new family – eventually persuading her husband to desert her and corrupting their youngest son.

The references to sugar in the novel are strongly linked to debates about class and literature. While Anna's worthy suitor, Harry Thornhill, is unable to speak to her about the true extent of his feelings, he is perfectly able to issue the 'glib poetic extracts' that inspire admiration in women of less sophisticated intellects. Hatton connects the degraded moral and intellectual sensibility of such women, and the devalued literature which caters to it, to sugar in the novel, figuring the person of a 'sugar merchant's daughter' as their dual representative.

Harry could *not* talk to Anna as he could talk to Mr Mountford. Had he cared less about her he might have said many a complimentary trifle, -baits that men throw out to women. Quiet and gravely happy as Harry usually was, many a pretty saying had nevertheless fallen from his lips in the best society in Maryport. He had even gone so far, one day, as to send a sugar merchant's daughter into a flutter of admiration at his apt quotations from Moore and Byron; but Anna Lee occupied in his thoughts a pedestal too high to be assailed with glib poetic extracts, and his love was too deep to be mooted, except in solemn words which Anna never gave him an opportunity to utter. (i, 46-7; author's emphasis)

When Harry decides to abandon his hopes of winning Anna, realising that she loves Paul Massey, Hatton compares the strength of his feelings to those of the sugar merchant's daughter for him, which are seen as so shallow as to be easily overcome. Unlike our hero, who plans to spend the rest of his life mourning his lost love, the sugar merchant's daughter experiences no depth of feeling on finding out that Harry plans to go abroad, her love having always been superficial: '[h]appy sugar merchant's daughter, who hath not told her liking, and will speedily be consoled, with the first beau who offers his hand for thine and the dowry which thy rich father will put into it!' (i, 144). Insincere sentiment is firmly linked to economic greed throughout Hatton's portrayal of the sugar merchant's daughter, and he makes sugar the sign of

both these undesirable qualities, as well as a symbol of poor moral and intellectual standards in general. The fact that the sugar merchant's daughter is never identified by name, only by the social position and profession of her father, confirms the crucial role that sugar plays within a class dynamic.

Hatton distinguishes Harry Thornhill from the crude economic concerns of other characters, including the sugar merchant's daughter and Paul Massey, who pursues Anna for her money. The link between commercial concerns and shallow, romantic fictions raised during the episode of the sugar merchant's daughter is paralleled elsewhere in the novel. A key reason for Anna's preference for Paul over Harry is her weakness for sentimental literature, which Hatton implies has poisoned her better judgement, leading her to fall in love with Paul before she has even met him: 'All that poetry, and romance, and history had taught her to admire in a man seemed to assume definite shape in Harry's school companion, though she had never seen him' (i, 58). Anna falls in love with an idea, not a person. Projecting desirable qualities onto Paul, she fails to notice Harry's true ones. Furthermore, the very same texts which are accountable for sending the sugar merchant's daughter's heart 'a flutter' are also implicated in Anna's love for Paul Massey. Anna says of Paul that he 'ought to be the hero of a book', because hearing about his escapades is 'as good as reading a novel' (i, 49). 'A lithe, tall young fellow of about thirty, Paul was every inch the Paul for a romance', Hatton reports (i, 85). His resemblance to the hero of a romantic poem or novel aligns him with the two poets Harry quotes in order to get the sugar merchant's daughter's attention, Byron and Moore. Lord Byron's *The Corsair* (1814), along with Thomas Moore's *Lalla-Rookh* (1817), were felt to have particularly defined the idea of the romantic hero in the period – both feature heroes who reject the conventions of society in order to pursue more spiritually-rewarding encounters (although *Lalla-Rookh*'s lover turns out to be a prince in disguise). Paul is described as looking 'quite Corsairish' in *Bitter Sweets*, making a clear link between this kind of reading and

superficial romantic passion (i, 88). Moreover, Hatton makes this link explicit in the novel. Lamenting that, as an orphan, Anna Lee had no mother ‘to turn this reading [...] into those channels which – under careful guidance – lead, in a woman, to a cultivation of the home affections’, he conjectures that, if she had, she ‘might have recognised and loved the sterling and the solid in Harry Thornhill’s character’ (i, 50).

Insomuch as the novel stresses the need for young women to behave prudently in their courtships, romantic literature is strongly linked to a weakening of the moral self, and the impairment of good judgement. While the sugar merchant’s daughter’s heartbreak is a comic episode, and easily righted, it is assumed, by the arrival of some new beau, Anna’s ‘romantic turn of mind’ (i, 50) destroys her life and those of others around her. In this respect, Hatton’s intention to produce a work ‘healthy in tone and matter’ assumes a more serious purpose. The way in which sugar is implicated in a discourse of unwholesome and potentially damaging reading in the novel demonstrates the strength of the associations between sugar and low-grade literature in the period. *Bitter Sweets* subscribes to this popular contemporary use of sugar even while making the concept of ‘sweets’ the main signifier of positivity in the novel. Hatton doesn’t question the status quo regarding sugar but rather adapts it to his purposes, using it to show that *Bitter Sweets* is a ‘healthy’ work of fiction, its ‘sweetness’ directly opposed to the mercenary and insincere qualities represented by sugar.

The Culture of Food Adulteration

The negative view of sugar expressed in literary debates in this period was heavily influenced by contemporary fears about food adulteration. A culture of food adulteration had been widespread in England ever since the late eighteenth century. However, around the middle of the nineteenth century new information concerning the extent of this practice and its potentially

lethal effects transformed the issue into a public health scandal, during which no shop-brought article could be regarded without suspicion. Flour, bread, coffee, tea, and sugar, for example, were all commonly adulterated, by adding chicory in the case of coffee or chalk and alum in the case of bread. While social commentators and the public blamed this phenomenon on dishonest tradesmen, John Burnett has argued that shop-keepers were effectively forced into the measure due to the intense competition in their trades.²⁴ He cites figures which show that, for example, by 1850 fifty thousand bakers were competing against one another, and of these three quarters were ‘undersellers’, i.e. they sold below the regular price.²⁵ From 1851-4 medical journal *The Lancet* published the findings of Arthur Hill Hassall, a biologist whose scientific analyses of food and drink using the most up-to-date microscopic technology proved that barely a single article of common household consumption was free from adulteration. Stung into action, Parliament established a Select Committee in 1855 to look into the matter, and this returned results similar to the ones Dr Hassall had uncovered.²⁶

By this time the issue of food adulteration had reached fever pitch. Rebecca F. Stern records that during the mid 1850s alone no less than twenty works concerning the topic were published, many of which also purported to explain to consumers how to test their products if they suspected adulteration.²⁷ As a result of the findings of the Select Committee the Adulteration of Foods Act was passed in 1860, but this legislation proved to be ineffective and the scandal continued unabated. In 1872 a number of radical amendments to the 1860 Act resulted in the Adulteration of Food, Drink, and Drugs Act of 1872. The new legislation was strengthened by the Sale of Food and Drugs Act of 1875 which clarified the definition of

²⁴ Burnett, *Plenty and Want*, p. 83.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 84. Burnett also records that an additional class of bakers existed who undersold the undersellers.

²⁶ For a comprehensive account of the scandal of food adulteration in the mid-Victorian era see Anthony S. Wohl, *Endangered Lives: Public Health in Victorian Britain* (London: J. M. Dent, 1983), pp. 52-5.

²⁷ Rebecca F. Stern, ““Adulterations Detected”: Food and Fraud in Christina Rossetti’s *Goblin Market*”, *Nineteenth-Century Literature* lvii (2003), 477-511 (p. 485, n17).

adulteration.²⁸ Although these new laws began to address the problem, the image of food being poisoned had become fixed in the public imagination, and continued to influence the popular perception of food both during and after this period. As one pamphlet, published in 1855, and entitled *How to Detect Adulteration in our Daily Food and Drink*, put it:

but few of our viands reach us in a pure state, while a large majority are adulterated to an extent and in a manner truly startling. The bread we eat is poisoned for the increase of the miller's and the baker's profit; the water we drink is too often crowded with materials that become the seeds of disease in the human body; our tea, coffee, and condiments – our fermented and spirituous liquors – our daily necessities and occasional comforts and luxuries – all submit to sophistication; and the health, the strength, the life of the commodity is daily sacrificed to swell the profits of unscrupulous traders, and to enhance the temporary fame of dishonest manufacturers.²⁹

The issue of food adulteration had become a moral question, as well as a commercial one.

As a foodstuff that was commonly used to adulterate other food as well as being frequently adulterated in its own right, sugar was an important part of these debates. Moreover, because sugar was a taxed commodity and one popular with the working-classes, tradesmen were under even more temptation to sell to their customers at an affordable price. Burnett points out that taxed commodities, including malt, tea, coffee, beer and sugar, were among the most heavily adulterated.³⁰ In *Adulterations Detected* (1857), Arthur Hill Hassall notes that it was common to adulterate sugar using potato sugar, starch, gum, finely powdered marble, chalk, sand, bone-dust, and common salt.³¹ In G. W. M. Reynolds's popular novel *Mary Price* (1852), the protagonist, a lowly but respectable servant girl, catches her master, a shopkeeper, adulterating his sugar with sand and calling it 'a pretty good hour's business'.³²

The fact that sugar was already subject to a form of adulteration may have contributed both to shopkeepers' willingness to tamper with it further and to consumers' readiness to view

²⁸ For a detailed analysis of early legislation concerning food adulteration see Burnett, *Plenty and Want*, pp. 202-207.

²⁹ Anonymous, *How to Detect Adulteration in our Daily Food and Drink* (London: Groombridge and Sons, 1855), p. 2.

³⁰ Burnett, *Plenty and Want*, pp. 85-6.

³¹ Arthur Hill Hassall, *Adulterations Detected: Or, Plain Instructions for the Discovery of Frauds in Food and Medicine* (London: Longman, 1857), p. 188.

³² Quoted in Stern, "'Adulterations Detected': Food and Fraud in Rossetti's *Goblin Market*", p. 484.

the product as inherently tainted. As Hassall records, the practice of ‘mixing’ or ‘handling’ sugar was common in the period.³³ This involved tradesmen substituting higher quality sugar for a lower grade, and then charging consumers fraudulently high prices. Customers and proprietors were therefore used to sugars of different grades, which would have made them not only comfortable with the idea that sugar could be purchased in a variety of different qualities but also used to the taste differences which might otherwise have alerted them more easily to more serious kinds of contamination.³⁴ As well as creating a scenario in which sugar was already subject to adulteration, the practice of handling also established different kinds of sugar as common adulterants, a role they were to resume as part of a more widespread practice of food adulteration. Just as sugar was subject to adulteration, it was also frequently used to adulterate. Another pamphlet, William Alexander’s *The Adulteration of Food and Drinks* (1856), records that ‘[o]nly 8 of 56 specimens of “Broma,” “Soluble,” and “Homeopathic Cocoa,” were really such, the rest having variable properties of sugar, wheat, and potato-flour, sago-meal, and red earthy matter’.³⁵

Sugary food was further implicated in the growing scandal of food adulteration through its association with confectionery and sweetmeats, which were widely perceived as numbering amongst the most toxic and dangerous examples of adulteration. Alexander reports that ‘scarcely a year ever passes by without recorded cases of fatal poisoning through coloured Sugar Confectionary [sic]’.³⁶ In a similar vein, the author of *How to Detect Adulteration in our Daily Food and Drink* advises those who value their health and wish to avoid ‘a long catalogue of ills, to which the termination is sometimes a coroner’s inquest’ to forgo coloured

³³ Hassall, *Adulterations Detected*, p. 189.

³⁴ Burnett records that even after people had been alerted to adulteration, they preferred the taste of adulterated food because it was what they were used to: ‘[e]arly pioneers of pure food sometimes encountered strong consumer opposition – co-operative societies, for example, experienced such difficulty in selling uncoloured teas that at least one was obliged to employ a lecturer to tell people what good tea should look like’. See Burnett, *Plenty and Want*, p. 86.

³⁵ William Alexander, *The Adulteration of Food and Drinks* (London: Longman, 1856), p. 8.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

confectionery entirely. ‘Adulteration’, he adds, ‘has here its vilest shape; the materials used to adulterate are all pernicious, most of them deadly in their character’. These included, according to him, ‘clay, chalk, plaster of Paris, preparations of lead, mercury, and copper, and others that would fill a volume merely to enumerate them in detail’.³⁷ Alexander agreed with this, confirming that ‘coloured Confectionary [sic] is often beautified by poisonous preparations of Lead, Copper, and Arsenic’.³⁸ The chief problem with such sugary confections was their colouring, much of which, Hassall argues, was effectively poison. The majority of yellow-coloured confectionery he tested, for example, contained chromate of lead. This pollution was furthermore not restricted to the painted outsides of the confectionery, but threatened to penetrate the inside of the sweets too. ‘While the colour of the majority was confined to the surface, in many cases it was diffused equally throughout the whole mass of the sugar used’, Hassall notes, making sugar and poison all but impossible to separate.³⁹

As I have shown, assessments of popular literature in this period commonly employed sugar as a benchmark of degradation and worthlessness. Sugar’s close ties to the issue of food adulteration further damaged the product’s reputation within Victorian society. The scandal revived older notions of sugar, first propagated by those abolitionists who claimed that the commodity was stained with the blood of slaves, as something pernicious and insidious, the deceptively sweet product of morally questionable practices. Although sugar was linked to more positive discourses both in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, such as those of economic progress and physical health, negative views of the product again came to the fore in the 1860s. Sugar’s involvement in food adulteration provided further ammunition for those who sought to implicate the product in a wider discourse of moral, intellectual and cultural corruption. Writing in *Temple Bar* in 1870 Alfred Austin decried works of the ‘Sensational

³⁷ Anonymous, *How to Detect Adulteration in our Daily Food and Drink*, p. 20.

³⁸ Alexander, *The Adulteration of Food and Drinks*, p. 8.

³⁹ Hassall, *Adulterations Detected*, p. 485.

School’ as ‘the worst form of mental food, if we except that which is absolutely poisonous’.⁴⁰ The moral equivalency Austin establishes between poison and sensation fiction builds on the existing association between sugar and low-brow literature. To call this literature ‘poisonous’ is to imply a direct relation between devalued literary productions and poisonous foodstuffs, sugared confectionery being the article through which the ‘grossest abuses’ are committed, according to Fredrick Accum, whose *A Treatise on Adulterations of Food and Culinary Poisons* first raised the issue of adulteration in 1820.⁴¹ Another review which appeared in *The Broadway* in 1868 seems to make the connection between coloured confectionery and popular literature explicit, linking both directly to women. ‘Briefly, novels are more numerous and more highly-coloured than they used to be’, the writer argues, ‘and these numerous and highly-coloured novels are chiefly composed by women’.⁴²

Stern has argued that ‘because food is a commodity that one literally consumes, food adulteration makes material the grossest fears about capitalist production, and thus justifies the most paranoid attitudes towards market culture in general’. Adulterated food, she argues, ‘thus worked as a signifier that *all* commodities – and all people that vended them – were potentially poisonous’.⁴³ Literary critics anxious to preserve an elitist cultural hierarchy figured sensation fiction as akin to adulterated foodstuffs in order to alert an ignorant public to what they perceived as its ‘dangers’. Writing in 1862, the reviewer in *St James’s Magazine* draws a clear parallel between ‘illicit’ or adulterated food and ‘mental food’ which is equally ‘unwholesome’:

Let us pause a moment to examine the word [‘sensation’]. As now used, it means a concentrated interest in any amusement brought particularly under our attention; and it is not only artificially produced, but apparently, as a greater recommendation, is commonly of illicit manufacture, from sources generally considered unwholesome. In

⁴⁰ Alfred Austin, ‘Our Novels: The Sensational School’, *Temple Bar* (1870), in *Varieties of Women’s Sensation Fiction*, i, 247-62 (p. 261).

⁴¹ Fredrick Accum, *A Treatise on Adulterations of Food and Culinary Poisons* (London: Longman, 1820), p. 315.

⁴² Anonymous, ‘Women’s Novels’, *The Broadway* (1868), in *Varieties of Women’s Sensation Fiction*, i, 219-25 (p. 220).

⁴³ Stern, “‘Adulterations Detected’: Food and Fraud in Rossetti’s *Goblin Market*”, p. 489; author’s emphasis.

some instances it may have a more innocent origin, and be presented to the public in what might be called a legitimate form, but on proper examination the article cannot escape condemnation as partly or entirely deleterious.⁴⁴

Imagery which connected sensation novels to adulterated foodstuffs strengthened existing links between sugar and popular literature in which sugar functioned as a symbol of poor quality. As the 1860s progressed the food adulteration scandal continued to be an issue, and continued to be compared to an analogous decline in literary standards. '[T]he novels we read are becoming as important to us as the water we drink or the food we eat', commented one writer in 1870: '[i]t is as desirable that we should be supplied with the best quality possible, and protected by all legitimate means, from the danger of adulteration'.⁴⁵

Wilkie Collins's *Man and Wife* (1870) was published in the same year as this anonymous article, and contains a lengthy passage in which the metaphor of adulterated sugar is central. During the episode Arnold Brinkworth asks his lover's uncle for her hand in marriage. The proposal, however, is derailed when the uncle, Sir Patrick, insists on talking instead about sugar. 'I don't understand what moist sugar has got to do with it', complains the bewildered Arnold, prompting Sir Patrick to embark upon a detailed explanation in which adulterated sugar becomes the symbol for corrupted femininity, the outward attractions of which mask a hidden pollution.

'I'll show you,' said Sir Patrick, crossing his legs, and settling in comfortably for a good talk. 'You go to the tea-shop, and get your moist sugar. You take it on the understanding that it *is* moist sugar. But it isn't anything of the sort. It's a compound of adulterations make up to look like sugar. You shut your eyes to that awkward fact, and swallow your adulterated mess in various articles of food; and you and your sugar get on together in that way as well as you can. Do you follow me, so far?'

Yes. Arnold (quite in the dark) followed, so far.

'Very good,' pursued Sir Patrick. 'You go to the marriage-shop, and get a wife. You take her on the understanding – let us say – that she has lovely yellow hair, that she has an exquisite complexion, that her figure is the perfection of plumpness, and that she is just tall enough to carry the plumpness off. You bring her home; and you discover that it's the old story of the sugar over again. Your wife is an adulterated article. Her lovely yellow hair is – dye. Her exquisite skin is – pearl powder. Her plumpness is – padding.

⁴⁴ Anonymous, 'The Philosophy of "Sensation"', p. 17.

⁴⁵ Anonymous, 'Literary Exhaustion', *Cornhill Magazine* xxii (1870), 285-96 (p. 290).

And three inches of her height are – in the bootmaker’s heels. Shut your eyes, and swallow your adulterated wife as you swallow your adulterated sugar – and, I tell you again, you are one of the few men who can try the marriage experiment with a fair chance of success.’⁴⁶

Luckily for Arnold, Sir Patrick subsequently admits that the discussion has been a test of his feelings. Rather than denigrating Blanche (Arnold’s intended) as ‘an adulterated article like the rest of them’, Sir Patrick’s intention has been to ascertain whether Arnold’s love is genuine.⁴⁷ Satisfied, he eventually gives his consent to the match, after Arnold has sworn his faith in the truth of Blanche’s beauty. It is ironic that Collins employs the image of adulterated sugar to stand for vanity and deception in this passage, because, like *Bitter Sweets*, his novel is exactly the sort of sensational tale that critics would have used metaphors of adulteration and sugar in order to attack.

Collins’s reference to food adulteration in *Man and Wife* is evidence of the way in which the scandal permeated Victorian culture. Moreover, his focus on the deceptions of the ‘marriage-shop’ testifies to the fact that fears about adulteration could spread to take in the character of people as well as food, books and other commercial products. In 1870, the year the novel was published, the question of adulterated food and drink was once again very much in the press, prompting new concerns about the reliability of appearance.⁴⁸ The way in which adulterated foodstuffs were tampered with in order to improve their outward appearance rather than their overall quality enhanced an existing sense in which the tempting allure of new-fangled commodities (that were increasingly a part of city life) were seen to represent some form of widespread cultural corruption. It was feared that the inner degradation of outwardly attractive commodities would corrupt the morals and intellectual mores of their consumers. Hassall insisted that adulterated food affected both ‘the health and morals of the people’.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Wilkie Collins, *Man and Wife* (1870), ed. Norman Page (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 94-5; author’s emphasis.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

⁴⁸ Gilbert, *Disease, Desire, and the Body*, p. 21-2.

⁴⁹ Hassall, *Adulterations Detected*, p. 17.

Likewise, the reading of ‘exciting works of fiction’ could lead to ‘distaste for wholesome reading’, according to an editorial published in *The Times* in 1864. Sensation fiction played on these fears, *The Times* argued, exploiting the sense in which hidden danger lurked beneath the most conventional of domestic settings: ‘[t]hey teach us not to trust appearances; that there is behind a great world of crime, wickedness and misery to which they alone possess the key’.⁵⁰ While much of the newspaper’s indignation is directed towards the presumption of sensation writers who seek to take on a role of instruction that should properly be reserved for the church, equally worrying is these writers’ representation of a hidden reality of modern life that is ‘wicked’ and dishonest.

The passage about adulterated sugar in *Man and Wife* relies heavily on its readers having an advanced understanding both of sugar’s role in food adulteration and of the cultural discourses surrounding the practice. Adulteration is representative not only of female artifice but also of other forms of corruption associated with economic exchange. The adulterated woman herself is constructed out of a series of commercial inventions. Padded, powdered and propped up by pearl powder, heels and padding, she is sustained by a variety of artificial means all of which disguise her true appearance. In comparing adulterated femininity to sugar, Collins creates an aesthetic economy in which the commodity is representative not only of food adulteration in general, but also of all other forms of shop-bought deception. The image also implies that such dishonesty is ideologically aligned with the concept of a ‘marriage market’, in which men and women are evaluated by their appearance and their economic means. Sir Patrick’s suggestion that a man looking for a wife should visit a ‘marriage-shop’ confirms the link between degraded interpersonal relationships and a consumer culture that privileges physical artifice over moral worth.

⁵⁰ Editorials from *The Times* (1864), in *Varieties of Women’s Sensation Fiction*, i, 120-26 (pp. 120-21).

