“Standing out like a Quartz Dyke”:
Self-Formation, ‘Energy’ and the Material Environment in John Ruskin and Charles Dickens

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Prompted by recent debates in secondary phase ecocriticism about the interdependence of ‘nature’ and ‘culture’, this paper looks at nineteenth-century representations of humans in their material environment, concentrating mainly on John Stuart Mill’s “On Nature” (1874), John Ruskin’s *The Ethics of the Dust* (1865), and exemplary passages from Charles Dickens’ *Bleak House* (1852–3) and *Our Mutual Friend* (1864–5). Writing at a time when both environmental pollution and the materialism of the human body first became widely discussed, these authors negotiate humans’ identities with, but also (self-)definitions against, the backdrop of their natural surroundings, making use of mineralogical, chemical, and physiological theories of ‘habit-formation’ and growth. Both Ruskin and Dickens are concerned with the influence of the human ‘will’ upon the environment, and thus with Mill’s dialectics of mankind as a part of nature that also alters nature. In Ruskin’s alignment of crystal formation with child development and his decree of “Form, against Force”, and in Dickens’ similar emphasis on energy as a metaphysical defence against hostile external forces, nineteenth-century scientific materialism, seeing the human body as a “thing among things” (Bill Brown 2001), was counteracted by a moral theory of self-formation which, paradoxically, again used materialist metaphors to describe its ideals of physical and mental development.

1 Introduction

It has recently been argued that the first wave of ecocriticism, in idealising nature, contributed towards perpetuating Enlightenment’s dualistic distinction between nature and culture. Secondary phase ecocritics now accord-
ingly insist upon the complex interconnections and alignments between those two terms, arguing with Martin Ryle that “ecocriticism, like green politics, must be centrally concerned with the historical development of ‘human nature’” (Ryle 2002: 13). Turning towards nineteenth-century discussions among scientists, social reformers and literary writers of the position of humans in their material environment, we come to witness a historical moment when both the impact of environmental pollution on human lives and the ‘materialism’ of the human body itself first became objects of public debate. I will here focus on John Ruskin’s *The Ethics of the Dust* (1865) and exemplary passages from Charles Dickens’ *Bleak House* (1852–3) and *Our Mutual Friend* (1864–5), arguing that these authors’ depiction of the interface between humans and their material environment can be said to anticipate John Stuart Mill’s core argument in his famous essay “On Nature” (1874), so pertinent to the recent ecocritical discussion. While acknowledging the validity of certain “absolute limits of the laws of nature” (1874: 375), Mill insists that human beings, part of nature themselves, are free to act upon the rest of nature. Opposing the Romantics’ idealisation, Mill emphasizes that “Nature is a scheme to be amended, not imitated, by Man” and that human actions are also ‘natural’: “Phenomena produced by human agency, no less than those which as far as we are concerned are spontaneous, depend upon the properties of the elementary forces, or of the elementary substances and their compounds” (*ibid*.; see also Parham 2007: 37–54 and 2002: 156–71). Victorian scientific and literary writings are similarly poised between emphasizing humans’ identities with, but also differences from, their natural surroundings. Physiological accounts of human development, narratives of adult (self-)formation in fictional texts and self-help literature, as well as inquiries into childhood growth, asking “by what steps exactly the wee amorphous thing takes shape and bulk, both physically and mentally” (Sully 1895: 3–4), are all concerned with latent human form as well as with the question of human (self-)definition against the backdrop of a material environment.

Both Ruskin and Dickens, in their depictions of human development, make use of a wide range of contemporary inquiries, such as mineralogy, chemistry, new notions of environmental pollution, and physiological theories of habit-formation and growth. In Ruskin, for instance, geochemistry and mineralogy help to supplement the materialist vision of the human body as a physiological machine with a vision of the ‘aliveness’, the energy or spirit and potential for growth of seemingly inanimate matter, such as rocks or crystals. Both Ruskin and Dickens are concerned with the influence of the...
human ‘will’ upon the environment, and thus with Mill’s dialectics of human-kind as a part of nature that also alters nature, as indeed do other species. In fact, it will be shown that the nineteenth-century scientific materialist concept of the human body as a “thing among things” (Brown 2001: 4) was counteracted by a moral theory of self-formation which, paradoxically, again used materialist metaphors to describe its ideals of physical and mental development. Applying these images to human processes of becoming amidst hostile external forces, Ruskin and Dickens create a moral universe where the borders between subject and object, assimilation and repulsion, the ‘foregrounded’ individual and the ‘background’ of the material world are continually redefined. Firstly, I will now turn to a more detailed look at nineteenth-century discussions of human habit formation and the question of ‘will’ or agency.

2 Victorian Habit Formation: The Body as ‘Material’ and the Question of Free Will

Behind many of the period’s discussions of moral theory, psychology, and physiology, there is a pervasive ambivalence about the role of the human ‘will’: while Darwinism and scientific materialism had abolished the idea of human exceptionality, notions of intentionality or will still persisted in scientific as much as in literary writing, as did the idea of a reciprocal influence between will and material environment. As George Henry Lewes stated ironically in Problems of Life and