Stern points out that over time the question of food adulteration became not just an issue of multiplying quantity, but also of increasing apparent desirability.⁵¹ In this sense concerns about food adulteration had much in common with sensation writers' preoccupation with exposing moral scissions within individuals who, although they appear to be respectable, turn out to be criminals in disguise. 'The man who shook our hand with a hearty English grasp half an hour ago – the woman whose beauty and grace were the charm of last night [...] how exciting to think that under these pleasing outsides may be concealed some demon in human shape' – for Henry Mansel the efforts of sensation writers may be comic, but they are nevertheless thrilling in their projection.⁵² Due to sugar's involvement in the abolitionist debates a context already existed in which sugar and sweetness were seen as capable of similar forms of concealment. The way in which abolitionist writers played on the sweet taste of sugar in contrast to the horrors of slavery had made the idea of sweetness unstable, a positive signifier that could also represent something apparently pleasant but inwardly false or corrupt. An issue of the *Saturday Review* from 1866 presents the modern 'murdress' as an actor in disguise: '[h]er beauty is the most dazzling of all the beauty in the ball-room, her step is the lightest, and her smile the sweetest'.⁵³ Here sweetness is emblematic of moral deception, and while sensation writers sought to expose this inner corruption, critics worried about the wisdom of presenting such portraits of moral deficiency. The more 'praise and sympathy' is included in the depiction of a villain, an issue of the *Christian Remembrancer* from 1864 fretted, 'the better it is done – the more sweetness and feeling is thrown into it – the more dangerous if it gets a hold'.⁵⁴

⁵¹ Stern, "'Adulterations Detected': Food and Fraud in Rossetti's *Goblin Market*", p. 492.

⁵² [Henry Mansel], 'Sensation Novels', p. 38.

⁵³ Anonymous, 'Homicidal Heroines', *Saturday Review* (1866), in *Varieties of Women's Sensation Fiction*, i, 145-50 (p. 146).

⁵⁴ Anonymous, 'Our Female Sensation Novelists', *Christian Remembrancer* (1864), in *Varieties of Women's Sensation Fiction*, i, 105-14 (p. 112).

One of the most notorious villains of the sensation genre has a rampant sweet tooth, which serves as a symbol of his duplicity. Count Fosco in Collins's *The Woman in White* (1860) even carries 'a pretty little inlaid box' of chocolate bonbons around with him to feed his sugar habit.⁵⁵ Charming and gracious in public, behind the scenes he is the architect of the plot to steal Laura Fairlie's fortune. What Margaret Oliphant, writing in 1862, called 'his love of pets and pastry', appears sinister in the novel because of its associations with innocence.⁵⁶ The count's excessive enthusiasm for animals and sweets is indicative of his corrupted appetites. An anonymous article published in *The Times* in 1860 summed up the way in which Count Fosco's 'childlike tastes' made Collins's portrait of his master criminal more titillating.

Here he is with his childlike tastes, with his love of tart and cream, with his fondness for birds and mice, with his affectation for sugar and water, with his horror of blood, but also with a contempt for human suffering, with a disregard for the laws of property, with a determination to gain his own ends, and with the knowledge that under his childlike tastes and impulsive ways he can easily conceal the most nefarious designs.⁵⁷

Together, the Count's fanatical love of animals and extreme appetite for sugary food indicate, by contrast, how far removed he is from socially conventional attitudes and behaviours.

Collins stresses this when he depicts an encounter between the Count and a poor organ grinder. Ignoring the man, the Count's exaggerated attention to the organ grinder's monkey demonstrates the disturbing extent to which his priorities are distorted.

The Count stopped; bit a piece for himself out of the tart; and gravely handed the rest to the monkey. 'My poor little man!' he said, with grotesque tenderness; 'you look hungry. In the sacred name of humanity, I offer you some lunch!' The organ-grinder piteously put in his claim to a penny from the benevolent stranger. The Count shrugged his shoulders contemptuously – and passed on.⁵⁸

The popularity of the portrait of Count Fosco in the 1860s is testament to the strong link between sugar as a literary trope and the forms of deception it came to represent in this period.

⁵⁵ Collins, *The Woman in White* (1860), ed. Matthew Sweet (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 234.

⁵⁶ [Margaret Oliphant], 'Sensation Novels', *Blackwood's Magazine* (May 1862), in *Wilkie Collins: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Norman Page (London: Routledge, 1974), pp. 110-21 (p. 113).

⁵⁷ Anonymous, *The Times* (30 October 1860), in *Wilkie Collins: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Page, pp. 95-103 (p. 101).

⁵⁸ Collins, *The Woman in White*, p. 567.

Oliphant worried over whether the portrait of Fosco was even too good, making it dangerously enticing. ‘The sympathies of the reader on whom the *Woman in White* lays her spell, are, it is impossible to deny, devoted to the arch-villain of the story’, she writes: ‘[t]he charm of the book, so far as character counts in its effects, is Fosco’.⁵⁹

Gilbert has pointed out that adulterated milk and sweets were associated with concerns about women in the period. Food, she argues, ‘became the focus of anxieties about the invasion of the body by dangerous substances through the wife and mother, the principal food preparer/overseer of the household’.⁶⁰ The juxtaposition between nurturing motherhood and the potential for mothers to harm their dependent offspring recalls similar a dynamic in some abolitionist writing, in which female consumers were warned against bringing polluted and morally tainted sugar into their homes. Ellen Wood’s novel *East Lynne* (1861) similarly implicates sugar in a debate about female morality, and in this sense the text has much in common with Collins’s *Man and Wife*, in which sugar is also set up as a barometer of feminine virtue. The far-fetched plot of *East Lynne* follows the story of an adulterous wife who runs away from home but who returns in disguise to be a governess to her children. Lawyer Archibald Carlyle marries the aristocratic Lady Isabel after her family suffers financial losses, but she struggles to adapt to the difficulties of managing on a middle-class income. Fundamental to the novel’s concerns is the question of the propriety of marriage between different social classes, and Wood uses sugar to discuss the economic imperatives governing this issue. Archibald’s second marriage – to local girl Barbara Hare – is successful, and Wood implies this is due to their similar social background and the fact that they grew up in the same community.

In a scene shortly succeeding Archibald’s engagement to Isabel, Wood uses sugar to demonstrate that Barbara would be a more suitable wife for him, while also pointing out the

⁵⁹ [Oliphant], ‘Sensation Novels’, in *Wilkie Collins: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Page, p. 113.

⁶⁰ Gilbert, *Disease, Desire, and the Body*, p. 21.

underlying causes that will result in the termination of his marriage to Isabel. Barbara is taking tea with Archibald and his sister Cornelia when the subject of Isabel and her potential suitors comes up. Already secretly engaged to Isabel, and fearing Cornelia's disapproval, Archibald is clearly uncomfortable with the direction of the conversation.

Barbara broke the silence.

'Shall you call on the Mount Severns this time?'

'Yes,' he answered.

'Do they talk of Lady Isabel's marrying?' pursued Barbara. 'Did you hear anything of it?'

'I cannot charge my memory with all I heard or did not hear, Barbara. Your tea wants more sugar, does it not?'

'A little,' she answered, and Mr Carlyle drew the sugar-basin towards her cup, and dropped four or five large lumps in, before anybody could stop him.

The gesture becomes a physical emblem of the matrimonial mistake Archibald is making.

He burst out laughing. 'I forgot what I was doing. Really, Barbara, I beg your tea's pardon. Cornelia will give you another cup.'

'But it's a cup of tea and so much good sugar wasted,' tartly responded Miss Corny.⁶¹

Cornelia's criticism of Archibald's wastefulness connects his relationship with Isabel to financial and domestic imprudence, while Barbara becomes aligned with the 'good sugar' itself; the good wife and the good sugar are both 'wasted', their true value overlooked by Archibald. Cornelia's interference on a question of domestic economy also foreshadows a further aspect of the plot. Her disapproval of the way in which Isabel manages money once she and Archibald are married is a significant cause of their later unhappiness together.

The presentation of Barbara as 'good' sugar, not to be wasted, indicates her suitability for Archibald in terms of class by linking her to middle-class notions of domestic thrift. It also has the effect of objectifying her, turning her into a commodity which Archibald at first undervalues. In contrast, Isabel, who is linked throughout the novel to ideas of aristocratic profligacy, is figured as the one bad investment Archibald ever makes. Archibald is lauded for having created his own fortune, whereas Isabel's dissipated father, the Earl of Mount Severn,

⁶¹ Ellen Wood, *East Lynne* (1861), ed. Elisabeth Jay (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 125.

dies with debts so huge his corpse is seized by bailiffs. Having run through the family's fortune the Earl is forced to sell the family seat, East Lynne, to Archibald in order to retain an income. A sign of the transfer of social power from the upper to the middle classes, the sale of East Lynne to the Carlyle family also underlines the importance of material goods as symbolic of moral worth in the novel. The episode of the wasted sugar is a vivid example of this symbolism. The comparisons of women to sugar, whether 'good' or 'adulterated', in *East Lynne* and *Man and Wife* affirms sensation fiction's preoccupation with feminine virtue, while also demonstrating the way in which sugar was frequently used as an index of morality in the writing of this period.

The material history of sugar in the 1860s was dominated by the scandal of food adulteration, a scandal which contributed to a generally negative view of sugar which figured the product as inherently deceptive and corrupt. As I have shown, this view was also shaped by the rhetorical legacy of the abolition debates from the turn of the century, in which sugar was characterised as physically and morally compromised, a sweet taste that disguised an inner degradation. Like the earlier condemnations of slave labour, concerns about food adulteration originated in the methods by which sugar was produced, but in both cases commentators focused their rhetoric primarily on the damaging effects of consuming morally and physically tainted sugar. Concerns about the consequences of eating sugar in the 1860s turned the commodity into a symbol for dangerous consumption in general, and in this role it was used as a metaphor by literary critics who were anxious about the pernicious moral effect on readers of low-brow literature, particularly sensation fiction. The use of a vocabulary of sugar and sweetness to discuss these issues was not, however, limited to critics; it was also employed by sensation writers themselves. More broadly, throughout the decade, writers in a whole range of genres used the cultural associations of sugar to explore questions about literary value, the literary marketplace and the morality of consumption.

George Eliot's *Brother Jacob* and the Commercialisation of Sugar

Brother Jacob is one of George Eliot's lesser known works of fiction. Written in 1860, it was not published until July 1864 when it appeared in the *Cornhill* as a favour from Eliot to George Smith, the publisher of the magazine, after the serialisation of *Romola* in the *Cornhill* had failed to raise the magazine's circulation figures. In a diary entry of 27 September 1860, Eliot records: '[s]ince our return from Italy [on 1 July] I have written a slight Tale – "Mr. David Faux, confectioner" – which G. thinks worth printing'.⁶² Later, however, she dismissed it as 'a trifle', although subsequent critics have been kinder in their appraisals.⁶³ Henry James, for instance, called *Brother Jacob* 'excellent reading' and 'extremely clever', while John Rignall concludes that 'this in fact adroit and exuberant tale remains relatively unappreciated'.⁶⁴

Sugar is an important motif throughout the novella, where it is intimately connected with dishonesty, the story's other main theme. Indeed, the metaphorical combination of sugar and deception is made explicit in the name and person of the main character, David Faux. A confectioner, he is also an irrepressible cheat, making off with his mother's savings in the early part of the story and later assuming a false identity in a new town where he lies about his past. Crucially, David is interrupted when stealing his mother's guineas by his retarded brother, Jacob, on whom he plays a trick in order to avoid a confrontation. Knowing Jacob's fondness for sweets, David persuades him that by burying the guineas they will turn into delicious lozenges. In this sense the literal 'burying' of the truth is figuratively aligned with sugar. Able to evade Jacob in this way, David manages to escape successfully. That is, until Jacob seeks him out later in life, destroying his hopes for social advancement in a new place by revealing

⁶² William Baker and John C. Ross, *George Eliot: A Bibliographical History* (New Castle, DE: Oak Knoll Press and The British Library, 2002), p. 383. 'G' refers to George Lewes, Eliot's long term partner.

⁶³ George Eliot to Sara Hennell, 25 June 1864, in *The George Eliot Letters*, ed. Gordon S. Haight, 9 vols. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1954-78), iv, 157.

⁶⁴ Henry James, 'The Lifted Veil and *Brother Jacob*', in *A Century of George Eliot Criticism*, ed. Gordon S. Haight (London: Methuen, 1966), pp. 130-31 (p. 131); *The Oxford Reader's Companion to George Eliot*, ed. John Rignall (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 41.

his unsavoury past. In ‘an admirable instance of the unexpected forms in which the great Nemesis hides herself’, Jacob has decided to seek out David because he associates him with the sweets David once used to fool him.⁶⁵ The story is humorous in tone and content (which might explain why Eliot called it ‘a trifle’), but it also speaks to several serious themes, including the commercialisation of food and— through sugar’s connection to popular fiction – the commercialisation of literature.

Throughout George Eliot’s oeuvre, sugar is associated with triviality, women, and low forms of literature, often all at the same time. Lydgate in *Middlemarch* (1871-2) describes Rosamond’s typically feminine keepsake album as a ‘sugared invention’, while in *Felix Holt* (1866), Felix claims that women’s ‘petty desires’ have ‘no more to do with manly life than tarts and confectionery’.⁶⁶ In ‘Silly Novels by Lady Novelists’, an article which was published in the *Westminster Review* in 1856, Eliot famously compared women’s fiction to ‘medicinal sweetmeat[s]’, declaring that: ‘[s]ociety is a very culpable entity, and has to answer for the manufacture of many unwholesome commodities, from bad pickles to bad poetry’.⁶⁷ The explicit comparison between ‘unwholesome’ literature and substandard foodstuffs indicates that Eliot, like many other mid-century commentators, made a rhetorical connection between poor quality food and unimpressive popular literature written by and for women. Eliot’s reference to ‘sweetmeats’ implicates sugar in this discourse, and her portrait of a cheating confectioner in *Brother Jacob* associates sugar with deception and dishonesty in a way that was common in the 1860s.

Eliot establishes a clear moral equivalency between consuming sugar and reading sentimental literature in *Brother Jacob*. David steals his mother’s money in order to travel to

⁶⁵ George Eliot, *Brother Jacob* (1864), in ‘*The Lifted Veil*’ and ‘*Brother Jacob*’, ed. Sally Shuttleworth (London: Penguin, 2001), p. 83. All subsequent references will be cited in the text.

⁶⁶ Eliot, *Middlemarch* (1871-2), ed. David Carroll (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), p. 264; and *Felix Holt, The Radical* (1866), ed. Fred C. Thomson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), p. 109.

⁶⁷ Eliot, ‘Silly Novels by Lady Novelists’ (1856), in *Essays of George Eliot*, ed. Thomas Pinney (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963), pp. 300-324 (pp. 317, 323).

the West Indies, a place where his limited acquaintance with literature has taught him that he can gain favour due to his 'broad and easily recognisable merit of whiteness' (47). David gets this idea from the story of 'Inkle and Yarico': Eliot records that although he has borrowed several novels from the local circulating library he has bought a copy of 'Inkle and Yarico' especially. The tale was a popular fable which appeared in a variety of forms throughout the eighteenth century, most famously Richard Steele's formative interpretation which was published in *The Spectator* in 1711. In the story, Yarico, an American Indian woman, protects Inkle, an English trader, when he is shipwrecked on her island. The pair fall in love but when Inkle is rescued he abandons his plans to marry Yarico, and sells her into slavery instead. As Frank Felsenstein has pointed out, 'Inkle and Yarico' came to be appropriated by the antislavery lobby, who used it to 'critique [...] the horrors of the transatlantic slave trade and of British attitudes as the pre-eminent slaving nation'.⁶⁸ David Faux, however, identifies with Inkle's mercenary attitude in the story, predicting that once he reaches the West Indies 'some Princess Yarico would want him to marry her, and make him presents of very large jewels beforehand; after which, he needn't marry her unless he liked' (53). Eliot implies that sugar and escapist literature are equal contributors to David's avaricious vision of life in the colonies. While David is inspired to become a confectioner when he is young 'by a sweet tooth', his ambition later takes on 'new shapes' after the tale of 'Inkle and Yarico' alerts him to the possibility of winning fabulous riches in the West Indies (without having to do any work) (46). However, David's greed and laziness are suitably punished when he fails to make a living in the Caribbean: he may succeed in changing his surroundings but he cannot change his stunted personality.

The fact that David travels to the West Indies, the site of British sugar production, means that, as in *Villette*, the issue of slavery forms an important background to the plot of

⁶⁸ Frank Felsenstein, 'Introduction', in *English Trader, Indian Maid: Representing Gender, Race, and Slavery in the New World, An Inkle and Yarico Reader*, ed. Frank Felsenstein (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), pp. 1-51 (p. 14).

Brother Jacob. Moreover, as Helen Small has pointed out, the story is set in the 1820s, prior to the British emancipation of slaves in 1834.⁶⁹ *Brother Jacob* has been neglected by most scholars of Eliot's work until recently, when a growing interest in the hidden colonial histories of texts has spurred a revival of interest in the story. Susan de Sola Rodstein, Melissa Valiska Gregory and Carl Plasa have all in recent years examined the novella in terms of a political discourse of colonialism.⁷⁰ As such, recent critical interpretations of *Brother Jacob* have approached the issue of sugar mainly in terms of a material history which connects the commodity to slavery. However, the bulk of the novella focuses on David's life in England and on the role of sugar as a domestic item. While the colonial origins of the commodity are crucial to any reading of *Brother Jacob*, I want to argue that the text is more concerned with the implications of sugar consumption than those of its production.

Returning from the West Indies, where he has failed to gain the unimaginable riches he dreamt of, David adopts the name Edward Freely and opens a confectionery shop in the small market town of Grimworth, where he sets about persuading the local matrons to buy their food ready-made instead of making it themselves. Eliot portrays this process as a 'gradual corruption of Grimworth manners', figuring the practice of 'buying at Freely's' as a 'perversion'. This 'infection' is strongly linked to the same kind of moral corruption brought about by reading popular literature: indeed the first person to '[give] way to temptation' is Mrs Steene, the veterinary surgeon's wife, for whom the reality of marriage has failed to live up to her romantic expectations, formed from reading Byron and Moore. Eliot's narrator criticises Mrs Steene's reading in class terms, commenting that 'I fear she had been rather over-educated for her station in life'. Indeed, Mrs Steene's intimate knowledge of *Lalla Rookh*, the *Corsair* and *The Siege of Corinth* has given her 'a distaste for domestic occupations'. Moore's *Lalla*

⁶⁹ Helen Small, 'Introduction', in George Eliot, *The Lifted Veil and Brother Jacob*, ed. Helen Small (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. ix-xxxviii (p. xxxiii).

⁷⁰ See Susan de Sola Rodstein, 'Sweetness and Dark: George Eliot's *Brother Jacob*'; Melissa Valiska Gregory, 'The Unexpected Forms of Nemesis: George Eliot's *Brother Jacob*, Victorian Narrative, and the Morality of Imperialism', in *Dickens Studies Annual* xxxi (2002), 281-303; and Carl Plasa, *Slaves to Sweetness*, pp. 75-95.

Rookh and Byron's the *Corsair* were, as we have seen in *Bitter Sweets*, commonly used to signify the kind of romantic, sentimental literature that cultural commentators claimed prevented people like Mrs Steene from embracing their lot in life. The veterinary surgeon's wife is described as being 'out of harmony with her circumstances' (60-61). David is similarly divorced from reality: his 'devices for getting rich without work' are described as having 'no direct relation with the world outside him' (72).

Byron and Moore both contributed to a trend beginning earlier in the nineteenth century for oriental escapism, and by the middle of the century this type of writing was typically seen as emblematic of frivolous literature in general. For Eliot, Mrs Steene's susceptibility to fantastical literature leads naturally to her succumbing to the charms of David's equally elaborate confectionery. She resorts to 'buying at Freely's' due to her anticipation of her husband's anger at a particularly heavy batch of mince pies: '[h]e would storm at her, she was certain; and before all the company; and then she should never help crying: it was so dreadful to think she had come to that, after the bulbul and everything!' (61).⁷¹ The 'bulbul' is a reference to Moore, and through it Eliot suggests that Mrs Steene's inability to control her emotions – a point of honour for middle-class Victorian women – relates to an intellectual weakness brought about by reading too much romantic literature. The same weakness leads her to buy pastries from David in a bid to cover up her domestic failings, but, luckily for her, Jacob's revelations about his brother's past force David to leave Grimworth, so that by the end of the story, having finally succeeded in making a batch of mince pies 'so excellent that Mr Steene [...] said they were the best he had ever eaten in his life, she thought less of bulbuls and renegades ever after' (83). The conclusion of *Brother Jacob* reinforces its status as a humorous tale, since no serious consequences result from David's deceptions. Like Mrs Steene, the other Grimworth women return to normal housewifery and to baking their own food, and even David

⁷¹ According to Sally Shuttleworth, the bulbul is a '[k]ind of thrush greatly admired for its song in the East' – see Eliot, '*The Lifted Veil*' and '*Brother Jacob*', ed. Shuttleworth, p. 98, n18. *Lalla Rookh* mentions the bird, and Moore himself was referred to as the 'Irish bulbul'.

suffers no lasting consequences. Admittedly, his engagement is broken off, and he is forced to sell up shop due to the town's disapproval, but he leaves with his character shaken but intact, presumably to carry on his deceptions in some other place. Unlike Hatton, for whom the consequences of reading unwholesome fiction in youth are devastating and last for generations, Eliot treats the issue more playfully in *Brother Jacob*.

Just as Eliot suggests that there are no long-term consequences to reading 'sugary' sentimental literature, she also implies that the ill effects of eating sugar are not permanent. Indeed, she even puts on record a long tradition of using sugar in Grimworth: '[h]itherto, it had been held a point of honour by the families in the Grimworth parish, to buy their sugar and their flannel at the shops where their fathers and mothers had bought before them' (57). Rather than suggesting that sugar itself is damaging, Eliot puts forward the idea that it is commercialisation, and specifically the commercialisation of sugar, which presents a pressing danger to the preservation of 'Grimworth manners'. As in *East Lynne*, sugar in *Brother Jacob* functions as a test of domestic virtue; by outsourcing their cooking to David's commercial enterprise, the women of Grimworth fail in their domestic duties. Sugar, already an alien and suspicious item because it is produced by slaves in the distant West Indies, is made doubly alien by its increased commercialisation. But Eliot doesn't consider sugar in itself a health risk, just as she doesn't consider popular literature to be permanently damaging. While the townspeople are initially awed by 'the abundant lozenges, candies, sweet biscuits and icings' (59) on display in the new shop, by the end of the tale they have returned to their normal diets, which, Eliot implies, have been unaffected by David's temporary residence in Grimworth.

Eliot's views are in line with Charlotte Brontë's in that neither of them saw sugar as inherently unhealthy. Like Brontë, Eliot also advocates moderate consumption of sugar, attributing David's rash decision to become a confectioner to his inability to curb or control his appetite: '[h]ow is the son of a British yeoman, who has been fed principally on salt pork and

yeast dumplings, to know that there is satiety for the human stomach even in a paradise of glass jars full of sugared almonds and pink lozenges, and that the tedium of life can reach a pitch where plum-buns at discretion cease to offer the slightest enticement?’ (45). Eliot’s views were confirmed (or perhaps formed) by George Henry Lewes, her long-term partner, who as I have mentioned in the previous chapter published *The Physiology of Common Life* in 1860, the same year as *Brother Jacob* was written. Lewes concurred with the general medical establishment’s view of sugar in the 1850s, which was subsequently overshadowed by concerns about food adulteration, that sugar had positive health benefits. Lewes’s opinion that sugar consumption was not harmful ‘when not excessive’ is in line with the views of both Brontë and Eliot. In accordance with Lewes’s injunction that sugar strengthened the bones and teeth by transporting phosphate of lime to them, Eliot asserts in *Brother Jacob* that: ‘I am glad to remember that a certain amount of calcerous food has been held good for young creatures whose bones are not quite formed’ (62).

While Eliot presents sugar as not being harmful in itself, I want to suggest that there are hints in the novella that David might adulterate his confectionery. His shop window, which displays a ‘blaze’ of ‘pink, and white, and yellow’, suggests exactly the kind of coloured sugar confectionery that was held responsible for the very worst forms of adulteration (58-9). Throughout the story, Eliot plays on David’s status as a ‘confectioner’, exploiting its double meaning as a purveyor of sweets and as a fabricator to suggest that David creates lies which are as elaborate as his ‘fanciful viands’ (62). Eliot alludes to food adulteration twice in the novella – once when David appears to refer to the practice to win the custom of the rector’s wife, Mrs Chaloner, and on the second occasion during Jacob’s visit. ‘[I]n giving her useful hints about choosing sugars he had thrown much light on the dishonesty of other tradesman’, Mrs Chaloner reports back after her first visit to David’s shop (60). David’s comment about ‘the dishonesty of other tradesmen’ may well be a reference to food adulteration. The fact that Eliot

specifically raises the issue of ‘choosing sugars’ might also mean that the ‘dishonesty’ to which David alludes could concern the equally common practice of ‘mixing’ or ‘handling’ sugar, in which lower-quality produce was substituted for that of a higher grade. However, given the higher profile of the food adulteration scandal at the time Eliot was writing *Brother Jacob*, it seems likely that she is referring to adulteration. Then, when David is confronted by Jacob in his shop, he alludes to food adulteration directly: ‘[h]e wished the Bath buns might by chance have arsenic in them’ (77). Arsenic was believed to be a common adulterating agent in sugary food, and David’s casual allusion to it suggests that this compulsive liar and cheat has some knowledge of the practices of food adulteration.

John Burnett points out that one of the reasons for the rise in food adulteration in the middle of the century was that in bigger cities shop-keepers relied less on reputation, whereas a fraudulent tradesman would quickly lose custom in a village or small-market town such as Grimworth.⁷² Of course, David’s deception is eventually exposed, but by creating the character of a fraudulent shopkeeper Eliot raises the spectre of a future dominated by unaccountable commercialism, in which private families rely not on their own labour but instead on ‘the work of a special commercial organ’ (62). In *Brother Jacob*, she suggests that this process is already in motion:

what security was there for Grimworth, that a vagrant spirit for shopping, once introduced, would not in the end carry the most important families to the larger market town of Cattleton, where, business being done on a system of small profits and quick returns, the fashions were of the freshest, and goods of all kinds might be bought at an advantage? (58)

Writing in 1860, Eliot’s portrayal of the 1820s presents on one level an idyllic picture of non-commercial country life, but as she herself suggests, it was also a time when a ‘vagrant spirit for shopping’ was first beginning to manifest itself. The issue of food adulteration didn’t reach

⁷² Burnett, *Plenty and Want*, p. 73.

its height until the 1850s and 1860s, but the first text on the subject was published in 1820, suggesting that by this period fraudulent commercial practices were already taking hold.⁷³

Despite its satirical tone, *Brother Jacob*'s references to sugar confectionery constitute a serious engagement with contemporary debates about food adulteration. In this context, David Faux's artificial and brightly coloured sweets become emblematic of the moral and social dangers posed by the unscrupulous pursuit of commercial profit. Moreover, Eliot's focus on the consumption rather than the production of sugar signals a wider shift in terms of the way the commodity was perceived by the mid-nineteenth century. While David's time in the West Indies is expunged from the text as efficiently as the character himself is banished from Grimworth at the end of the novella, the history of sugar consumption in this unassuming little market town is not so easily overlooked. Carl Plasa has argued that, because the residents of Grimworth already use sugar before David arrives (and will continue to do so after he leaves), 'the domestic spaces into which his business reaches are themselves already haunted by the spectre of slavery'.⁷⁴ In Plasa's opinion, sugar is the straightforward symbol of colonial brutality, but to argue this is to risk ignoring the everyday importance of the commodity as an essential foodstuff. It is not sugar itself that disrupts domestic harmony in the novella, but the way in which it is consumed, specifically in the form of David's manufactured and shop-bought confections. In this way, *Brother Jacob* is one of many texts from the early 1860s that uses sugar and sweetness to explore fears about food adulteration in particular and the commercialisation of society in general.

⁷³ The scandal of food adulteration first came to public attention in 1820 when popular scientist Fredrick Accum published his *Treatise on Adulterations of Food and Culinary Poisons* (see above, p. 140). However, within a few months of the book being published Accum was forced to leave England in disgrace after being involved in a dispute with the Royal Institution concerning the mutilation of several of their books. His research was discredited as a result of the scandal, which some people have suggested was a conspiracy. See Burnett, *Plenty and Want*, pp. 74-7 for more details about Accum's life and work.

⁷⁴ Plasa, *Slaves to Sweetness*, p. 89.

‘Sweeter than Honey from the Rock’: Christina Rossetti’s *Goblin Market*

Christina Rossetti’s *Goblin Market* was first published in 1862. Various perceived as being about subjects ranging from Christianity to vampirism, the plethora of interpretations has done little to quell critical interest in the poem.⁷⁵ Recently, Rebecca F. Stern has claimed that the poem concerns food adulteration, which as I have shown was rife in the 1860s. Aiming to address the material focus of the poem, as a story about food that is poisonous, Stern puts the culture of adulteration at the centre of her study. The preoccupation with the food adulteration scandal in the 1860s and in the years before this fostered a culture, Stern argues, in which adulterated food came to symbolise wider fears about the marketplace. Herbert F. Tucker has challenged this interpretation, arguing that what ‘goblinizes’ the Goblin fruits is not their inherent contamination but ‘a strategic hype that extracts them from actual origins and recontextualizes them in fantasies of exoticism and abundance’.⁷⁶ His view that Rossetti was writing about advertising is persuasive, but it ignores the materiality of the poem. To a certain extent, so does Stern: although she posits the poem as work concerning ‘actual groceries’, she says little about the type of food represented by Rossetti in the poem.⁷⁷

While Rossetti’s goblin men sell fruit, I want to argue that sugar is the implied focus of the poem’s concerns about food adulteration. Stern acknowledges that coloured sugar confectionery was the most toxic example of adulteration, but stops short of figuring sugar as the primary symbol of adulteration in the poem.⁷⁸ I don’t want to suggest that food adulteration is the sole or most important meaning of this hugely complex and multifarious poem; rather

⁷⁵ See, for example, Shelley O’Reilly, ‘Absinthe makes the Tart Grow Fonder: A Note on “Wormwood” in Christina Rossetti’s *Goblin Market*’, *Victorian Poetry* xxxiv (1996), 108-14; Mary Arseneau, ‘Incarnation and Interpretation: Christina Rossetti, the Oxford Movement, and *Goblin Market*’, *Victorian Poetry* xxxi (1993), 79-93; David F. Morrill, ‘“Twilight Is Not Good For Maidens”: Uncle Polidori and the Psychodynamics of Vampirism in *Goblin Market*’, *Victorian Poetry* xxviii (1990), 1-16; and Elizabeth K. Helsinger, ‘Consumer Power and the Utopia of Desire: Christina Rossetti’s *Goblin Market*’, *ELH* viii (1991), 903-33.

⁷⁶ Herbert F. Tucker, ‘Rossetti’s Goblin Marketing: Sweet to Tongue and Sound to Eye’, *Representations* lxxxii (2003), 117-33 (p. 122).

⁷⁷ Stern, ‘“Adulterations Detected”: Food and Fraud in Christina Rossetti’s *Goblin Market*’, p. 479.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 488-9.

that the references to food adulteration which do exist in *Goblin Market* are given added clarification by considering their relationship to sugar. Furthermore, the link between the sweetness of sugar and the insincere and insubstantial relations of economic exchange is made explicit by the alternative discourse of sweetness Rossetti develops in the poem, built around images of honey and connected to uncomplicated domesticity. Both accounts of sweetness hinge on the issue of feminine morality, in the same way as *Brother Jacob* and the sensation novels of the 1860s use sugar to explore concerns about women's roles in the home and in society.

The poem concerns two sisters, Laura and Lizzie, who apparently live by themselves in an unidentified rural setting, keeping house together. Each evening they fetch water from a nearby glen, where goblin men carrying elaborate displays of exotic fruit try to tempt the girls to buy from them. Lizzie tells Laura that they must stay away from the goblin men, but her sister heeds their cries and buys fruit from them in exchange for a lock of hair. Although Laura gorges on the fruit, it doesn't satisfy her appetite, and when she returns to the glen the next night, she is dismayed to find she cannot hear or see the goblins. Cut off from her supply of goblin fruit, Laura grows ill, and Lizzie tries to help her by visiting the goblins and buying some of their fruit for her sister. However, the goblins want to watch Lizzie eat, rather than taking the fruit away for her sister, and when she refuses they become violent, pushing her and trying to force their commodities into her mouth. Lizzie resists, and returns to Laura covered in the juices of the goblin fruit, which act as a restorative for her sister. Despite the intensely physical nature of the exchanges in the poem, the allegorical structure of *Goblin Market* encourages it to be read as a parable. Yet the role of the fruit as the material vehicle through which temptation operates places it at the centre of the poem. Moreover, Rossetti suggests the idea of food adulteration by implying that the fruit is poisoned. The goblin wares are 'like

honey to the throat / But poison in the blood'. 'We must not buy their fruits', Lizzie tells Laura: '[w]ho knows upon what soil they feed / Their hungry thirsty roots?'.⁷⁹

The produce sold by the goblins ultimately leaves Laura feeling unsatisfied. 'I ate and ate my fill / Yet my mouth waters still' (165-6) she tells her sister. Like food which has been adulterated, Rossetti implies, the goblin's food looks delicious but its reality doesn't match its appearance. The goblins announce that the fruit is high quality – 'fresh from the vine'; 'full and fine' (20-21) – but this is just advertising. While Rossetti is detailed in her descriptions of the fruit's appearance, cataloguing the goblins' '[b]loom-down-cheeked peaches' (9) and '[b]right-fire-like barberries' (27), the poem says very little about what the fruits actually taste like. Laura does say that she 'never tasted such before' (132), but this doesn't necessarily mean that the fruit tastes pleasant, although she continues to desire it.

The one definite taste that the goblins and Laura both attribute to the fruit, however, is sweetness. It is Laura's 'sweet-tooth' (115) that inspires her to sample the fruit in the first place. She describes their taste as '[s]weeter than honey from the rock' (129) and speculates on the 'sugar-sweet [...] sap' that must enrich them (183). The goblins themselves describe their fruit as '[s]weet to tongue and sound to eye' (30), emphasising the appearance of the produce and its ability to cater to all the senses (the use of 'tongue', 'sound' and 'eye' implies that the goblins' fruits appeal to the senses of taste, hearing, and sight simultaneously). Yet only the sense of taste is linked to a specific quality – sweetness – whereas the effect the fruit has on the other senses is left to the reader's imagination. The importance of this figuring of sweetness as the main taste of the goblin fruit is that it reinforces the link between their wares and food adulteration. As Stern has argued, the bright colours of the fruit suggest a form of adulteration which enhanced the colour of a product, often by dint of poison, and was most prominent in

⁷⁹ Christina Rossetti, 'Goblin Market' (1862), ll. 554-5, 43-5, in *The Complete Poems*, ed. R. W. Crump (London: Penguin, 2001), pp. 5-20. All subsequent line references will be cited in the text.

connection with coloured sugar confectionery.⁸⁰ Although Rossetti is ostensibly writing about fruit in *Goblin Market*, the whole poem is an allegory for the marketplace. Rossetti's fruit, which has the same appearance as brightly coloured sugar confectionery and tastes like sugar too, bears more than a slight resemblance to the product which had in many ways become a symbol of the food adulteration scandal.

However, as much as Rossetti implies that the goblin fruit bears some relation to sugar, she also implicates honey as another possible source of its sweetness in the poem. As much as the fruit is 'sugar-sweet', it is also '[s]weeter than honey from the rock'. Rossetti continues to mix metaphors of honey and sugar when describing the goblins' marketing technique. On the one hand, this is based on references to sugar – the goblins' 'customary cry, / "Come buy, come buy"', (231-2) is an 'iterated jingle / Of sugar-baited words' (233-4) – yet they also hawk their wares in 'tones as smooth as honey' (108). Rossetti makes sweetness representative of the deception of the marketplace in *Goblin Market*. Although the material basis of this deceptive sweetness shifts between honey and sugar, there is nonetheless, over the course of the whole poem, a clear demarcation between sugar as associated with commercial exchange and honey as associated with a more positive discourse of domesticity.

The sisters are compared to bees in the poem, and furthermore honey is an important part of their domestic routine, which involves tending bees as well as other livestock.

Early in the morning
 When the first cock crowed his warning,
 Neat like bees, as sweet and busy,
 Laura rose with Lizzie:
 Fetched in honey, milked the cows,
 Aired and set to rights the house,
 Kneaded cakes of whitest wheat,
 Cakes for dainty mouths to eat,
 Next churned butter, whipped up cream,
 Fed their poultry, sat and sewed;
 Talked as modest maidens should (199-209)

⁸⁰ Stern, "Adulterations Detected": Food and Fraud in Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market", p. 488.

Honey is connected to natural, home-made food, such as the sisters eat before Laura succumbs to the temptations of the goblin men. After consuming their fruit she falls ill, and in a passage clearly intended as a parallel to the sisters' earlier routine, Rossetti describes how Laura can no longer eat the non-commodified food or participate in preparing it.

She no more swept the house,
Tended the fowls or cows,
Fetched honey, kneaded cakes of wheat,
Brought water from the brook:
But sat down listless in the chimney-nook
And would not eat. (293-8)

At this stage in the poem, despite the fact that honey is implicated in descriptions of the goblins' contaminated food, it is clearly set up primarily in opposition to the goblins' commercialised wares: a point Rossetti emphasises when she makes honey a symbol of Lizzie's resistance to the goblins in their final confrontation in the poem. As Lizzie resists the goblins' attempts to push the food on her, she is compared to a tree '[w]hite with blossoms honey-sweet / Sore beset by wasp and bee' (416-17). In figuring Lizzie's purity in terms of 'blossoms honey-sweet', Rossetti relocates the taste of honey's sweetness to its original source in the nectar of flowers. Yet the positive, natural associations of honey are undermined by the apian imagery which identifies the goblins as violent and invasive wasps and bees. In line with the poem's wider ambiguities, Rossetti complicates her portrayal of honey. At times she implicates it in the goblins' behaviour and designs, but for much of the poem honey clearly represents healthy domesticity, as opposed to the disruptive forms of economic exchange symbolised by sugar.

In so far as sugar is associated with the goblin fruit more than honey, *Goblin Market* maintains the links I have discussed in this chapter between sugar, food adulteration, and degraded commercial tastes in both food and literature. Laura's desire for the goblin fruit destroys her normal, healthy appetite, and in this respect Rossetti's poem reflects the concerns of contemporary critics, who argued that reading 'sugary' fiction destroyed the appetite for

wholesome, moral fare. One opinion piece, published in *Tinsley's Magazine* in 1867, claimed that the 'moral intoxication' of modern novels would render readers' minds unable to 'swallow or digest wholesome food any longer'.⁸¹ The idea that consumerism created false needs was a prime fear about commodity culture in the Victorian period. Laura's appetite in *Goblin Market* for the goblin fruit seems to relate specifically to her desire to buy more of it, rather than necessarily to consume more. After Laura realises that she can no longer hear the hawking calls of the goblins, she is horrified to learn that she is unable to purchase their wares from them: '[m]ust she then buy no more such dainty fruit?' (257). Her construction of the fruit as 'dainty' links it to other stylish objects of Victorian consumer desires. When Lizzie seeks to rescue Laura, she doesn't wish for food for her to eat, but longs instead 'to buy fruit to comfort her' (310). The centrality of economic exchange to Laura's desire for the fruit in the poem compounds the idea that her passion is a false need founded not on genuine appetite but on consumerist cravings.

Laura's yearning for the fruit resembles an addiction: powerless to access the goblin fruit, her symptoms are similar to the effects of withdrawal from drugs. Unable to eat, sleep, rest, or engage in productive activity, Laura experiences physical symptoms which leave her in 'exceeding pain' (271) and also affect her emotionally: 'in a passionate yearning' she 'gnashed her teeth for baulked desire, and wept / As if her heart would break' (267-8). She even hallucinates: 'with sunk eyes and faded mouth / She dreamed of melons, as a traveller sees / False waves in a desert drouth' (288-90). Rossetti's emphasis on the word 'false' reinforces the idea that Laura's cravings are not based on any real need. Again, the poem resembles contemporary criticisms of popular literature, which figured the taste for sensation fiction in the same way. 'The vicious taste having been once created', the 1864 editorial from *The Times*

⁸¹ Anonymous, 'Aunt Anastasia on Modern Novels', *Tinsley's Magazine* (1867), in *Varieties of Women's Sensation Fiction*, i, 160-70 (p. 162).

asserts, ‘novelists, it will be said, will of course meet it – the supply has created the demand, and the demand now keeps up the supply’.⁸²

Ultimately, sugar is connected to the rampant consumerism peddled by the goblins in the poem, and in this Rossetti’s views were in line with most of her contemporaries. During the 1860s sugar changed from being seen as nutritious in moderation to being viewed with suspicion as a dangerous and even poisonous product. William Banting’s conclusion that sugar should be cut out of the diet entirely is paralleled in contemporary reviewers’ fears that an appetite for sensation fiction, once indulged, would destroy readers’ taste for morally instructive literature. The way in which Rossetti posits honey in opposition to sugar in *Goblin Market* establishes an alternative discourse of sweetness which reminds readers of the more traditional and positive associations of sweetness. By the middle of the nineteenth century, sweetness as an aesthetic term still retained these connotations, but they were coupled with new imagery suggesting that the apparent desirability of sweetness might conceal something sinister. This view of sweetness is also an important trope in sensation fiction, and, as I have suggested earlier, this might explain why reviewers of popular fiction in the period found sugar to be such a useful metaphor for this kind of writing. The authors discussed in this chapter view sugar as the embodiment of the distorted commercial priorities of contemporary culture. Through sugar, sweetness had become an important term in debates about literature and culture by the 1860s, but its meanings remained contested. In my next chapter I will examine how other contemporary writers used a more expansive and positive idea of sweetness, less closely linked to sugar, to challenge existing understandings of culture.

⁸² Editorials from *The Times*, p. 122.

Chapter 4

Late Victorian Poetics and the Culture of Sweetness

Between 1867 and 1868 Matthew Arnold published a series of articles in the *Cornhill Magazine*, based on the last lecture he delivered as Professor of Poetry at Oxford. By the time these articles had been collated and published as *Culture and Anarchy* in 1869, the phrase ‘sweetness and light’ had become synonymous with Arnold and was increasingly adopted as a meaningful allusion in itself. In the first half of 1869 alone, the press made considerable use of Arnold’s ‘catchphrase’.¹ An article which appeared in the *Liverpool Mercury* in April 1869 uses the concept of sweetness and light as a byword for culture – ‘so prettily defined as “sweetness and light” in the essays of Mr Matthew Arnold’ – and in the same year the *Daily News* described state-established churches as having ‘something of the sweetness and light with which Mr Arnold is so much charmed’.² ‘He is the prophet of sweetness’, declared the *Daily News* in 1869: ‘[h]e panegyrises light in dark sayings’.³ Sweetness and light were even implicated in a humorous poem, entitled ‘Miss Minuet’, which appeared in the fun section of the *Manchester Times* in May 1869, and which also made mention of Arnold:

Sweet minuet maiden, our grandmothers grumble,
Our manners are wormwood and gall to their sight,
Of decency, dirt, and decorum they mumble;
And Arnold keeps preaching of sweetness and light!

¹ This information was accessed on 12 November 2008 using the British Library archive *British Newspapers 1800-1900* at <http://newspapers.bl.uk/blcs/dispAdvSearch.do?prodId=BLCS&userGroupName=blcsuser>, during an advanced search using the terms ‘sweetness’, ‘light’, and ‘Arnold’ for the months January – December 1869. All further references to the archive follow this model and will not be cited in full. Two references to Arnold and sweetness and light appeared in the *The Preston Guardian* and the *Glasgow Herald* during January 1869, prior to the date of the book’s publication. Park Honan records in his definitive biography of Arnold how many newspapers picked up on the phrase. See *Matthew Arnold: A Life* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1981), p. 350.

² Ibid., ‘Lord Stanley at Glasgow’, *Liverpool Mercury*, 5 April 1869; ‘The Bishops on the Voluntary Principle’, *Daily News*, 28 June 1869.

³ This review appeared in the *Daily News* on 10 February 1869. It is possible that in coining the phrase ‘prophet of sweetness’ the *Daily News* were influenced by an article by one of Arnold’s most vocal detractors, Henry Sidgwick, which appeared in *Macmillan’s Magazine* in 1867. See Henry Sidgwick, ‘The Prophet of Culture’, *Macmillan’s Magazine* xvi (1867), 271-80.

The poem connects Arnold with an older set of more traditional values, linked to the grumbling grandmothers of the stanza but opposed to the coquettish minuet maiden, who elsewhere, we are told, wears short skirts and is ‘very much given to flirting’.⁴ The term ‘sweetness’ should serve to link Arnold to the maiden, since she is also described as ‘sweet’: the fact that they are opposed in the poem indicates the extent to which Arnold’s idea of sweetness and light had become separate from conventional definitions of sweetness in the period. His concept of sweetness and light and its wide and rapid dissemination through Victorian culture nonetheless changed the way in which the term sweetness could be encountered throughout the rest of the century.

As I discussed in my previous chapter, for most of the 1860s saccharine sweetness was predominantly associated with the damaging effects of commercialism on morality and culture. *Culture and Anarchy*, a text fundamentally concerned with the role of culture in contemporary society, can be read as a continuation of the debates about literary standards that took place earlier in the decade, and the centrality of sweetness to Arnold’s argument reinforces the connection. Arnold’s sweetness, however, is representative of an ideal of culture, and thus differentiates itself from the negative discourse of sweetness that had emerged from fears about food adulteration and sensation fiction. By playing on established meanings of sweetness as it was connected to literary culture, Arnold makes it clear that his new agenda departs from contemporary constructions of literary and artistic taste.

Just as Arnold’s dual representation of sweetness and light generated new connotations for sweetness in the period, the idea of sweetness took on multiple and often radically new meanings in the work of Algernon Charles Swinburne and Walter Pater. Sweetness is a key term in a new sexual politics Swinburne and Pater began to explore in the 1860s and 1870s and which, in part, is a response to Arnold’s theories of social life. As such, sweetness was a

⁴ Ibid., *Manchester Times*, 22 May 1869.

contested term not only in debates about literary culture in the period, but also in the work of these three writers, who in their different ways were contributing to these debates.

Fundamental to the representation of sweetness in this period were the roles of sugar and honey. As the two main indicators of the taste of sweetness in the period sugar and honey were often opposed to each other in aesthetic configurations, and this grew more pronounced as the century progressed. Honey became an important contrast to the idea of sugary sweetness, as is shown by Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market*. Arnold, Swinburne and Pater deal not so much with mapping the contemporary degradation of literature, but with the role of culture and of literature within a much larger framework, one that spans back to the classical era. In this context sweetness became an important term for them not just because of the current importance of sugar to debates about the quality of literature, but also because of its capacity to represent a broader set of ideas.

Sweetness and Light: Arnold on Culture

The phrase 'sweetness and light' first appears in Jonathan Swift's *Battle of the Books*, a hugely successful satire which earned Swift much approbation. Written in the closing years of the 1690s (although it was only published in 1704), it dates from the time when Swift's employer, Sir William Temple, was embroiled in the Ancients and Moderns controversy, a specific set of debates about culture which took place throughout Europe towards the end of the century. The debates originated over the question of whether contemporary knowledge had surpassed that of the classical civilisations. Temple subscribed to a view of history not endorsed by the 'moderns': that the purpose of history was not to accumulate information but to develop moral and philosophical reasoning, and Swift largely supported this view, as can be seen from the *Battle*, which is essentially an allegorical representation of the intellectual questions the

controversy raised. The story depicts a literal war between the books of the King's Library in St. James's palace, enacted largely through their mascots, a bee and a spider, which represent the key characteristics of the ancient and modern factions respectively. Ancient culture, like the bee, amasses learning from a variety of sources and is critical, whereas modern culture, Swift suggests, relies, like the spider, on narrow self-interest. The spider's web has been constructed, he informs us, with 'material extracted altogether out of my own person', whereas the bee 'by an universal range, with long search, much study, true judgement, and distinction of things, brings home honey and wax': 'thus furnishing mankind with the two noblest of things, which are sweetness and light'.⁵ Although Swift's representation claimed to be impartial, the ancient books and the bee clearly have the upper hand in this battle, ideologically at least. Swift ends the text with the fight yet unresolved: it is up to the reader to decide who should ultimately win.

The binary Swift sets up – prompted by the actual controversy between ancient and modern types of culture – clearly appealed to Arnold, who uses Swift's formulation to make sweetness and light his main defence against the aspects of modern culture he is critical of in the 1860s. If culture is the 'pursuit of perfection', then the pursuit of perfection, Arnold argues, in a linguistic sleight of hand that is ultimately utterly meaningless, is 'the pursuit of sweetness and light'.⁶ By refusing to define what he means by sweetness and light, yet insisting on these qualities as the ultimate measure of cultural value, Arnold emphasises their importance as signifiers of a wider set of ideas. The philosophy of *Culture and Anarchy* is geared towards utilising the wisdom of the arts to develop an individual and collective 'best' self or best version of society, and it was in this respect that Arnold perceived his affinity to Swift, whose own complaint about a very different set of 'modern' prerogatives was also grounded in a

⁵ Jonathan Swift, 'Battle of the Books' (1704), in Jonathan Swift, *A Tale of a Tub and Other Works*, ed. Angus Ross and David Woolley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 104-25 (pp. 112-13).

⁶ Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, in *Complete Prose Works*, ed. Super, v, 112. All subsequent references will be cited in the text.

disagreement not so much about certain texts or artefacts but rather in the way individuals and society reacted to them. Both Swift and Arnold are preoccupied with the methodology of culture: in *The Battle of the Books* what differentiates the bee and the spider are their different approaches. For Arnold, too, ‘culture’ is not a specific set of key texts or ideas, but a means of ‘seeing things as they really are’ (253).

Arnold rejects the Philistine definition of culture as familiarity with certain key classical texts, arguing instead that putting too high a value on educational privileges is a hindrance to achieving culture in the word’s proper sense. The beginning of chapter one (entitled ‘Sweetness and Light’ from the second edition onwards) reads:

The disparagers of culture make its motive curiosity; sometimes, indeed, they make its motive mere exclusiveness and vanity. The culture which is supposed to plume itself on a smattering of Greek and Latin is a culture which is begotten by nothing so intellectual as curiosity; it is valued either out of sheer vanity and ignorance or else as an engine of social and class distinction, separating its holder, like a badge or title, from other people who have not got it. No serious man would call this *culture*, or attach any value to it, as culture, at all. (90; author’s emphasis)

Despite Arnold’s apparent democratic principles, his approach to discovering culture – which he defines as based on an appreciation of ‘the best which has been thought or said’ – is naturally biased towards the culture of the establishment (233). His refrain is an extension of a previous argument in ‘The Function of Criticism at the Present Time’, an essay which first appeared in 1864, and in which culture is figured as ‘the idea of a disinterested endeavour to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the world’.⁷ Arnold’s intention in highlighting the disparity between actual and assumed culture is to reclaim the role of culture as a social and moral guide. What he objects to in the above example is not the teaching of the classics itself, but rather poor teaching of the classics, a construction which ultimately supports the preservation of the core English educational system, which Arnold as a school inspector

⁷ Arnold, ‘The Function of Criticism at the Present Time’, in *Complete Prose Works*, ed. Super, iii, 258-85 (p. 282).

(and Senior Inspector from 1870) might well be expected to promote.⁸ In his now notorious Preface to his *Poems* of 1853, in which he rejects modern poetry in favour of a study of Greek models, Arnold presents classical texts as not necessarily ‘the best sources of intellectual stimulus for the general reader, but [...] the best models of instruction for the individual writer’.⁹ It is hard to see how this does not privilege a conservative view of the content of culture.

In the same way as Swift is critical of so-called ‘modern’ approaches to knowledge, which are based on information gathering rather than analysis, in ‘On Translating Homer’ (1861) Arnold berates contemporary scholarship in terms of its ‘[m]odern sentiment’, which in his opinion inhibits true communion with the classics:

The frame of mind in which we approach an author influences our correctness of appreciation of him; and Homer should be approached by a translator in the simplest frame of mind possible. Modern sentiment tries to make the ancient not less than the modern world its own; but against the modern sentiment in its applications to Homer the translator, if he would feel Homer truly – and unless he feels him truly, how can he render him truly? – cannot be too much on his guard.¹⁰

For Arnold, as for Swift, differences between ancient and modern sentiment are represented as alternative frames of mind. This is an important link to Pater, whose own concept of the Renaissance is expressed as a ‘temperament’ and is notoriously historically inaccurate, stressing the status of the construct as a feeling or state of mind as opposed to a historical reality. The shift in the above passage from calm authority to the almost obsessive introspection (‘if he would feel Homer truly’, ‘unless he feels him truly’) reflects a wider conflict in Arnold between disinterestedness and what he characterised in the Preface to the 1853 edition of his poems as ‘the dialogue of the mind with itself’.¹¹ Arnold defined this as the

⁸ Arnold was promoted to Chief Inspector in 1884, only four years before his death. It was not an illustrious career, being one which Arnold initially took on to support a family and which was later marred by the outspokenness of his social and religious criticism.

⁹ Arnold, Preface to *Poems* (1853), p. 12.

¹⁰ Arnold, ‘On Translating Homer’ (1861), in *Complete Prose Works*, ed. Super, i, 97-216 (p.101). Arnold’s inaugural lecture at Oxford as Professor of Poetry was entitled ‘On the Modern Element in Literature’.

¹¹ Arnold, Preface to *Poems* (1853), p. 1.

modern preoccupation with expression over action and partial contemplation over consideration of the whole. He saw such narrow contemplation as opposed to the Greek ideals of literature.¹² ‘An allegory of the state of one’s own mind, the highest problem of an art which imitates actions!’ he scoffs in the Preface – ‘No assuredly, it is not, it never can be so: no great poetical work has ever been produced with such an aim’.¹³ The Preface was partly an attempt to justify Arnold’s removal of his own poem, ‘Empedocles on Etna’, from the volume, which he disqualifies for failing to match up to his new version of the Greek ideal. The withdrawal of ‘Empedocles on Etna’ marked a major turning point in Arnold’s development as a poet: from then on Arnold’s poetic output and inspiration declined, perhaps as a result of these self-imposed restrictions – but he still felt compelled to resist the so-called ‘modern’ imperatives.

Culture and Anarchy is wide ranging in its scope and interests, partly a result of the fact that the book was written in a haphazard, off-the-cuff fashion, as Arnold developed his ideas in response to other critical perspectives on the text that were emerging as he continued to write. ‘Do not you think a timely and pleasing little volume might be made of these Anarchy and Authority essays [...]?’ he wrote to George Smith, his publisher at the *Cornhill Magazine*, in May 1868.¹⁴ When his last lecture as Professor of Poetry at Oxford, ‘Culture and its Enemies’, had been published in the magazine the previous July, Arnold had intended to follow it up with a companion piece, which was to be called ‘Anarchy and Authority’, but instead he delayed in order to have time to respond to the critiques of the first piece, which came pouring in soon after its publication. Most notable were those by Frederic Harrison in the *Fortnightly Review* and Henry Sidgwick in *Macmillan’s Magazine*.¹⁵ Arnold’s most forthright critic, Sidgwick accused him of being ‘ambitious, vague, and perverse’: the accusation of perversity centred on

¹² Ibid., p. 5: ‘[t]hey regarded the whole; we regard the parts. With them, the action predominated over the expression of it; with us, the expression predominates over the action’.

¹³ Ibid., p. 8.

¹⁴ Matthew Arnold to George Smith, 8 May 1868, in *The Letters of Matthew Arnold*, ed. Cecil Y. Lang, 6 vols. (Charlottesville, VA: The University Press of Virginia, 1996-2001), iii, 251.

¹⁵ Frederic Harrison, ‘Culture; A Dialogue’, *Fortnightly Review* xi (1867), 603-14.

what Sidgwick saw as Arnold's linguistic inadequacies and failure to properly identify what he meant by the concept of 'culture':

I think it clear that Mr Arnold, when he speaks of culture, is speaking sometimes of an ideal, sometimes of an actual culture, and does not always know which. He describes it on one page as 'a study of perfection, moving by the force, not merely or primarily of the scientific passion for pure knowledge, but for the moral and social passion for doing good.' A study of this vast aim, moving with the impetus of this double passion, is something that does, I hope, exist among us, but to a limited extent: it is hardly that which has got itself stamped and recognised as culture.¹⁶

Unable to attack the specifics of Arnold's definition of culture – this being so vague and ambiguous – Sidgwick focuses his critique on Arnold's construction of sweetness and light, arguing that 'the world wants fire and strength' – by which Sidgwick means religion – even more.¹⁷ As the 'Prophet of Culture', it is Arnold's sweetness that comes to define him, or at least what is wrong with him, in Sidgwick's mind. '[W]hen a poet keeps congratulating himself that he is not a Philistine', he comments, 'I ask myself, [w]here is the sweetness of culture. For the moment it seems to have turned sour'.¹⁸ Sidgwick's seizure of the phrase 'sweetness and light', which he then twists to suit his own purposes, illustrates the ease with which this malleable phrase could be manipulated. When he was given an honorary DCL degree by Oxford in 1870, the Chancellor told Arnold that he should rather have been called 'Vir dulcissime et lucidissime' (which roughly translates as 'he of the sweetness and light'), implying a gentle joke at Arnold's expense.¹⁹ In his classic study of Arnold from 1939 Lionel Trilling makes the point in an altogether less delicate way: '[t]his phrase has fallen into such disrepute, has come so much to mean a smirking, simpering flabbiness of attitude, a kind of Pollyanna hypocrisy, that it may be well to recall its origin in Swift', Trilling rails, keen to offset what he clearly sees as the damagingly flippant contemporary connotations of the

¹⁶ Sidgwick, 'The Prophet of Culture', p. 272.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 274.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 279.

¹⁹ Honan, *Matthew Arnold: A Life*, p. 350.

phrase.²⁰ Sidgwick latches on to sweetness, rather than light, as the weak point through which to ridicule Arnold's work. As I have shown in the previous chapter, the association of sugary sweetness with commercialised and thus degraded literary tastes made it vulnerable to these kinds of distortions. Arnold aims to rescue the concept of sweetness from these modern associations by using it in *Culture and Anarchy*, but as much as this created new connotations for sweetness, there was a considerable risk attached.

Henry Sidgwick's article appeared in 1867 in response to the appearance of 'Culture and its Enemies' in the *Cornhill* in July. Continuing to expand his material, Arnold soon had enough for a book, and by December of 1868 he was exchanging a series of letters with Smith about the proofs of the volume, now called *Culture and Anarchy*. Ostensibly, the book deals with a number of current political and social issues, such as how to accommodate (or not) the beliefs of the Dissenters, a possible amendment to the law which would allow a man to marry his dead wife's sister, and the differences in general between the classes, which Arnold defines as Barbarians (the aristocracy), Philistines (the middle classes), and Populace (the working class). Honan argues that Arnold's dissatisfaction with the way in which class differences were regulated in English society was connected to the lack of free and detached perspective he saw as part of a general cultural malaise.²¹ By making culture a primary consideration in terms of how social structures were organised, Arnold hoped to instigate a disinterested and objective spirit of improvement. This was not 'Doing as One Likes' (the title of chapter two), so much as doing as one should. As Stefan Collini points out, his main objection to the Dissenters concerns 'the kind of deformation suffered by those who define themselves *primarily* in terms of some sectarian opposition to an established order'.²² For Arnold, the Dissenters were unable to achieve a 'free play of the mind on all subjects', due to a self-imposed intellectual restriction,

²⁰ Lionel Trilling, *Matthew Arnold* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1939), p. 268.

²¹ Honan, *Matthew Arnold: A Life*, p. 339.

²² Stefan Collini, *Matthew Arnold: A Critical Portrait* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), p. 80; author's emphasis.

but Honan insists that theirs were the very values that Arnold wanted to appeal to.²³ The British aristocracy (or ‘Barbarians’) were ‘unawakened’, in Arnold’s view, while the working classes were ‘hopelessly impaired’ in their powers of action and sympathy (139, 141). It was his own class, the Philistines, that Arnold therefore addressed.

The concept of sweetness and light is a key term not just in Arnold’s vocabulary but in the structure of his argument. The concept of culture as ‘the best that has been thought or said’ is a self-conscious reference to Swift’s bee, which ranges through ‘every corner of nature’ using ‘judgement’ and ‘distinction’ to discover ‘the [...] noblest of things’.²⁴ Arnold’s description of the purveyors of culture draws on Swiftean imagery: ‘great men of culture are those who have had a passion for diffusing, for making prevail, for carrying from one end of society to the other, the best knowledge, the best ideas of their time’ (53). The phrase sweetness and light is a consistent feature of Arnold’s argument, cropping up far more often in the text than other key concepts, including Hellenism and Hebraism and the differences Arnold sets up between Barbarians, Philistines and Populace. Sweetness and light is at the centre of Arnold’s project in *Culture and Anarchy*, as he contends that: ‘increased sweetness, increased light, increased life, increased sympathy, – is an idea which the new democracy needs far more than the blessedness of the franchise’ (109). Sweetness and light are part of Arnold’s moral and social mission to transform the prerogatives of English society: ‘the sweetness and light of the few must be imperfect until the raw and unkindled masses of humanity are touched with sweetness and light’, he insists (112). The image is opposed to the idea of ‘machinery’ in the text, by which Arnold means physical and material concerns. ‘Faith in machinery is [...] our besetting danger’, he contends, since it encourages people to treat it ‘as if it had a value in and for itself’ (96). Machinery becomes ideologically aligned with Swift’s spider in *Culture and Anarchy*, which ‘spins and spits’ entirely from itself. Sweetness and light, on the other hand –

²³ Honan, *Matthew Arnold: A Life*, p. 338.

²⁴ Swift, ‘Battle of the Books’, pp. 112-13.

which take their cue from Swift's bee – form the antidote to the mistaken priorities of modern industrial culture.

Arnold drives this point home in *Culture and Anarchy* by linking sweetness and light to the ancient Greeks and the values of classical civilisation. 'Sweetness and light evidently have to do with the bent or side in humanity which we call Hellenic', he argues, connecting the idea of sweetness and light to the poetic culture of the classical world: '[t]he immense spiritual significance of the Greeks is due to their having been inspired with this central and happy idea of the essential character of human perfection [...] In thus making sweetness and light to be characters of perfection, culture is of like spirit with poetry' (178, 99). In his important study of Arnold's cultural theory Joseph Carroll reiterates this point: linking the concept of sweetness and light to 'the best self of Hellenism' as it is represented in *Culture and Anarchy*.²⁵

Hellenism is a central tenet of Arnold's philosophy in the text, where as a social theory it is contrasted to the concept of Hebraism. While for Arnold Hellenic principles take in free play and an objective understanding of the world, Hebraism stands for rigid order and obedience, and is linked to restrictive religious practices, such as those of the Dissenters. In connecting sweetness and light to the idea of Hellenism in *Culture and Anarchy* Arnold deliberately subverts the modern associations of sweetness with saccharine sentimentality in order to demonstrate the more enduring value of Hellenic principles.

As Helen Small has shown, Arnold's use of sweetness and light in *Culture and Anarchy* self-consciously plays on the idea of sweetness as it was known in the classical period when it was involved in debates about the value of poetry. Plato and Pindar both compare poets to bees in their writing, and, in a reversal of the Platonic associations (which employed this imagery in a disparaging way), Horace figures *dulce et utile* as his ultimate defence of poetry.²⁶ His allusion to *dulce et utile* was, as Small points out, the most famous of these classical allusions

²⁵ Joseph Carroll, *The Cultural Theory of Matthew Arnold* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1982), p. 90.

²⁶ Helen Small, 'Of Sweetness and Light, and Other Utilities', draft chapter of a book in process.

to sweetness by the time that Arnold was writing in the 1860s: it is also the basis for Swift's formulation of sweetness and light which Arnold borrows in *Culture and Anarchy*. In this sense, Swift's bee – the self-styled defender of ancient culture – embodies a classical form of sweetness in his satire, and it is this classical sweetness that Arnold hopes to deploy as a defence against modern culture in *Culture and Anarchy*.

Guided by Horace and Swift, Arnold draws on an older, positive discourse of sweetness that is directly opposed to the contemporary view of sweetness as a symptom of cultural decay. He writes about 'real thought and real beauty; real sweetness and real light', suggesting that these are opposed to 'ordinary popular literature' in a way that distinguishes classical sweetness from modern 'sugary romances'. In common with the writers in the previous chapter Arnold figures the public consumption of literature as akin to consuming food: '[p]lenty of people will try to give the masses, as they call them, an intellectual food prepared and adapted in the way they think proper [...] The ordinary popular literature is an example of this way of working' (112). Arnold's sweetness and light, linked to bees and honey from the classical era through to Swift, is figured as the antithesis of the 'intellectual food' of the masses, which throughout the 1860s was linked to specifically sugary sweetness. Arnold's juxtaposition of classical and modern culture has much in common with the contrast that Christina Rossetti sets up in *Goblin Market* between the natural sweetness of honey and the commodified sweetness of sugar. Although honeyed sweetness symbolises different things for Rossetti and Arnold – respectively, the joys of domesticity and the integrity of classical culture – both writers present it as an alternative to the degradation and insincerity of the modern world.

In many ways, *Culture and Anarchy* is a sort of guide for how people in a post-industrial age should consume culture. The vague and imprecise language for which Arnold was condemned by his critics, and specifically the phrase 'sweetness and light', is in fact essential to this project, because it allows him to evoke an idea of culture that is impossible to

define precisely and to make subtle distinctions between the practices of proper culture and those of Philistinism.

The pursuit of perfection, then, is the pursuit of sweetness and light. He who works for sweetness and light, works to make reason and the will of God prevail. He who works for machinery, he who works for hatred, works only for confusion. Culture looks beyond machinery, culture hates hatred; culture has but one great passion, the passion for sweetness and light. It has one even yet greater! – the passion for making them *prevail*. (112; author's emphasis)

The passage has one main shift in it. After the second sentence there is a break after the word 'prevail' which anticipates Arnold's repetition of this word at the end of the passage. Arnold uses the discourse he establishes surrounding the fact that sweetness and light can only achieve their full effect when united, to demonstrate to readers how the same words can mean different things in different contexts, and this allows him to go on to make the otherwise paradoxical claim that 'culture hates hatred'. '[H]e who works for hatred, works only for confusion', Arnold insists, and the reader is supposed to take this at face value while understanding that it is possible for 'culture' to hate in a proper, and thus socially useful, way.

Arnold saw sweetness and light as separate but as working in conjunction, describing them as the 'main characters' of perfection (115). However, the imagery also implies that culture can only be known by its effects: in other words, by the physical sensations of sweetness and of light. As the embodiment of culture, sweetness and light transcend their role as mere rhetoric, and become in themselves emblematic of this culture. Arnold makes them the symbol of successful self-development in the text: 'the idea of self-transformation, of growing towards some measure of sweetness and light not yet reached, is evidently at clean variance with the perfect self-satisfaction current in my class, the middle-class' (138), he argues, positioning indolence in opposition to improvement. Ultimately, Arnold's culture is, by dint of its very virtue, indescribable, and thus it can only be known by its transformative effects, by the measure of sweetness and light that it yields.

Furthermore, if light, which implies enlightenment, is a metaphor for knowledge in the text, then sweetness appears to be some kind of emotion, or aesthetic quality or physical sensation (or all of the above), signalling how this increased comprehension feels and makes us feel. This formulation also figures a crucial role for sweetness in the structure of Arnold's argument. *Culture and Anarchy* is ostensibly not about culture, but how to consume culture properly, and, assuming that this is the case, then the presence or absence of sweetness would be a telling indication about the relative success or failure of the endeavour. If, as Arnold seems to be suggesting, there are no clear rules as to what might constitute culture, this leaves people more reliant on their feelings as a method of judgement. As much as the concept of sweetness and light is an abstraction, through its origins in the material sweetness of Swift's bee's honey it retains a connection to physicality which continues to be present in Arnold.

Collini insists that Arnold's intention was to stay faithful to Swift's interpretation:

It is unfortunate, I think, that the words "sweetness and light" now have a somewhat unctuous, almost genteel, even anaemic air about them; they suggest too much the mild uplift dispensed by that kind of wet do-gooder who never seems to have felt the pull of any real human appetites. But these were not the connotations Arnold had in mind.²⁷

Sweetness, more than light, represents the pull of these 'real human appetites' in *Culture and Anarchy*.

Prior to Arnold, the literary culture of sweetness was overwhelmingly viewed in negative terms, as commercial and unenlightened. However, Arnold was not alone at this time in seeking to construct a more positive and open model of sweetness. Like Arnold, Swinburne and Pater both make sweetness a central term in their investigations into the role of culture in society. By connecting sweetness to such a nebulous concept as culture, and by overturning the established definition of sweetness (i.e. that it was mass market and perverse), Arnold paradoxically sets the agenda for sweetness to be used or read as a term capable of other kinds of perversions, which Swinburne and Pater would explore more fully. Similarly, while Arnold

²⁷ Collini, *Matthew Arnold: A Critical Portrait*, p. 83.

implicitly links the concept of sweetness and light to the cultural and material history of honey, Swinburne and Pater take this further, making classical definitions of sweetness and the physical experience of the taste central to their arguments.

Swinburne's *Poems and Ballads* and the Sexualisation of Sweetness

Swinburne's contemporaries recognised that sweetness was as important a term in his poetry as it would be in Arnold's prose. But while Arnold's 'sweetness and light' was accepted as an attempt to define the 'best' that culture could offer, Swinburne's sweetness was condemned as evidence of his sensationalism and vulgarity. A review of Swinburne's *Poems and Ballads* (1866) by Henry Morley which appeared in the *Examiner* in September 1866 uses sweetness to link the collection to other forms of devalued literary production. 'There are sweets enough', Morley writes, 'in these two little volumes to set up a wholesale grocer for his life-time'.²⁸ The comments connect Swinburne to uncultured commercialism through the image of sugary confectionery, and in this way Morley's review forms part of a critical discourse, as discussed in the previous chapter, in which sensation fiction and other unedifying literature was compared to sugary food. In Morley's image, the 'two little volumes' become interchangeable with grocery shop wares themselves, reinforcing their status as commodities and undermining Swinburne's artistic claims, although ostensibly Morley's review was in support of him. While Arnold at a later date uses honeyed sweetness to define culture in *Culture and Anarchy*, Morley's comparison of Swinburne to sugar consolidates the sense in which *Poems and Ballads* was seen as a perversion of proper aesthetic standards, a view which centred on the collection's perceived departure from classical values despite its use of classical sources.

²⁸ Henry Morley, Review of *Poems and Ballads*, *Examiner* (1866), in *Algernon Swinburne: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Clyde K. Hyder (London: Routledge, 1970), pp. 42-8 (p. 44).

The review draws on a tradition of poetry criticism which worried over the distinctions between low culture and high art and used sweetness as a key term in this debate. Keats had faced similar criticism for his poetry, but his writing was also defended in terms which played on the potential of sweetness as a signifier to represent the triumph of feeling over reason. Francis Jeffrey in the *Edinburgh Review* demanded for Keats ‘all the indulgence that can be claimed for a first attempt’ for the reason that ‘[i]t is impossible to resist the intoxication of [the poems’] sweetness’.²⁹ Yet Jeffrey’s review, in the same way as Morley’s, forms only a limited defence. Both reviews are, in a sense, *apologias* for inadequacies in Keats and Swinburne, but the effect of Morley’s review is to put Swinburne, an Eton scholar and Oxford graduate, on Keats’s level, who was taunted for having trained as an apothecary.

Hostility to Keats centred on class: Keats’s lower middle-class background was seen as an impenetrable barrier to a proper communion with Greek literature, and despite Swinburne’s privileged upbringing and classical education, Morley’s review, which emphasises his youth and inexperience, highlights a similar anxiety, playing on the idea that the language Swinburne uses is corrupted. ‘Here are the passions of youth fearlessly expressed’, Morley exclaims, before performing a detailed critique of Swinburne’s overuse of the word ‘eyelids’.³⁰ This fear about language being corrupted also takes in the word ‘sweet’. Keats faced resistance due to the class and social implications that were believed to be contained within his poetry’s refusal to conform to conventional subjects and language: John Gibson Lockhart, writing for *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* in 1818, told him to ‘get back to the shop’, implying not only that Keats was not educated enough to be able to understand ‘proper’ poetry but also that

²⁹ Francis Jeffrey, Review of Keats’s *Endymion* (1818) and *Lamia, Isabella, The Eve of St Agnes, and Other Poems* (1820), *Edinburgh Review* xxxiv (1820), in *The Romantics Reviewed: Contemporary Reviews of British Romantic Writers*, ed. Donald H. Reiman, 9 vols. (New York: Garland, 1972), *Part C: Shelley, Keats, and London Radical Writers*, 2 vols., i, 385-90 (p. 386).

³⁰ Morley, Review of *Poems and Ballads*, p. 43.

his own poetry was of no value because he didn't belong to the 'educated' classes.³¹ In a similar way, Morley's fears about Swinburne centre on the ambiguous associations of his language, as he imagines the 'sweets' of Swinburne's poetry becoming actual sweets in a grocery shop. We believe we are reading the language of classical antiquity, he implies, but actually it is the language of the marketplace, and it is dangerously seductive.

I am going to argue that, as well as their class and cultural agendas, what these criticisms also pick up on is the way in which Swinburne himself uses the term 'sweet' and its derivatives to flout conventional boundaries. Sweetness is central to Swinburne's poetics due to its openness and multivalence as a concept, which allows it to transform and subvert ostensibly fixed categories. 'Of "sweet" – "sweet" – "sweet," he has the iteration of a canary bird', Morley sneers, the switch from meaningful language to empty sound – the 'sweet' of the poems echoing the tweet of a canary bird – demonstrating not only the flexibility of sweetness as a signifier but also the way in which Morley feels Swinburne is using it.³² The comment recognises sweetness as capable of representing linguistic as well as cultural perversion, and anticipates a later strain of Swinburne criticism led by T. S. Eliot in which style was felt to be privileged over substance in his poetry. 'What we get in Swinburne', Eliot argues, 'is an expression by sound'.³³ More recently, Jerome J. McGann has provided a counter position to Eliot through his suggestion that repetitions in Swinburne perform a positive function, building up and accumulating meaning in his texts.³⁴ The way in which Swinburne refers to sweetness throughout *Poems and Ballads* consolidates its potential as a subversive term, able to represent a series of challenges not only to class and to religion, but also to sexuality. The most significant sense in which Swinburne uses sweetness to represent transgression is in terms of

³¹ John Gibson Lockhart, Review of Keats's *Poems* (1817) and *Endymion* (1818), *Edinburgh Review* iii (1818), in *The Romantics Reviewed, Part C: Shelley, Keats, and London Radical Writers*, i, 90-95 (p. 95).

³² Morley, Review of *Poems and Ballads*, p. 44.

³³ T. S. Eliot, 'Swinburne as Poet' (1920), in *Selected Essays*, 3rd edn (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), pp. 323-7 (p. 324).

³⁴ Jerome J. McGann, *Swinburne: An Experiment in Criticism* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1972).

conventional sexuality. Moreover, Swinburne's sexuality, like that of Pater, has implications for his theory of art. For Swinburne, good poetry transcends boundaries, including that between the physical and the spiritual. The notion of sweetness as part of a subversive terminology is in keeping with the reception history of *Poems and Ballads*. The volume was published in July 1866 and instantly made an impact after being viciously attacked in the press. As Allison Pease relates, almost overnight Swinburne 'went from being hailed as the next great poet of England to being vilified' for what the newspapers deemed his 'recklessly sexual and anti-Christian' verse.³⁵ By early August, his publishers Moxon and Co. had withdrawn the book in response to fears of a lawsuit, although it was reissued in September by John Camden Hotton, a publisher who specialised in erotic literature. The tumultuous bibliographic history of *Poems and Ballads* confirms its status as a controversial work.

Before considering the implications of these contentions for Swinburne's poetry, it will be necessary to define what kind of sweetness Swinburne himself thought he was writing about. The heavy network of classical allusion in *Poems and Ballads* would appear to suggest that honey, as the classical form of sweetness, provides a reference point for Swinburne, and there are several moments when honey is discussed in *Poems and Ballads*. In 'Before Parting', which was first published separately in the *Spectator* in 1862, honey is the reference point for the speaker's short-lived emotions about love.

A month or twain to live on honeycomb
Is pleasant; but one tires of scented time,
Cold sweet recurrence of accepted rhyme,
And that strong purple under juice and foam
Where the wine's heart has burst;
Nor feel the latter kisses like the first.³⁶

³⁵ Allison Pease, *Modernism, Mass Culture, and the Aesthetics of Obscenity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 37.

³⁶ Algernon Charles Swinburne, 'Before Parting', *Poems and Ballads* (1866), in *Poems and Ballads and Atalanta in Calydon*, ed. Kenneth Haynes (Penguin: London, 2000), ll. 1-6. All future line references to poems from this collection will be cited in the text.

Later in the poem the speaker compares his experience of love to ‘some bee-built cell’ that ‘[f]eels at filled lips the heavy honey swell’ (29-30). The ‘scented time’ in the stanza (itself a pun on ‘thyme’, a common source of honey), and a later reference to ‘some perfumed wise’ (11) which obscures the speaker’s face, might well refer to the scent of flowers visited by the bee. In ‘The Two Dreams’, ‘hidden honey’ (73) signals unconsummated sexuality that will eventually be realised when the lovers escape the difficulties that prevent them from being together. There are numerous other references to honey in *Poems and Ballads*, some of which might help explain Swinburne’s penchant for the idea of ‘stinging’ pain, when we think of the bee and his stinging mechanism.³⁷ Swinburne’s sadomasochistic binaries, in which bittersweet love is an all consuming experience and lovers frequently dream of the beloved’s torture and death, finds an aesthetic compatibility with the bee as a symbol, whose penetrative sting is fatal to itself.

Elsewhere in *Poems and Ballads* other references to sweetness centre on fruit. In ‘Laus Veneris’, the forbidden pleasures of Venus’s mountain are compared to the forbidden fruit of the Bible.

There lover-like with lips and limbs that meet
They lie, they pluck sweet fruit of life and eat;
But me the hot and hungry days devour,
And in my mouth no fruit of theirs is sweet. (97-100)

The inability of the knight to enjoy the food is symptomatic of his Christian desire to do penance. The nature of the transgression is connected with sexuality (‘with lips and limbs that meet’) and alludes to the fact that in Christian doctrine sexual transgressions were punishable by eternal suffering in hell, through the fact that both sexuality and hell are referred to in the ‘hot and hungry days’. In ‘Félise’, the speaker compares the female body itself to sweetened fruit. His ideal woman must be ‘half perverse, / And sweet like sharp soft fruit to bite’ (102-3), confirming female sexuality as the site of both sexual pleasure and perversion.

³⁷ I am indebted to Marion Thain for this observation.

As Catherine Maxwell has pointed out, ‘Swinburne’s women are voracious aggressors, who revel in their sexuality and their erotic dominance and control’.³⁸ Sweetness becomes a key indicator of this sexuality in the poem, which for Swinburne is the site of both lust and violence. ‘Anactoria’ echoes the language of ‘Laus Veneris’ when its speaker, Sappho, articulates her mingled hatred of and sadomasochistic desire for her unfaithful lover Anactoria. ‘I would earth had thy body as fruit to eat, / And no mouth but some serpent’s found thee sweet’ (25-6). ‘Anactoria’ was one of the most controversial poems in *Poems and Ballads*, and was singled out along with ‘Dolores’, another poem about one of Swinburne’s provocative femme fatales, for criticism in the *London Review* as ‘especially horrible’.³⁹ The existing perversion of Sappho’s prohibited desire for Anactoria, which is reflected in the latter’s representation as forbidden fruit, enables Swinburne to enact a further perversion of ‘normal’ desire, introducing a violent and destructive element into Sappho’s love.

As Edmund Gosse records, Swinburne – who studied at Balliol College between 1856 and 1860 – attended Arnold’s initial lectures as Professor of Poetry at Oxford but ultimately found them ‘disappointing’, reflecting the way in which Swinburne’s later work distinguishes him from Arnold.⁴⁰ While Arnold’s sweetness and light signifies abstraction it nevertheless remains grounded both textually and materially in the image of Swift’s bee. Paradoxically, although Swinburne’s sweetness is more overtly bodily than Arnold’s, Swinburne seems to revel in the idea of sweetness as an undifferentiated signifier and the sense of unlicensed free play this entails. There is definitely a sense in Swinburne – which is not really there in Arnold

³⁸ Catherine Maxwell, *The Female Sublime from Milton to Swinburne: Bearing Blindness* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), p. 182.

³⁹ Anonymous, *London Review* (1866), in *Algernon Swinburne: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Hyder, pp. 35-8 (p. 37). Swinburne responded to these comments in his *Notes on Poems and Reviews*, which was published in 1866 in response to the criticisms of his work. ‘The first, it appears, of these especially horrible poems is *Anactoria*. I am informed, and have not cared to verify the assertion, that this poem has excited, among the chaste and candid critics of the day or hour or minute, a more vehement reprobation, a more virtuous horror, a more passionate appeal, than any other of my writing’ – see Swinburne, *Notes on Poems and Reviews* (London: John Camden Hotten, 1866), p. 7.

⁴⁰ Edmund Gosse, *The Life of Algernon Charles Swinburne*, vol. xix of *The Complete Works of Algernon Charles Swinburne*, Bonchurch edn, ed. E. Gosse and T. J. Wise, 20 vols. (London: W. Heinemann, 1925-27), p. 50.

– that sweetness could mean literally anything, and in many ways, as an aesthetic concept, sweetness has its primary value as an agent of transformation or change in his poetry. In ‘At Eleusis’, another of Swinburne’s Greek adaptations, he consolidates different material bases for sweetness within one abstract concept. The different references to sweetness – as in honey or fruit – are linked together through similarities in their phrasing in the text. Swinburne compares:

words
Made sweet with wisdom as the rare wine is
Thickened with honey (2-4)

To:

And ye put water to my mouth, made sweet
With brown hill-berries (21-2)

In both examples the construction ‘made sweet’ is applied to different sources of sweetness – wine, fruit and honey – indicating the mainly metaphorical value of the image overall. The reference to wine highlights another way in which sweetness comes to be thought of in Swinburne’s poetry. To figure wine as sweet is to figure sweetness as intoxicating, enhancing the sense of corruption and perversion surrounding the existing uses of the word in *Poems and Ballads*. Swinburne’s employment of a poetics of sweetness to indicate something abstract in his writing is in many ways a metaphor for how his poetry works in general, as the breakdown of one particular set of semantic rules assists in the collapse of other moral and conceptual frameworks.

In ‘Félise’ Swinburne muses on the idea of mutation using sweetness as the essence of transformation.

For many loves are good to see;
Mutable loves, and loves perverse;
But there is nothing, nor shall be,
So sweet, so wicked, but my verse
Can dream of worse (161-5)

The sudden shift Swinburne effects from sweetness and wickedness as two opposing sides of a regulated dichotomy to the unregulated transgression of the final line – the scintillating ‘worse’ that only his verse can dream of – challenges the sanctity of the conventional opposition. Instead of morality being governed by two competing categories, the possibilities for transgression, which combines the sweet and the wicked, are now endless. In the second and fourth lines of the stanza, Swinburne rhymes ‘perverse’ with ‘verse’, highlighting the linguistic and sonic similarity between the two words and anticipating the shift of the final line in which his poetry is the enabler of transgression. The word ‘perverse’ is made to rhyme in on itself, but simultaneously to undo itself, since it turns on the word ‘verse’ – an alteration of the original word. The sense in which this in itself is a perversion highlights the importance Swinburne attributed to this feature of his poetry. Sweetness seems to be interchangeable with wickedness in the stanza, but although Swinburne appears to be talking about conventional sweetness, he actually means sweetness which is transgressive or perverse, and this subversive sweetness is the means by which he indicates the pleasure he takes in being ‘wicked’ in his poetry, i.e. in the destruction of traditional categories. Swinburne’s breakdown of these categories is to him the purpose of his art – indeed, all art, and sweetness as a term is central to these unorthodox transformations.

The sense of transformation in ‘Félise’ is appropriate since the main component of the action in the poem is change. It concerns the story of a young man who one year earlier was violently in love with an older woman living in the country. Since then, he has been in town, and while his feelings have subsided, hers have only increased. Sweetness seems to represent initially some kind of disappointment in the poem. The name itself, ‘Félise’, is: ‘[t]he sweetest name that ever love / Grew weary of’ (44-5), the second line undermining the first and also altering its meaning, a common effect of the poetics of sweetness in *Poems and Ballads*. Later Swinburne repeats the phrase with only a slight variation – ‘Félise’ is now ‘[t]he sweetest name

that ever love / Waxed weary of" (89-90) – the repetition itself enhancing the sense of impasse surrounding the situation. 'Behold, there is no grief like this', the speaker warns almost menacingly, '[t]hou shalt find out how sweet it is' (226, 228). In a letter to John Ruskin in 1866 Swinburne alludes to this sense of transformative sweetness in the poem. He defends his rhyme of 'flowers' and 'hours' in lines 91 and 93 of 'Félise' on the basis of their similarity in aesthetic terms, and connects them both to sweetness. 'As to the flowers and hours', he insists, 'they rhyme naturally, being the sweetest and most transient things that exist – when they *are* sweet'.⁴¹ Sweetness represents a sort of excess for Swinburne, and in its excessiveness he identifies a potential for perversion.

Sweetness is at the heart of the transformations in 'Félise', and these transformations sum up the subversive potential of Swinburne's poetry. The concept of poetry as perverse was a crucial one to Swinburne's philosophy. Yopie Prins records how he connected his introduction to metre and rhythm in school with one teacher in particular, who as well as his interest in metre, also beat Swinburne repeatedly. Later on Swinburne boasted that his school-day experiences of such punishments had given him a better ear for metre than Tennyson, consolidating the sense in which his poetry collapses bodily feeling, especially pain, and poetic prerogatives.⁴²

In 'Itylus', the term 'sweet' also signals a transformative shift. The poem is an account of the Greek myth surrounding Philomela, whose monologue forms the basis of the action. It deals with the aftermath of Philomela and her sister Procne's murder of Itylus, Procne's son, in revenge for the rape of Philomela by Procne's husband, Tereus. After killing Itylus and feeding Tereus his dismembered body, the sisters are pursued by him until the gods intervene, turning Philomela into a nightingale and Procne into a swallow to allow them to escape. The shift in the physical form of the women is embodied linguistically in Swinburne's text. He repeatedly

⁴¹ Swinburne to John Ruskin, 21 March 1866, *The Swinburne Letters*, ed. Cecil Y. Lang, 6 vols (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1959-62), i, 160; author's emphasis.

⁴² Yopie Prins, *Victorian Sappho* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 151.

mingles the words ‘sister’ and ‘swallow’, playing on their alliterative similarity to suggest Procne’s transformation from one form to another.

Swallow, my sister, O sister swallow (1)
 O swallow, sister, O fair swift swallow (7)
 Swallow, my sister, O singing swallow (31)
 O swallow, sister, O fleeting swallow (37)
 O sweet stray sister, O shifting swallow (43)

Swinburne’s use of ‘swallow’ as the central rhyme of the poem also plays on its significance to the story in a gustatory sense. Swinburne references the physical vocabulary of swallowing in order to highlight the relationship between Procne’s act of feeding Itylus’s remains to Tereus and her physical transformation. What appears to interest Swinburne about the episode is the way in which language can highlight the perversity of other types of change. To talk about sweetness in a poem about someone who feeds her son (or in Philomela’s case, her nephew) to her husband is in any case quite perverse, but Swinburne makes sweetness the site of further transformations which are rooted in the workings of language. ‘O fleet sweet swallow’ (13), the poem continues, the lack of punctuation in the address emphasising the sense in which the meanings of the words and also their sounds run into each other. The alliteration of ‘sweet’ and ‘swallow’ is anticipated by the rhyme of ‘fleet’ and ‘sweet’, but it is the status of sweetness as a flexible term which allows Swinburne to make the final transition. And would it be too farfetched to conjecture that Morley’s conglomeration of ‘sweet’ and ‘tweet’ in his review of Swinburne was influenced by Swinburne’s selfsame movements in ‘Itylus’? After all, while ‘Itylus’ concerns a swallow, in the review Morley also connects linguistic shifts in sweetness (from ‘sweet’ to ‘tweet’) with a bird – in his case a canary – in a way which recalls Swinburne’s ‘fleet sweet swallow’, and which perhaps also provides further evidence that Morley took his cue about how language worked in *Poems and Ballads* from Swinburne himself.

Sweetness often functions in *Poems and Ballads* to indicate a particular kind of pleasure which is physical in nature and opposed to conventional morality. ‘My love, that had no part in man’s, / Was sweeter than all shape of sweet’ Sappho declares in ‘The Masque of Queen Bersabe’ (268-9), the homosexual implication of the ‘love that had no part in man’s’ intensifying the erotic potential of the encounter as it is represented by sweetness. Desire is often represented as appetite in the poems, and taste – or the embodiment of this appetite – is invariably represented by sweetness. In ‘Anactoria’, Sappho’s fantasy that the body of her unfaithful lover be ‘abolished and consumed, / And in my flesh thy very flesh entombed!’ is a physical enactment of her longing to possess her lover entirely (113-14), to become one with her physically, and her lust – ‘[t]hy breasts like honey!’ – is similarly expressed as cannibal desire (112). Unlike the occasions in *Poems and Ballads* when sweetness is a free floating signifier, here it is clearly linked to honey, and as such is the same kind of classical sweetness that Arnold uses later. Swinburne applies it, however, in a way that Arnold never would, with sweetness being used to flag up subversive sexual desires:

Ah, take no thought for Love’s sake; shall this be,
 And she who loves thy lover not love thee?
 Sweet soul, sweet mouth of all that laughs and lives,
 Mine she is, very mine; and she forgives.
 For I beheld in sleep the light that is
 In her high place at Paphos, heard to kiss
 Of her body and soul that mix with eager tears
 And laughter stinging through the eyes and ears;
 Saw Love, as burning flame from crown to feet,
 Imperishable, upon her storied seat;
 Clear eyelids lifted towards the north and south,
 A mind of many colours, and a mouth
 Of many tunes and kisses; and she bowed,
 With all her subtle face laughing aloud,
 Bowed down upon me, saying, ‘Who doth thee wrong,
 Sappho?’ but thou – thy body is the song,
 Thy mouth the music; thou art more than I,
 Though my voice die not till the whole world die (59-76)

Swinburne’s collapse of Anactoria’s ‘sweet soul’ into her ‘sweet mouth’ anticipates the later collapses in the passage between physical and spiritual boundaries: ‘body and soul [...] mix

with eager tears', as Sappho makes Anactoria's sexual attractiveness indicative of her moral worth.

These breakdowns of boundaries set the scene for further disintegrations which will result in Sappho's proclamation 'I Sappho shall be one with all these things' (276). The statement refers to her return to nature in death, to the fact that her body will be one with the earth, but there are also implications for Sappho's art. As Prins has made clear, Swinburne was hugely invested in Sappho as an artistic standard, and this interest was directed by the idea of the Lesbian poet as a fragment, due to the limited evidence that existed of her actual work. As Prins explains:

What makes Sappho sublime [to Swinburne] is the mutilation of the Sapphic fragments, allowing her to be simultaneously dismembered and remembered, in a complex mediation between corpse and corpus: the body of the poet is sacrificed to the body of her song, and this body of song is sacrificed to posterity, which recollects the scattered fragments in order to recall Sappho herself as the long-lost origin of lyric poetry.⁴³

In a letter (quoted by Prins) Swinburne pledges 'lifelong faith' to Sappho precisely because all that survives of her are 'mutilated fragments'.⁴⁴ Sappho becomes the model of artistic integrity for Swinburne because the body of her work as a poet is able to be broken down and reconstructed, and Swinburne rehearses these transitions in 'Anactoria'. In the extract above, Anactoria is 'more than' Sappho, even though Sappho's art will make her immortal ('my voice die not till the whole world die'), since she is the subject of Sappho's song and as such she precedes the artist in importance. Sappho's 'Ode to Anactoria' provides the context for Swinburne's poem: he even works some of her own lines into the text.⁴⁵

The conflation Swinburne performs in 'Anactoria', of her 'sweet soul' into her 'sweet mouth', is replicated elsewhere in the poems, always using sweetness as a key term. More than Arnold, and more than any other writer in this period (with the possible exception of Rossetti

⁴³ Ibid., p. 115-16.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 115.

⁴⁵ Haynes cites several lines in 'Anactoria' that have been borrowed or influenced by Sappho – Swinburne, *Poems and Ballads and Atalanta in Calydon*, ed. Haynes, p. 333.

in *Goblin Market*), Swinburne puts forward an account of sweetness that is intensely and primarily physical. Throughout *Poems and Ballads*, sweetness is representative of sensual experience, and particularly sexual feeling. ‘My hair was as sweet scent that drips’, Chrysothemis recalls in ‘The Masque of Queen Bersabe’ (228), and in ‘Fragoletta’ the speaker’s anticipation of sexual pleasure is alluded to in the ‘drip’ of ‘sweet leaves’, wherein ‘all the sweet life slip / Forth’ (18-19). Mouths are the site of both consumption and sexuality in the poems, and they are routinely described using a vocabulary of sweetness. In ‘Sapphics’, Swinburne’s tribute to Sappho’s stanza, the speaker imagines the inhabitants of the idyllic and free thinking Lesbos ‘kissing across their smitten / Lutes with lips more sweet than the sound of lute-strings’ (49-50).

In ‘Before Dawn’, the ‘[s]weet lips’ of the speaker’s beloved connect her sexuality both to the ‘[s]in sweet’ and the ‘[s]weet life’ of preceding lines (32, 19, 1). The effect of this is to make them seem unified, when actually in conventional terms the bubbling sexuality of the lover’s encounter would have been opposed to established notions of propriety. The poem plays on the ability of language to shape morality. Swinburne adopts a playful tone in which he can lightly shrug off what could in fact be considered as serious moral issues.

To say of shame – what is it?
Of virtue – we can miss it,
Of sin – we can but kiss it,
And it’s no longer sin (37-40)

In the passage, sin is transformed by a kiss into – not virtue – but something indescribable, at least not something that Swinburne can explain. The new action is only identified in terms of what it is not. It is ‘no longer sin’, but is not recognised as virtuous either – in fact, virtue as a quality has already been dismissed in the poem. Swinburne transcends conventional boundaries and their strict assignation of meaning so that words become only transitional terms. Sweetness is among the most prominent of these transitional words: it signifies sensual feelings so intense that they override and destabilise moral categories.

In 'Dolores', 'sweet lips' (65) are also suggestive of the sublimation of the lover's identity to her sexuality, as in 'Anactoria' and 'Before Dawn'. All three poems feature female subjects about whom the speakers harbour sadomasochistic fantasies, and these fantasies are often the root of a disruptive desire in the poems. Swinburne ponders on the role of the loved one's lips as indicative of the transformative power of her sexuality in the poem.

Could you hurt me, sweet lips, though I hurt you?
 Men touch them, and change in a trice
 The lilies and languors of virtue
 For the raptures and roses of vice (65-8)

The presence of sweetness as a word suggestive in a conventional sense of pleasant and insipid niceness allows Swinburne to emphasise the extent of the transgression from virtue to vice, yet also maintain a sense of its legitimacy. In 'The Garden of Proserpine' he describes his eponymous subject's lips as 'sweeter / Than love's who fears to greet her' (53-4). References to sweet throats and sweet mouths abound in the course of the poems, calling attention to the mouth and lips as the site of both consumption and sexuality, and possibly implying the idea of the labia. In many of Swinburne's poems sweetness also expresses the idea of synaesthesia. In 'The Two Dreams' it becomes indicative of a universal physicality that is expressed through all the senses: 'if dreams be sharp and sore / Shall not waking time increase much more / With taste and sound, sweet eyesight or sweet scent?' (189-91) the speaker questions. Itself symbolic of a lack of clear boundaries (or even the capacity to transform them), sweetness is a term both ambiguous and significant enough to represent these synaesthetic transitions. As Catherine Maxwell records, there is evidence that Swinburne's senses were particularly acute, a fact which might also explain his predilection for sadomasochism, since, as Maxwell also notes in her detailed and engaging study: '[e]xtreme sensory stimulus is usually experienced as pain, or

a pleasure that borders on pain'.⁴⁶ The centrality of sweetness to such expressions of hyper-sensory stimulation places the concept at the heart of Swinburne's poetics.

Sweetness is frequently indicative of some kind of transition point in Swinburne which seems to refer to the struggle between pleasure and morality but also has the potential to flag up subversive, sadomasochistic desires. In 'Laus Veneris' the '[e]xceeding pleasure' Venus 'weaves and multiplies [...] out of extreme pain' (119-20) is alternately sweet or bitter according to whether individual desire or social judgements are privileged. 'Alas thy beauty! for thy mouth's sweet sake / My soul is bitter to me' (145-6), the knight laments, but whereas in 'Anactoria' the configuration of the beloved's 'sweet soul, sweet mouth' signifies the dissolution of boundaries, in 'Laus Veneris' the competing interests of lust and social responsibility are opposed to one another, but become sympathetically linked through the attractiveness of their opposition. An underlying discourse of sadomasochism pervades the text, but whereas in other poems in the volume, including 'Anactoria', this subject is discussed openly, in 'Laus Veneris' Swinburne leaves more to the imagination, using sweetness to explore the confused boundary between pleasure and pain.

The poem deals with the story of the Tannhäuser, a German poet and minstrel who became the subject of a legend propagated in an anonymous ballad. This legend figures the Tannhäuser as a knight as well as poet, and imagines that he travels to the mythical mountain of Venus and spends a year there living with the goddess in blissful love, before Christian repentance leads him to seek absolution in Rome. Once he arrives there, the pope tells him that until his dry, old stick sprouts leaves he will never receive absolution from God. Swinburne takes the story up at this point in a fictional French epigraph which details how the knight returns to Venus and the mountain but the pope is afterwards amazed to find that the stick bears flowers. Filled with remorse, he tries to seek out the knight: '[m]ais oncques plus ne le

⁴⁶ Maxwell, *The Female Sublime*, p. 195.

virent; car toujours demeura ce pauvre chevalier auprès de Venus la haulte et forte déesse ès flancs de la montagne amoureuse'.⁴⁷

In the poem, sweetness is emblematic of the tempting pleasures which attracted the knight to the mountain and kept him there. He repeatedly states his regret with regard to his unholy lifestyle but in terms which allow him to dwell on his enticement and the sweetness of the pleasures which lured him. 'These things were sweet, but sweet such years ago, / Their savour is all turned now to tears', he muses sorrowfully (230-1), dwelling on 'bitter thoughts' of the 'sweet finished things' (274-5) which have precipitated his entrance into 'sad hell where all sweet love hath end' (179). Yet when asking forgiveness of God the knight implies that he is still drawn to Venus by using the same vocabulary to renounce his tastes as he does to remember them.

She is right fair; what hath she done to thee?
Nay, fair Lord Christ, lift up thine eyes and see;
Had now thy mother such a lip – like this?
Thou knowest how sweet a thing it is to me. (21-4)

Elsewhere another appeal to heaven repeats the same terms. 'Nathless thou knowest how sweet a thing it is' (172), the knight continues to insist, until it seems certain that his renunciation is simply a pretence in order to deny his irresistible attraction. Even he himself seems to feel as if the reminder of the transgression only increases its appeal. 'Seal my lips hard from speaking of my sin', he pleads, '[I]est one go mad to hear how sweet it is' (323-4).

In the above examples, Swinburne invokes the idea of sweetness as an unstable signifier to demonstrate the knight's struggle over his feelings, but it also introduces an element of doubt as to whether his 'sin' is truly 'great'. Swinburne enhances this ambiguity by connecting the idea of salvation to sweetness in the poem. From the 'hot sweet throat' (269) of Venus the knight travels to the 'sweet land' (347) of Rome, where the 'sweet-souled father'

⁴⁷ Haynes translates as follows: 'But they never saw him; for this poor knight remained forever beside Venus, the high strong goddess, in the amorous mountainside' – see Swinburne, *Poems and Ballads and Atalanta in Calydon*, ed. Haynes, pp. 325-6.

tells him ‘some sweet word’ (352, 363). The pope’s verdict depends on a promise of salvation that will be granted if the stick blooms and ‘smell[s] sweet’ (370):

‘Until this dry shred staff, that hath no whit
Of leaf nor bark, bear blossom and smell sweet,
Seek thou not any mercy in God’s sight,
For so long shalt thou be cast out from it.’

Yea, what if dried-up stems wax red and green,
Shall that thing be which is not nor has been?
Yea, what if sapless bark wax green and white,
Shall any good fruit grow upon my sin?

Nay, though sweet fruit were plucked of a dry tree,
And though men drew sweet waters of the sea,
There should not grow sweet leaves on this dead stem,
This waste wan body and shaken soul of me. (369-80)

The knight’s doom is cast into doubt by the ability of sweetness to represent so many things in lines 377-80, in which the fruit, water and leaves are all described as sweet. This should indicate that the miracle is possible, as indeed it is. In line 380 he compares himself to the dead stick, but contrary to the implication that as a dry stick the knight cannot appreciate sweetness, the ability of the stick to bloom indicates that even when repenting or ‘ruined’, the knight still cannot resist the allure of Venus – as the lasting sweetness of the transgression continues to imply. The poem makes a mockery of traditional religious narratives in which the sinner finds solace and comfort in the presence of God. By contrast, in ‘Laus Veneris’ conventional religion fails either to punish or save the sinner, in effect condemning him to his old way of life, while the fact that the stick does bloom – something the pope thought impossible – suggests that he may not even have been right about the supposed transgression in the first place. Swinburne uses the changeable nature of his vocabulary in the poem, particularly the vocabulary of sweetness, to make possible these kinds of wider conceptual and ideological shifts.

‘The Leper’ is another poem in which Swinburne employs sweetness in a bid to challenge the categories of conventional morality. In the poem, a besotted clerk wins the chance to keep his aristocratic mistress company only after she falls ill with leprosy. Swinburne invents another fictitious French source for the story, which he includes in a note at the end. It begins:

At that time there was in this land a great number of lepers, which greatly displeased the king, seeing that because of them the Lord must have been grievously wroth. Now it happened that a noble lady named Yolande de Sallières was afflicted and utterly ravaged by this base sickness; all her friends and relatives, with the fear of the Lord before their eyes, made her quit their houses and would never receive or help a thing cursed of God, stinking and abominable to all men. This lady had been very beautiful and graceful of figure; she was generous of body and lascivious in her life. However, none of the lovers who had often embraced and kissed her very tenderly would shelter any longer such an ugly woman and such a detestable sinner.⁴⁸

What is shocking about the poem is the way in which it collapses conventional standards, since the clerk continues to dote upon the lady’s body even though she is no longer lovely by any kind of ‘normal’ definition either: physical, moral or spiritual. Although cast out and universally reviled, the clerk insists that the lady is still lovely to him, and this loveliness is represented in the poem by sweetness. Although ‘[c]hanged with disease her body sweet’ (47), the clerk condemns those around them for not realising her beauty: ‘[f]ools they were surely, seeing not / How sweeter than all sweet she is’ (55-6).

His passion, which transcends all boundaries, is as blind to differences between beauty and ugliness as it is to moral worth, but Swinburne becomes especially provocative when he questions the idea of even death being an insurmountable barrier. The poem moves into the realm of necrophilia, as the clerk’s obsession with the lady remains undiminished even after her death. He continues to kiss and caress her rotting corpse which he likewise continues to identify with sweetness.

Six months, and now my sweet is dead
A trouble takes me; I know not
If all were done well, all well said,
No word or tender deed forgot.

⁴⁸ Trans. Haynes, in *Poems and Ballads and Atalanta in Calydon*, ed. Haynes, p. 345.

Too sweet, for the least part in her,
 To have shed life out by fragments; yet,
 Could the close mouth catch breath and stir,
 I might see something I forget. (93-100)

The clerk's desire to keep the lady's body whole is replicated in his desire to keep his memory of her complete. In the poem, sweetness enables the collapsing of boundaries precisely because it is such an unstable term, able to represent the loveliness of the lady's physical attributes, morality, or even spirituality equally well.

So far, the way in which I have shown Swinburne to be using sweetness in 'The Leper' is in line with the way in which he employs the term throughout *Poems and Ballads*. Sweetness as symptomatic of sensuality allows Swinburne to slip between different categories: between pleasure and pain, love and hate, male and female, and as I have mentioned, even life and death in 'The Leper'. However, there is another way in which Swinburne uses sweetness in the poem, not in an abstract or aesthetic sense, but in order to reference another material history. By staging the lady's corpse as sweet, Swinburne connects the poem to another topical discourse in the Victorian period in which aesthetic and physical forms of sweetness converged.

Many hagiographic narratives claim that the bodies of deceased saints smell sweet, and I want to argue that this affects Swinburne's choice of vocabulary in the poem. The phenomenon was known as the 'odour of sanctity' and was typically associated in the Victorian period with the sensual practices of the Catholic Church. *Brewer's Reader's Handbook* from 1898 maintains this theory while also involving the notion of an aesthetic or spiritual sweetness connected with the smell.

Odour of Sanctity. To die 'in the odour of the sanctity' did not mean simply in 'good repute.' It was a prevalent notion that the dead body of a saint positively emitted a sweet-smelling savour, and the dead body of the unbaptized an offensive smell. When

good persons die, catholic priests attend, and use incense freely, which naturally adds a sweet savour to the body.⁴⁹

The idea that a saint could be identified from the sweet smell of their corpse originated in the medieval period. As André Vauchez has argued, sainthood in the middle ages was believed to be initially revealed in terms of a physiological impact on the body (or ‘virtus’), and this expressed itself in two ways: firstly in terms of the incorruptibility of the flesh and secondly in terms of the body’s smell, which Vauchez asserts was just as important to the concept of sainthood as its state of preservation. ‘Public opinion was very exacting on this point’, he records, ‘and if the corpse of a servant of God did not emit “the odour of sanctity”, the veneration might stop as quickly as it had begun’.⁵⁰ Although nineteenth-century understandings of this event were scientifically sceptical, the odour of sanctity was still an important way in which the Victorians understood sainthood, and especially the sainthood of certain key figures. One such figure was Saint Teresa de Avila, who according to popular belief was held to have emanated a strong scent of perfume or roses after death that filled her entire convent. An article detailing the life of Teresa, a Carmelite nun who lived from 1515 to 1582, appeared in *Fraser’s Magazine* in 1862 and attributes this strong scent to sweetness. After Teresa is buried, the writer relates, ‘a perfume filled the chapel, so overpowering in its sweetness that it could not be borne’.⁵¹

Swinburne may also have been influenced by Tennyson, who writes about sweetness as an attribute of saintliness in his dramatic monologue ‘St. Simeon Stylites’, as Cornelia Pearsall has recently pointed out.⁵² The poem was first published in Tennyson’s 1842 collection, although it was probably written in 1833. It explores the (possibly) last moments of Simeon (390-459 AD), who was a famous Christian ascetic notorious for living on a pillar in order to

⁴⁹ *Brewer’s Reader’s Handbook*, ed. E. Cobham Brewer (London: Chatto and Windus, 1898), p. 769.

⁵⁰ André Vauchez, *Sainthood in the Later Middle Ages*, trans. Jean Birrell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 427-8.

⁵¹ [J. A. Froude], ‘Santa Teresa: A Psychological Study’, in *Fraser’s Magazine* lxx (1862), 59-74 (p. 73).

⁵² Cornelia Pearsall, *Tennyson’s Rapture: Transformation in the Victorian Dramatic Monologue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 98-9.

ensure a fuller communion with God. Pearsall maintains that the reference to a sweet smell within the poem alludes to the odour of sanctity, which was attributed to Simeon, as Christopher Ricks has also pointed out in his authoritative edition of Tennyson's poems.⁵³

Sweet! sweet! spikenard, and balm, and frankincense.
Ah! let me not be fooled, sweet saints: I trust
That I am whole, and clean, and meet for Heaven.⁵⁴

Simeon's belief that he can smell the saints might also anticipate his own canonisation, which Tennyson cynically implies is the aim of his asceticism in the poem. The poem is a critique of the ascetic lifestyle, which Tennyson presents as vain and self-serving. Simeon may well be delirious at this point in the poem, a result of his punishing regime, which involves a denial of food, drink and sleep. Perversely, however, although Simeon rejects physicality in order to be closer to God, he relies on a sensory vocabulary to identify heaven. The inadequacy of Simeon's logic allows Tennyson to question moral prerogatives which prescribe a denial of the body.

Swinburne knew Tennyson and would have read his 1842 *Poems*, suggesting that his own literary representation of this phenomenon may well have been influenced by the Poet Laureate. Catherine Maxwell has noted that at times Swinburne even seems to be 'consciously revising his near predecessor'.⁵⁵ In a similar vein to Tennyson, in 'The Leper' Swinburne uses his construction of the lady's body as sweet in order to critique conventional religious distinctions between the impure body and the soul. However, while Tennyson's implication is subtle, Swinburne achieves his effect by using shock tactics. While the lady has been shunned by her community due to their interpretation of her disease as a punishment for sexual transgressions, Swinburne's representation of her body as sweet figures her as a persecuted saint. The sweetness of her body achieves the ultimate collapse of categories, transcending not

⁵³ *The Poems of Tennyson*, ed. Christopher Ricks, 3 vols., 2nd edn (Harlow: Longman, 1987), i, 604, n208. Ricks cites *Hone's Everyday Book*, in which a 'precious odour' is purported to have emanated from Simeon as he died.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, i, 604.

⁵⁵ Maxwell, *The Female Sublime*, p. 181.

only death and decay, but also its own materiality, which becomes spiritual in Swinburne's construction.

If St. Simeon Stylites was an influence on 'The Leper', then he was also an important figure for Swinburne in other ways. Further documentation suggests that St. Simeon was more than a marginal figure in Swinburne's consciousness. According to epistolary evidence, Swinburne's concept of Christian asceticism was intimately bound up with Simeon, who, perhaps due to Tennyson's influence, he interpreted as the figurehead of this movement. In a letter to Richard Monckton Milnes Swinburne expresses his contemptuous views of the Marquis de Sade by recourse to a version of Christian asceticism which is personified by Simeon (he addresses his comments directly to Sade).

You take yourself for a great pagan physiologist and philosopher – you are a Christian ascetic bent on earning the salvation of the soul through the mortification of the flesh. You are one of the family of St. Simeon Stylites [...] Your one knack is to take common things, usual affections, natural pleasures and make them walk on their heads; by the simple process of *reversing*, any one may write as good a Justine as yours. If you were once cured of that trick of standing on your head for ten volumes through, and your energies turned back into the old channel that they ran in some centuries since, you would revert to the chain and the top of a pillar and ascetic worship. That is about your mark, I reckon. We took you for a sort of burlesque Prometheus; you are only a very serious Simeon Stylites – in an inverted posture.⁵⁶

What Swinburne objects to in Sade is his straightforward reversal of conventional categories, since this leaves intact the wider moral framework and thus is a hollow rebellion. The truly radical option, Swinburne implies, would be to collapse these categories altogether, which is what he tries to do in his poetry through sweetness, a term which acts as a catalyst for these transformations since it is able to contain so many different and contradictory meanings. In the passage Swinburne compares Sade to Simeon in an 'inverted posture' and accuses him of being a workman as opposed to an artist. By 'the simple process of *reversing*' anyone could be a Sade, he protests. In this respect, although Swinburne objects for a different reason, he is

⁵⁶ Swinburne to Richard Monckton Milnes, 18 August 1862, in *The Swinburne Letters*, ed. Lang, i, 57; author's emphasis.

nevertheless demonstrative of wider Victorian scepticism about asceticism. As Julia F. Saville has argued, '[i]n Victorian England radical asceticism [...] was treated with extreme suspicion and was a focal point for anti-Roman Catholic rhetoric'.⁵⁷

Swinburne's personal criticisms of asceticism can shed some light on the prerogatives governing his poetry in general and 'The Leper' in particular. As I have mentioned, what Swinburne objects to about the ascetic values he attributes to Sade is that the process of 'reversing' by which they accomplish their subversion of existing social norms operates within the same moral framework they wish to transgress. A poetics of sweetness, on the other hand, functions as an integral part of Swinburne's radical breakdown of categories in *Poems and Ballads* precisely because its status as an unstable signifier enables him to transcend such categories. Swinburne's portrait of the hermaphrodite in 'Hermaphroditus' is provocative for the very reason that instead of inverting conventional categories the poem deconstructs them. The figure of the hermaphrodite breaks down both social and sexual categories. Not only are traditional definitions of male and female challenged but so is the sanctity of marriage which maintains these gender distinctions.

Where between sleep and life some brief space is,
 With love like gold bound round about the head,
 Sex to sweet sex with limbs and lips is wed,
 Turning the fruitful feud of hers and his
 To the waste wedlock of a sterile kiss (15-19)

Swinburne plays on nineteenth-century beliefs that the hermaphrodite body was sterile. His presentation of the figure as a kind of representative marriage in itself locates these fears within the threat they represent to conventional heterosexual relationships. Sweetness is the signifier of both gender and sexuality in the poem, replicating the sense in which the hermaphrodite itself conflates these. The 'limbs' of each 'sweet sex' are 'wed' in the poem, subverting heterosexual marriage with the act of sex itself, which society both legitimises within marriage

⁵⁷ Julia F. Saville, *A Queer Chivalry: The Homoerotic Asceticism of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (Charlottesville, VA: The University Press of Virginia, 2000), p. 11.

yet condemns outside of it. To Swinburne, the hermaphrodite represents ‘the best’ because no other love ‘be sweet enough’ to encompass both the genders (5-6).

Swinburne believed that all good poetry broke down gender distinctions. Commenting on Tennyson, he even once argued that all great poets were bisexual (albeit in terms of gender, not sexuality).⁵⁸ For Swinburne, poetry should collapse boundaries, encouraging readers to question the gaps in traditional morality and suggestively hinting at the pleasures and intoxication involved in the breaking of sexual taboos. Walter Pater uses sweetness in a similar way, foregrounding the term’s links to the body and to classical culture in order to explore alternative sexualities, in this case homoeroticism. Pater’s handling of the concept of sweetness questions contemporary cultural conventions, and it also directly challenges the cultural theory of Arnold. Taking the renaissance as his model, Pater seeks to construct a subjective, idiosyncratic and subversive definition of culture that is radically different from Arnold’s sweetness and light.

‘Ex Forti Dulcedo’: Pater’s Revision of Arnold

When Pater joined The Queen’s College, Oxford, as an undergraduate in October 1858, Matthew Arnold had been Professor of Poetry at the university for over a year. During the time he was at Oxford Pater could hardly have failed to realise the significance of Arnold’s influence. By the time *The Renaissance* was published in 1873 Pater himself had become a fully fledged member of the academic community, albeit a less illustrious one. He graduated with a disappointingly low degree (a second class) in 1862, but was elected to a probationary fellowship in Classics at Brasenose College shortly afterwards, from where in 1867 he graduated to the position of lecturer. It was during this time that Pater began to publish many of

⁵⁸ Christopher Ricks, *Tennyson*, 2nd edn (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989), p. 207.

the reviews that later appeared in *The Renaissance*. His theory of aesthetic criticism, with its injunction ‘to know one’s impression as it really is’, deliberately inverts Arnold’s notion of the critic as ideally objective and impartial. ‘[S]eeing things as they really are’ (253), is fundamental to Arnold’s philosophy in *Culture and Anarchy*, yet *The Renaissance* undermines the idea of such rigid classification, asking instead ‘[w]hat is this song or picture, this engaging personality presented in life or in a book, to me?’⁵⁹

Pater wrote the separate chapters of *The Renaissance* over a number of years. The essay on Winkelmann first appeared as an anonymous review in the *Westminster Review* in January 1867, and was followed by ‘Notes on Leonardo da Vinci’, ‘A Fragment on Sandro Botticelli’, ‘Pico della Mirandola’ and ‘The Poetry of Michelangelo’, all of which were published in the *Fortnightly Review* between 1869 and 1871. Publishing *The Renaissance* as a whole gave Pater the opportunity to present his writing as a complete philosophy. Other chapters were written especially for the book, including the Preface in which Pater’s opposition to Arnold is most apparent.⁶⁰ This opposition is not overt, however, as Pater dexterously presents his contradiction of Arnold’s theories as something more akin to an elaboration of them: ‘to see the object as in itself it really is, has been justly said to be the aim of all true criticism whatever; and in aesthetic criticism the first step towards seeing one’s object as it really is, is to know one’s impression as it really is’.⁶¹ Subtle as it is, Pater’s distinction of his own criticism from that of Arnold would not have gone unnoticed in the Oxford of the 1860s. Pater’s choice to position himself as an alternative to Arnold has as much to do with contemporary politics at the university as with theoretical imperatives.

⁵⁹ Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* (1873), ed. Donald L. Hill (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1980), pp. xix-xx; author’s emphasis. The edition I am using follows the 1893 text. All subsequent references will be cited in the text.

⁶⁰ The chapters written especially for volume publication were: ‘Aucassin and Nicolette’, ‘Luca della Robbia’, and ‘Joachim du Bella’. ‘The School of Giorgione’ appeared only from the second edition (published in 1877) onwards.

⁶¹ Adam Phillips argues that Pater uses ‘and’ instead of ‘but’ in this passage in order to imply the continuity of his and Arnold’s ideas: ‘a possible contradiction, as is usual with Pater, is made to look merely like an elaboration’ – see Phillips, Introduction to Walter Pater, *The Renaissance* (1873), ed. Adam Phillips (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. xvi.

‘[T]here is no other author whose phrases, ideas, arguments and attitudes so completely saturate Pater’s writings at all stages as do Arnold’s’, David J. DeLaura has argued.⁶² And the key to understanding Arnold’s influence on Pater is to understand their respective positions at Oxford. In *Culture and Anarchy*, Arnold paints Oxford as an idyllic haven of shared intellectual community. He claims that the ‘sweetness and light’ he advocates is in keeping with core ‘Oxford’ values, which for him remain unquestionable.

Oxford, the Oxford of the past, has many faults; and she has heavily paid for them in defeat, in isolation, in want of hold upon the modern world. Yet we in Oxford, brought up amidst the beauty and sweetness of that beautiful place, have not failed to seize one truth:- the truth that beauty and sweetness are essential characters of a complete human perfection. When I insist on this, I am all in the faith and tradition of Oxford. (105-6)

Arnold’s reference to the ‘Oxford of the past’ and its ‘many faults’ is an allusion to the Oxford University Act of 1854, which brought about some key constitutional changes including the abolition of religious tests at first degree stage as well as opening up the curriculum. Eagerly sought by many of the younger Fellows at the university in the 1840s, including a young Benjamin Jowett, the legislation was a major piece of reform which opened up the institution democratically and challenged the predominance of ecclesiastical authority. As Linda Dowling has shown, it also had personal implications for Pater, expanding the number of non-clerical fellowships, meaning that graduates like Pater who had not taken Anglican orders could stay on at Oxford to teach.⁶³ As above, Arnold presents this transition as being smooth, and the resulting atmosphere in Oxford one of unanimous mutual support, but this was far from the case. Arnold and Pater occupied quite opposing and contradictory positions in the complex university politics of the 1860s, and these positions defined not only their political stance, but also their respective literary philosophies.

⁶² David J. DeLaura, *Hebrew and Hellene in Victorian England: Newman, Arnold, and Pater* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1969), p. xvi.

⁶³ Linda Dowling, *Hellenism and Homosexuality in Victorian Oxford* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), p. 13.

In one of the most important studies to have affected Pater criticism in the past two decades, Richard Dellamora argues that the factions created by these politics are central to the way in which Pater and Swinburne forged homoerotic discourses which were in opposition to Arnold's views. Arnold was associated with the traditionalists at Oxford, led by Edward Pusey and Henry Liddon. While Pater shared similar views to Jowett and the Broad Church party about the function of education, he was disillusioned by the religious content of Jowett's writings. Pater was associated with the liberals at Oxford, known as 'the Hegelians', whose ideology, particularly their positive approach to the body, Dellamora contends was central to Pater's development of masculine desire in his 'Diaphaneité' and 'Winkelmann' essays.⁶⁴ The politics of gender, and in particular debates about the meaning of masculinity, were, as Dellamora argues, central to the cultural landscape of Oxford in the 1860s. These debates took place surreptitiously, clandestinely, and under the guise of public politics, yet through them a new form of sexual politics began to emerge and take shape.

If we accept Dellamora's contention – that the politics of the Hegelians theorised a place for desire between men, that Arnold's Hellenism opposed such a notion and that both discourses were concealed beneath heavily coded references only an elite audience could understand – then it is possible to argue that Pater employs other linguistic signifiers to challenge other aspects of Arnold's politics. Specifically, I want to suggest that 'sweetness' is a significant idea in *The Renaissance* that responds to Arnold's concept of 'sweetness and light'. While the ubiquity of the term 'sweet' in Pater's text has been noted, it has tended to be labelled as a quirk or a weakness. Adam Phillips points out Pater's frequent use of the word 'sweet' and connects it to a series of other 'indefinite words', including 'peculiar', 'strange', and 'delicate', which he claims are 'resonant as blanks' in the text.⁶⁵ I am going to argue that this language is not only resonant as a 'blank' but takes part in a wider, more critical cultural

⁶⁴ Richard Dellamora, *Masculine Desire: The Sexual Politics of Victorian Aestheticism* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1990), p. 60.

⁶⁵ Phillips, Introduction, in *The Renaissance*, ed. Phillips, p. ix.

vocabulary in which subtle differences between Arnold and Pater's concepts of sweetness are used to distinguish their theoretical positions. 'Sweetness' is a term which flags up an important connection between *The Renaissance* and Arnold, whose concept of 'sweetness and light' had become a byword for cultural enlightenment by the time that Pater was writing. Pater's employment of the word follows that of his predecessor, for whom 'sweetness' in the 'sweetness and light' imagery seems to function as representative of the emotional effects of culture. Sweetness is also indicative of certain effects or feelings which cannot be openly identified in *The Renaissance*, but in Pater's case these relate to homosexuality. In an important new study of Hellenism and British aestheticism Stefano Evangelista argues that Pater was one of a number of writers who adapted the idea of classicism embodied in ancient Greece to form a radical critique of their own times.⁶⁶ In this sense, Pater's use of sweetness challenges Arnold's political ideas and his authority as a classicist simultaneously. Since Arnold's sweetness refers back, through Swift, to Horace, it serves to validate the cultural authority of his social theory, yet by questioning the origins of this sweetness Pater destabilises Arnold's philosophy.

Swinburne's writing, in which sweetness was a key term, also had an influence on Pater. Philip Henderson points out that Pater even informed Swinburne, in not so many words, that this was the case.

When Swinburne wrote to Lord Morley in April 1873 to say how much he admired Pater's work, he concluded: 'I am somewhat shy of saying how much, ever since on my telling him once at Oxford how highly Rossetti as well as myself estimated his first papers in the *Fortnightly* [where *The Renaissance* first appeared], he replied to the effect that he considered them as owing their inspiration entirely to the example of my own work in the same line'.⁶⁷

Laurel Brake spots this influence on Pater's writing practice, noting that Swinburne's first article in the *Fortnightly*, on Renaissance art, appeared in 1868, and afterwards Pater adopts

⁶⁶ Stefano Evangelista, *British Aestheticism and Ancient Greece: Hellenism, Reception, Gods in Exile* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 5.

⁶⁷ Philip Henderson, *Swinburne: The Portrait of a Poet* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974), p. 82.

not only Swinburne's subject but also the provisional nature of his titles. Swinburne's 'Notes on Designs of the Old Masters at Florence' has a clear echo in Pater's 'Notes' on Leonardo and 'Fragment' on Botticelli.⁶⁸

In Pater's essay 'Style', which appeared in the *Appreciations* volume of 1889, he stresses the importance of every individual word to the overall piece of work, providing some compelling grounds for the idea that his use of a vocabulary of sweetness was deliberate and self-conscious in its response to Swinburne and Arnold. Time and again during 'Style' Pater dwells on the importance of finding 'the one word, the one acceptable word'.⁶⁹ 'The right vocabulary!' he exclaims. 'Translators have not invariably seen how all-important that is in the work of translation'. To a 'lover of words', Pater maintains, 'nothing [...] is unimportant'. The logic and coherency of an entire piece can be 'evidenced not merely in the lines of composition as a whole, but in the choice of a single word'.⁷⁰ Ostensibly a study of Flaubert, Pater's essay describes not so much Flaubert's art but rather his struggle to find the ideal vocabulary: '[t]he one word for one thing, the one thought, amid the multitude of words, terms, that might just do: the problem of style was there! –the unique word, phrase, sentence, paragraph, essay, or song, absolutely proper to the single mental presentation or vision within'.⁷¹ 'I afflict my soul over some dubious word', he reports Flaubert as saying, 'out of all proportion to the pleasure I get from a whole page of good writing'.⁷²

At the same time as Pater is conscious of selecting the right linguistic materials, he stresses the importance of vocabulary as a kind of physical matter which the writer moulds to his own individual form. '[A]ny writer worth translating at all', he contends 'has winnowed and searched through his vocabulary, is conscious of the words he would select in a systematic reading of a dictionary, and still more of the words he would reject [...] he begets a vocabulary

⁶⁸ Laurel Brake, *Walter Pater* (Plymouth: Northcote House, 1994), p. 28.

⁶⁹ Pater, 'Style', in *Appreciations: with an Essay on Style* (1889) (London: Macmillan, 1910), pp. 5-38 (p. 36).

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 14, 20, 22.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 33.

faithful to the colouring of his own spirit, and in the strictest sense original'. '[T]he chief stimulus of good style is to possess a full, rich, complex matter to grapple with', Pater asserts: the 'lover of words' is 'a minute and constant observer of their physiognomy'.⁷³ The artist 'vindicat[es] his liberty in the making of a vocabulary, an entire system of composition, for himself, his own true manner'. '[H]e is no pedant', Pater argues, 'and does but show his intelligence of the rules of language in his freedoms with it'.⁷⁴

Not only did Pater consider every word important, but his concept of language was as an evolving, rather than a static, construct. Both these ideas, which were central to Pater's philosophy, underpin the significance of a poetics of sweetness in *The Renaissance*. Influenced by the way in which Arnold and Swinburne engaged with this discourse, Pater plays on their use of sweetness as a concept with transformative potential to effect his own transformations in *The Renaissance*. Linda Dowling has argued that the decadent movement itself (of which Pater and Swinburne's aestheticism was a forerunner) was instigated by linguistic changes which made possible a new literary culture. Pater, she contends, was at the forefront of this movement.

In the immediate background of literary Decadence, we began by saying, of the moment of Oscar Wilde and Aubrey Beardsley and the *Savoy*, there lies a story, not of cultural decline, but of linguistic demoralisation, of the silent subversion of a high Victorian ideal of civilisation by the new comparative philology imported from the Germany of Bopp and Grimm. The same displacement of cultural ideals and cultural anxiety onto language explains why we also glimpse in the background of Victorian Decadence no lurid tales of sin and sensation and forbidden experience but a range of stylistic effects, of quiet disruptions and insistent subversions in the prose of Walter Pater. For Pater's writing, both in itself and as it was to set in motion the forces that would converge in literary Decadence, is best understood as an attempt to rescue from the assaults of scientific philology and linguistic relativism an ideal, however diminished and fugitive, of literature and literary culture.⁷⁵

It is not so much what Pater writes that is important, Dowling implies, but the way in which he writes it. Pater's infamous style expressed a philosophy, and central to the way in which this

⁷³ Ibid., p. 15, 16, 20.

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 14.

⁷⁵ Dowling, *Language and Decadence in the Victorian Fin de Siècle* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), p. 104.

operated was Pater's transformation of the old. In the same way as he redefines the Arnoldian concept of what constituted classical culture and why it was valuable, Pater remakes Arnold's poetics of sweetness, inspired by his engagement with Swinburne.

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T. S. Eliot can be credited with originating the critical tradition which connects Arnold and Pater in an essay he wrote in 1930. In 'Arnold and Pater', Eliot recognises not only that the basis of their commonality is a linguistic one but also that this connection is linked to the word 'sweetness'. 'The vague religious vapourings of Carlyle, and the sharper, more literate social fury of Ruskin yield before the persuasive sweetness of Arnold', Eliot writes: 'Pater is a new variation'. The 'persuasive sweetness' of which, according to Eliot, Arnold is representative is no doubt derived from the 'sweetness and light' image. However, Eliot's use of the term 'persuasive' is also suggestive of the kind of perversion to which he later links the two authors, when he figures Pater as a 'new variation' of Arnold. '[W]e can hardly venture to say that it is even a perversion of Arnold's doctrine', he continues, 'considering how very vague and ambiguous that doctrine is'.⁷⁶ Although Eliot's dismissal of Arnold and Pater is too one-sided, it is revealing that he frames his discussion of them through terms such as sweetness and perversion. Arnold himself may well have felt Pater's writing to be a 'perversion' of his philosophy, and Pater was certainly responding to Arnold in a very self-conscious manner, deliberately twisting Arnold's language and terms in order to undermine his account of culture as something objective and fixed. Just as, according to Dellamora and others, Pater constructs a coded discourse of homoeroticism in the 'Diaphaneité' and 'Winkelmann' essays, he also employs a linguistic code of sweetness throughout *The Renaissance*, which serves both as an allusion to homosexuality and as a critique of Arnold's definition of culture. In the same way

⁷⁶ Eliot, 'Arnold and Pater' (1930), in *Selected Essays*, pp. 431-43 (pp. 438-9).

as Pater's stylistic sleights of hand – the way in which he makes his attack on Arnold at the beginning of the preface appear to be a compliment, for example – imply a continuity with Arnold, his use of 'sweetness' also seems to build on Arnold's practice. But the appearance of similarity is deceptive: Pater uses Arnold to demonstrate his distance from him, subverting Arnold's idea of the natural in order to infer that his 'culture' is artificial. By distorting Arnold's discourse, Pater is able to demonstrate the extent to which Arnold is 'perverse' anyway – a fact which Eliot picks up on.

Christopher Ricks, in an article which echoes Eliot's comparison – 'Pater, Arnold and Misquotation' – defends Arnold by claiming that it is Pater's misquotations of Arnold that make the latter's prose seem impressionistic and vague. 'If what you desire is "ear and finger refining themselves infinitely, in the appetite for sweet sound"', then Pater, rather than Arnold, is your man, Ricks suggests.⁷⁷ For Ricks, Pater's sweetness is a sign of the weakness of his writing. Yet for Pater, as for Arnold and Swinburne, the seeming emptiness of the term 'sweetness' means that it can be used as the repository of a number of complex meanings. In Pater's case, as in that of Swinburne, sweetness is a transformative term, capable of dissolving fixed categories, which he uses to fashion an understanding of culture that draws on subversive ideas about the body and sexuality.

Both Arnold in *Culture and Anarchy* and Pater in *The Renaissance* use sweetness to signify an abstraction, respectively culture and the spirit of the Renaissance. Pater famously stated that what he intended to invoke by the concept of 'Renaissance' was a state of mind: 'What is important, then, is not that the critic should possess a correct abstract definition of beauty for the intellect, but a certain kind of temperament, the power of being deeply moved by the presence of beautiful objects' (xxi). In this sense, just as it does in Arnold's writing,

⁷⁷ Ricks, 'Pater, Arnold and Misquotation', *Times Literary Supplement*, 25 November 1977, pp. 1383-5 (p. 1383).

sweetness becomes a kind of emotion in the text, symbolising a wider shift in European temperament.

Here and there, under rare and happy conditions, in pointed architecture, in the doctrines of romantic love, in the poetry of Provence, the rude strength of the middle age turns to sweetness; and the taste for sweetness generated there becomes the seed of the classical revival in it, prompting it constantly to seek after the springs of perfect sweetness in the Hellenic world. And coming after a long period in which this instinct had been crushed, that true ‘dark age,’ in which so many sources of intellectual and imaginative enjoyment had actually disappeared, this outbreak is rightly called a Renaissance, a revival. (2)

Using an umbrella term like sweetness to define his idea of the Renaissance is useful for Pater much in the same way as the ‘sweetness and light’ trope works for Arnold, in the sense of bringing together the ideological unity of an otherwise disparate material entity. ‘[W]hat I understand by the word [Renaissance]’, he admits in the Preface to the work, involves ‘giving it a much wider scope than was intended’, and indeed, beginning in France in the middle ages and ending in eighteenth-century Germany with the work of Winckelmann, Pater’s historical definition of the period was far more comprehensive than contemporary scholarly opinion traditionally allowed (xxii). He changed the title of the book from the second edition onwards from *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* to *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*, to reflect this, removing the reference to history that some critics had called ‘misleading’, but the overall tone of the piece still seemed worryingly cavalier.⁷⁸

In many ways *The Renaissance* undermined the philosophical certainties of the kind of cultural criticism that had achieved credibility through figures such as Arnold, Carlyle, and J.S. Mill. Arnold had claimed in ‘The Function of Criticism at the Present Time’ that criticism should be ‘the disinterested endeavour to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the world’, but this assumes that what is ‘best’ will be self-evident. *Culture and Anarchy* performs a useful function for Pater in *The Renaissance*, providing a counter position

⁷⁸ Mrs Mark Pattison had originally criticised the title as being ‘misleading’ in the *Westminster Review*: ‘the historical element is precisely that which is wanting’, she added by way of explanation. See Phillips, Introduction, in *The Renaissance*, ed. Phillips, p. xi.

from which Pater can differentiate himself and his political ideals. Dennis Denisoff has argued that parody was an important means by which mainstream society could interact with the non-normative forms of sexuality expressed by the aesthetic movement, but also that this technique was a way in which marginalised groups could counteract dominant social norms.⁷⁹ Although Pater doesn't parody Arnold directly, an internal register in which nuanced distinctions between Arnold and Pater's concepts of sweetness are used to differentiate their theoretical positions contributes to *The Renaissance*, making the concept of sweetness an important link between their works.

While for Arnold 'sweetness and light' is primarily an intellectual construct, Pater's concept of sweetness is more directly connected to physicality and the body. For Pater, sweetness represents the union between sensual and intellectual feeling that was crucial to the evolution of the Renaissance. Throughout *The Renaissance* – which Linda Dowling calls Pater's 'great celebration of sensuous renewal' – references to sweetness indicate moments of creativity, experiences which are figured as simultaneously intellectual and embodied.⁸⁰ Pater's recourse to a physical vocabulary is indicative of the belief that full responses to art are experienced through the body. Commenting on Joachim Du Bellay's poem 'D'un Vanner de Ble aux Vents', he notes that '[t]he sweetness of it is by no means to be got at by crushing' (140), invoking a physical sensation to describe the aesthetic and emotional effects produced by the poem. 'One longs to penetrate into the lives of men who have given expression to so much power and sweetness' (49), he muses at the beginning of the 'Luca della Robbia' chapter, and refers to the work of the poets of the Pleiad (again in the 'Joachim Du Bellay' chapter) in marrying two kinds of different French poetic traditions as 'drain[ing] out the last drops of sweetness' (134). Interestingly, all of the above references originate from chapters that Pater wrote and added specifically for book publication. This suggests that a poetics of

⁷⁹ Dennis Denisoff, *Aestheticism and Sexual Parody 1840-1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 2.

⁸⁰ Dowling, *Hellenism and Homosexuality in Victorian Oxford*, p. 13.

sweetness became more relevant to him as he was consciously thinking about the shape of his text as a unified philosophy. The concept of sweetness came to be increasingly important to Pater as a central idea both of the Renaissance and of the notion of aesthetic criticism. As well as artistic greatness itself, the potential to be great is also often expressed through the trope of sweetness. The ‘life’ of Pico della Mirandola, written by his nephew Francis, has ‘some touch of sweetness’ (27) in it, according to Pater, while Joachim Du Bellay must return to the lands of his native country for ‘the sweetest flower of his genius’ (139) to spring up.

Pater’s essay on Michelangelo, first published in the *Fortnightly Review* in 1871, represents perhaps the culmination of these ideas in *The Renaissance*. ‘The Poetry of Michelangelo’ was the last review to be published before *The Renaissance* appeared as a complete work, and as such it gave Pater an unusual opportunity to develop the discourse of sweetness he had already suggested was a crucial component of the Renaissance. Perhaps the discourse of sweetness he developed in ‘Michelangelo’ even inspired the ubiquity of sweetness as a term in the pieces he wrote specifically for book publication afterwards. In the essay Michelangelo becomes the literal embodiment of a formative tradition, his ‘sweetness’ indicative of both genius and physicality as the actual body of the artist becomes the main representation of sweetness in the text. The chapter deals primarily with Michelangelo’s poetry, but Pater also considers his sculpture, seeking to discover an explanation for Michelangelo’s brilliance, which departed so radically from earlier cultural and artistic traditions.

He finds in a minor episode of Michelangelo’s life what he believes to be the answer to this riddle, ascribing to Michelangelo’s engagement with a number of works by early Tuscan sculptors during a brief sojourn in Bologna an influential impact on his later work. This legacy enters the artist in physical terms; or, as Pater describes it, his work is ‘impressed [...] with so deep a sweetness’ (61). Sweetness becomes Michelangelo’s physical body and his body reveals

the secret of his art. 'Some of those whom the gods love', Pater muses, 'die young. This man, because the gods loved him, lingered on to be of immense, patriarchal age, till the sweetness it had taken so long to secrete in him was found at last' (70). The chapter further develops the discourse of artistic creation that Pater has constructed. Sweetness represents Michelangelo's genius in the passage and also our capacity to understand it – this is the meaning of the sweetness being 'found at last'. Rather than merely indicating that responses to art are experienced through the body, Pater suggests that sweetness is found within the body: it is a set of bodily responses which are connected to the sensations that art produces, but also, more importantly, with the temperament needed to create original work. Sweetness is comparable to a secret in this essay. Only specially gifted people, or in other words those with exceptional sensibilities, will be able to locate it – this is why Pater is able to represent sweetness as both material and spiritual simultaneously: 'those who feel this grace or sweetness in Michelangelo might at the first moment be puzzled if they were asked wherein precisely such quality resided' (57), he states. Sweetness is representative both of the body and of a certain artistic temperament: the intermingling of these qualities is indicative of Pater's belief in the material basis of both spiritual and mental processes.

Yet sweetness also represents the body's hidden desires. Pater presents it as an aspect of Michelangelo's work that is both misunderstood and underrated: 'few have understood his sweetness' (58) he notes, implying once again a certain sense of secrecy associated with sweetness, which is on the one hand indicative of the higher cultural sensibility he assumes in his audience, but which might also suggest a concealed homoerotic discourse that Pater expects them to pick up on. The emphasis on sweetness and strangeness makes possible a link between the concept of sweetness and less normative forms of passion. The chapter begins as follows:

Critics of Michelangelo have sometimes spoken as if the only characteristic of his genius were a wonderful strength, verging, as in the things of the imagination great strength always does, on what is singular or strange. A certain strangeness, something of the blossoming of the aloe, is indeed an element in all true works of art: that they

shall excite or surprise us is indispensable too. But that they shall give pleasure and exert a charm over us is indispensable too; and this strangeness must be sweet also – a lovely strangeness. And to the true admirers of Michelangelo this is the true type of the Michelangeloesque – sweetness and strength, pleasure with surprise, an energy of conception which seems at every moment about to break through all the conditions of comely form, recovering, touch by touch, a loveliness found usually only in the simplest natural things – *ex forti dulcedo*. (57; author's emphasis)

In the same way as Arnold introduces sweetness and light as complementary values in *Culture and Anarchy*, Pater posits sweetness and strength in a similar pairing in *The Renaissance*, only here they are potentially hostile. In a typical stylistic sleight of hand, Pater presents the qualities as almost competing for dominance. The resolution of this situation – in which sweetness and strength are conceived as stronger and more capable when combined – is undermined by the way in which Pater rarely refers to them together throughout the rest of the chapter, instead developing a discourse of sweetness on its own.⁸¹ Paradoxically, despite its privileged position in the text, the exact meaning of sweetness remains obscure, because it stands for the 'true' yet hidden essence of Michelangelo, which is often misunderstood and therefore devalued. Pater flags up the word 'true' in the passage – his references to the 'true' admirers of Michelangelo and 'true' type of the Michelangeloesque emphasising the sense in which the genuine qualities of the artist are liable to be misrepresented. The 'true' meaning of Michelangelo, Pater suggests, is only accessible to a select and elite audience.

This imagery dovetails with another discourse in the chapter in which Pater implies that Michelangelo's homosexuality was an important aspect of his genius yet one which has been wilfully ignored by most critics. 'The older, conventional criticism, dealing with the text of 1623, had lightly assumed that all or nearly all the sonnets were actually addressed to Vittoria herself; but Signor Guasti finds only four, or at most five, which can be so attributed on genuine authority. Still', Pater muses, 'there are reasons which make him assign the majority of

⁸¹ In choosing to effectively ignore the concept of strength for the rest of the chapter, Pater may also be disputing Henry Sidgwick's 1867 challenge to Arnold, as discussed earlier, when he claimed that 'the world wants fire and strength' more than sweetness and light. Sidgwick is referring to the need for religion over culture. See Sidgwick, 'The Prophet of Culture', p. 274.

them to the period between 1542 and 1547' (66). Since their original publication it had been widely assumed that Michelangelo's sonnets – of which he wrote almost 300 – were dedicated to Vittoria Colonna, a close companion in later life. However, this interpretation was challenged by claims that some of the sonnets were addressed to Tommaso dei Cavalieri, a young man with whom Michelangelo was believed in some quarters to have had sexual feelings for and to whom he is also believed to have dedicated some of the sonnets.⁸² In 1878 John Addington Symonds, a known advocate of homosexuality, published a translation of the sonnets in which their original, male pronouns were restored. Symonds was not the first person to restore the pronouns to the male gender – Pater also acknowledges the important work of Cesare Guasti in the chapter, as a 'true version' of Michelangelo's writing (65) – but Pater's relegation of Symonds's contribution to a footnote reflects the necessity of concealing commentary which appeared to be supportive of homosexuality in the increasingly intolerant atmosphere of elite academic communities. This was especially the case at Oxford, where Pater missed out on a routine promotion in 1874 amid allegations he had had a sexual relationship with one of his male students.⁸³

Much has been made of Pater's open references to homosexuality in his review of 'Winkelmann'. 'That [Winkelmann's] affinity with Hellenism was not merely intellectual [...] is proved by his romantic, fervent friendships with young men', Pater notes (152). As Evangelista has argued: "'Winkelmann" also affords us an insight into an uncensored expression of Pater's radical aestheticism, before the fear of scandal obliged him to seek increasingly more oblique or heavily coded ways of experimenting with his ideas on sexuality and the aesthetic'.⁸⁴ In the rest of the essays in *The Renaissance* Pater apparently felt the need to censor himself, and instead of making overt statements, he relies on the minutiae of style and

⁸² Hill, 'Critical and Explanatory Notes', in Pater, *The Renaissance*, ed. Hill, p. 351, n66, ll. 23-31.

⁸³ For a full account of this encounter, which was to have a disastrous effect on Pater's Oxford career, see B. A. Inman, 'Estrangement and Connection: Walter Pater, Benjamin Jowett, and William M. Hardinge', in *Pater in the 1990s*, ed. Laurel Brake and Ian Small (Greenboro, NC: ELT Press, 1991), pp. 1-20.

⁸⁴ Evangelista, *British Aestheticism and Ancient Greece*, p. 24.

language to convey his points about sexuality. As it does for Swinburne, the vocabulary of sweetness in particular gives Pater a means of addressing sexual issues that he cannot openly discuss. Sweetness is an important way in which he disguises allusions to homosexuality in the text, the strategy by which he connects his poetics of sweetness to a discourse of secrecy acting as an important indicator that we can read sweetness in his work as a signifier of suppressed narratives and ideas. Two of his quotations from Michelangelo's poetry refer to sweetness: *par che amaro ogni mio dolce io senta* – 'I seem to feel as bitter every sweet' (64), and *un dolce amaro, un sì e no mi muovi* – 'a bitter sweet, a yes and no moves me' (66).⁸⁵ In figuring sweetness as emblematic of a specifically sexual desire, Pater is following the example of Michelangelo himself.

Pater's references to sweetness also draw on the Bible, specifically Judges 14:14: 'out of the strong came forth sweetness'. Pater initially conceals this quotation in the Latin phrase '*ex forti dulcedo*', before subsequently translating it (57, 70). As I have mentioned, this is the biblical passage that provided the motto for Abram Lyle's tins of sugar-based golden syrup, and as such it demonstrates how, by the late nineteenth century, all references to sweetness could potentially be drawn into the cultural discourses surrounding sugar.⁸⁶ However, Pater's use of the passage, in reference to issues of sexuality and artistic genius far removed from the cultural imperatives linked to sugar as a mass-market commodity, confirms that sweetness as an aesthetic concept retained a life independent of sugar in the Victorian period. The quotation is a perfect fit for Pater's employment of sweetness as a term indicative of disguise and concealment, because the context in which it originally appears is that of a riddle. It is taken from the story of Samson, who comes across a lion on his way to procure a wife from a Philistine town, a course of action he pursues deliberately in order to incite a rift and challenge their claim to the land. On his return he encounters the carcass again and notices that a swarm

⁸⁵ Translations are by Donald L. Hill. See Pater, *The Renaissance*, ed. Hill, p. 348, n64, ll. 11-12; and p. 350, n66, ll. 21-2.

⁸⁶ See above, Introduction, pp. 30-31.

of bees have made their nest there. Helping himself to their honey, he muses that ‘out of the eater came forth meat, and out of the strong came forth sweetness’ (Judges 14:14). Samson poses the riddle as a question to the Philistines at his wedding feast (his quest for a wife has been successful), offering a reward of clothes and linen for the correct answer. The Philistines get the answer from Samson’s wife, who betrays him, but afterwards he punishes them by killing thirty of their men. The riddle seems to imply that – although vicious – Samson’s actions are just, yet although the Philistines are motivated by greed it is Samson who has imposed the situation on them.

The allusion, which hinges on sweetness, de-sentimentalizes the idea of the natural world in the chapter, figuring through the image of the disintegrated carcass the ‘simplest natural things’ of Pater’s earlier description as potentially brutal and disturbing. This allusion forms the material basis of Pater’s sweetness in the text, formulating honey as his reference-point, and simultaneously threatening to destabilise Arnold’s sentimental version of sweetness. Furthermore, Pater suggests that the ‘natural’ relations he means to represent are specifically both human and sexual. The purpose of the Michelangeloesque is to recover ‘a loveliness found usually only in the simplest natural things’, yet later Pater admits that ‘the world of natural things has almost no existence’ for Michelangelo. Instead, ‘[i]t belongs to the quality of his genius thus to concern itself almost exclusively with the making of man’ (58). At the same time, Pater stresses that Michelangelo did have a sex life: ‘[h]e who spoke so decisively of the supremacy in the imaginative world of the unveiled human form had not always been, we may think, a mere Platonic lover’ (64). Pater connects the discourse he has built up throughout *The Renaissance* in which the marginal is positioned as of central importance to his meaning – the value of previous attempts to ‘define beauty in the abstract’ having ‘most often been in the suggestive and penetrating things said by the way’ (xix), he contends in the Preface – to the hidden aspects of these artists’ lives that are signified through sweetness. The incompleteness

of Michelangelo's 'David' statue contains a 'penetrative suggestion of life', Pater argues. 'And it is in this penetrative suggestion of life', he concludes, 'that the secret of his sweetness is to be found' (60).

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Pater's choice of words in the above example is interesting because in many ways it is through its power of penetrative suggestion that a poetics of sweetness has been most useful to him in *The Renaissance*. Pater, as we have seen, borrows heavily from both Arnold and Swinburne's portrayals of sweetness as a fundamentally transformative notion, but it is perhaps, ironically, to Arnold that Pater owes his greatest debt. Arnold figured sweetness above all as a feeling. Whereas Swinburne deploys sweetness in order to collapse boundaries, in Arnold the concept is tightly confined within a moral and emotional definition. 'Light' signifies the rationality and enlightenment of culture, and 'sweetness' connotes the emotional effects of that enlightenment. Similarly, the idea of sweetness as an emotion or feeling is central to the way in which Pater employs this terminology in *The Renaissance*. Pater represents culture and sweetness as a state of mind, but it might more accurately, perhaps, be defined as a state of body. The sort of body Pater is talking about is homosexual, and his poetics of sweetness is a key way in which he expresses the power of repressed feelings and desire. In the same way as it was in Swinburne's poetry, desire is a crucial tenet of Pater's philosophy of art. A poetics of sweetness allows them both to explore the connections between subjective emotion and the material world. In their writings, along with those of Arnold, the concept of sweetness is drawn in apparently contradictory aesthetic and physical directions. The three writers operate a different poetics of sweetness in each of their texts, but they are all reacting against an aesthetic and literary culture of sweetness in which the concept represented commercialised and debased forms of literature linked to sugar. Arnold's use of sweetness seeks to rehabilitate the term, but while he frees it

from its negative associations with sugar, he proceeds to tie it just as closely to classical ideas of sweetness and to his own rather narrow definition of culture. Paradoxically, however, Arnold's opening up of the concept of sweetness set the terms by which Swinburne and Pater would employ the word 'sweet' as a transformative term, capable of perverting and subverting conventional understandings of sexuality, aesthetics, and culture.

Conclusion

Grandcourt put up his telescope and said, ‘There’s a plantation of sugar-canes at the foot of that rock: should you like to look?’

Gwendolen said, ‘Yes, please,’ remembering that she must try and interest herself in sugar-canes as something outside her personal affairs.¹

Gwendolen and Henleigh Grandcourt encounter the sugar canes as they cruise in the Mediterranean. The exchange occurs towards the end of George Eliot’s *Daniel Deronda* (1876), but uses the image of the sugar plantation to build on an existing discourse in the novel in which Gwendolen’s marriage to Grandcourt is figured as slavery. Eliot frequently depicts Gwendolen as a slave in the novel while portraying Grandcourt as her master. In marrying Grandcourt, Eliot suggests that Gwendolen has ‘sold herself’, whereas her ‘maiden time’ is figured conversely as ‘freedom’.² In this sense, her reaction to the sugar canes as ‘something outside her personal affairs’ is a satire on her self-centredness. Unable to feel an interest in anything other than herself, paradoxically this means that Gwendolen is denied the cultural and political framework that might otherwise enlighten her about her own individual condition. Unable to relate the sight of the sugar plantation to slavery, she also fails to recognise its relevance to her own position as ‘enslaved’. Through this episode Eliot once again demonstrates that Gwendolen’s unhappiness is a result of the fact that she is ultimately governed by self-interest (another failure to see ‘outside her personal affairs’) rather than the idea of some wider communal reality, such as Deronda discovers in Zionism, and which brings meaning to his life. The episode also indicates that for Eliot the sugar canes are a visual symbol of slavery, connecting sugar to a wider rhetoric of slavery in the novel.

As Eliot shows, sugar retained its links to slavery even after the British abolition of the practice in 1834. To a large extent, these were emotional rather than actual. Although slave

¹ George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda* (1876), ed. Graham Handley (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), p. 625.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 623, 626.

labour continued to be used to make sugar – in Cuba up until 1884 – the tide was already turning: France abolished slavery in 1848, and America followed suit in 1863. Sugar beet made important inroads into global sugar production from the middle of the century onwards, and this also changed the industry, not least because it didn't rely on slave labour. Eliot shows how despite these changes slave-produced cane sugar continued to carry the largest cultural resonance for sugar in the nineteenth century, retaining its imaginative primacy in popular understandings of sugar long after the commodity had, for the most part, ceased to be grown in this way. But while Eliot makes definite links between sugar and slavery, more importantly she demonstrates the extent to which sugar had outgrown these associations by the late nineteenth century. While highlighting the irony of Gwendolen's chronic lack of self-awareness and failure to identify with the idea of slavery despite her being, as the novel insists, in a comparable situation, Eliot's satire relies on the fact that Gwendolen doesn't know or care how sugar is produced. In so far as imagery related to slavery appears in *Daniel Deronda*, it is used in a figurative sense: to demonstrate Gwendolen's oppression by her bullying husband or other forms of metaphorical imprisonment, which, although they utilise a discourse of slavery, are nonetheless not real bondage. As in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*, sugar and its associations with slavery are used as rhetorical devices for exploring the gendered power relations that take place between men and women, thus engaging with questions of gender and sexuality. Eliot herself was aware that sugar was more than just shorthand for slavery: in *Brother Jacob*, it is the consumption of sugar which is at issue, as the market forces symbolised by the commodity undermine female morality, domestic economy, and social cohesion. This brief and fascinating interlude in *Daniel Deronda* similarly affirms that, by the mid-nineteenth century, sugar had ceased to be defined only by its vexed history of production.

A key part of my argument has been to show that by the mid-nineteenth century slavery is no longer central to Victorian conceptions of sugar and sweetness, but that aesthetic

representations of sugar and sweetness in this period are still tied to a material history. As new concerns move the public debate about sugar away from questions about its production, issues of consumption play an increasingly important role in representations of the commodity. Medical theory, the scandal of food adulteration in the 1850s and 1860s, and the increasing association of sugar with the marketplace all have the effect of aligning the product with a new set of ideas which focus on its involvement in consumer culture and its implications for health. However, while references to sugar and sweetness continue to evoke a material history, this history is by no means straightforward or stable. As Eliot shows, the legacy of slavery remained influential to representations of sugar long after British sugar had ceased to be produced using slave labour. These colonial resonances were challenged by new trends linked to sugar's increasing importance as a consumer commodity, but never entirely replaced by them. As such, my work confirms the shift Regenia Gagnier identifies as taking place in the second half of the nineteenth century from 'notions of Economic Man as producer [...] to a view of Economic Man as consumer', but it also demonstrates that this movement was neither consistent nor complete.³ Unlike thing theorists such as Elaine Freedgood and writers on sugar such as Timothy Morton, who argue that the violent colonial origins of everyday items such as sugar are the most important context in which to view these commodities, I suggest that although a material history of sugar continues to affect the reception and representation of the product, this history is constantly evolving, and involves consumption as much as production.

A second major way in which my work departs from thing theory is my focus on the links between the material history of sugar and an aesthetic tradition. Sugar and the aesthetic concept of sweetness are closely interrelated in the nineteenth century, but, although their trajectories overlap at certain key moments, they nonetheless remain distinct and independent. Throughout this thesis, I hope to have shown how these two separate histories intersect, albeit

³ Gagnier, *The Insatiability of Human Wants*, p. 2.

in complex and constantly changing ways. At times these histories co-exist at the same time as being separated from each other. In the abolitionist debates of the late eighteenth century advocates of 'blood sugar' imagery opposed the literal sweetness of sugar to the idea of moral sweetness in order to condemn the brutality of slavery which underpinned sugar production. At the same time, parliamentary abolitionists made the literal taste of sugar the basis of their construction of moral sweetness, using the idea of sweetness to argue that sugar could have a positive social role. Victorian novelists such as Brontë and Thackeray similarly considered sugar in relation to a moral discourse of sweetness, but what is at stake for these writers is the morality of consumption, not production. Thackeray opposes the physical sweetness of sugar to the 'sweetness' of feminine morality, but Brontë connects the two by suggesting that sugar is physically, and, by implication, emotionally beneficial to women. In some writers in the 1860s, sweetness comes to seem entirely aligned with sugar, as both are used as terms with which to attack commercialised and degraded literary and cultural forms. Yet in the same decade writers such as Arnold, Swinburne and Pater demonstrate the continuing flexibility of sweetness as a concept by linking it more strongly to honey than to sugar, and by using it, in a radical strategy, as a positive term that represents the transformative effects of art and culture.

In 1987, two years after the publication of his authoritative history of sugar, *Sweetness and Power*, Sidney W. Mintz contributed to a special issue of the history journal *Food and Foodways* dedicated to reviewing his work. 'A great many books are yet to be written on sweetness, and among them will be those that deal with the astounding proliferation of figurative uses that has kept pace with the global role of sugars in modern life' Mintz suggests.⁴ Although he posits an unsophisticated affinity between sugar and sweetness that does not do justice to the complexity and richness of sweetness as an idea, I hope that this thesis has contributed to the mission he lays out in his article. There is still more important

⁴ Mintz, 'Author's Rejoinder', *Food and Foodways* ii (1987), 171-97 (p. 189).

work to be done on the connections between sugar and sweetness: particularly, I would suggest, in the twentieth century. To date there has been little critical interest in the aesthetic concept of sweetness in this period, especially in relation to sugar (although Carl Plasa's recent book, *Slaves to Sweetness*, is one notable exception). Perhaps because the link between sugar and sweetness seems so obvious in modern times, it is often overlooked in terms of its critical potential. Associations between sugar and obesity whose origins I have begun to map in the nineteenth century have become the predominant way in which sugar is understood in recent times. Other bonds established in the nineteenth century, such as those between sugar and excess, greed, pleasure and addiction, also remain relevant today, as does the connection between sugar and sex (as I have pointed out, the popularity of pet names such as 'sugar', 'sweetie', and 'honey', bears testament to this fact).⁵

Much as I believe there is further work to be done on this topic in the twentieth century, there is also more to be done in the nineteenth. Sugar has a prominent presence in Victorian culture, and sweetness is so ubiquitous a term that there are many more ways in which to explore the relationship between them in this period. In the Victorian era, sugar becomes the main material form of sweetness as a taste, and it is during this time that both separately and together they acquire their current modern meanings. The connections between sugar and sweetness and low-grade, commercial tastes, excessive sentimentality and pleasure at the expense of substance all become widespread in the nineteenth century. Yet the meanings of sweetness were not straightforwardly dependent on sugar in the Victorian period; instead, sugar and sweetness influenced each other reciprocally. Together, these two contested terms were a crucial feature of nineteenth-century debates about sexuality, morality, literature and culture.

⁵ See above, Introduction, p. 28.

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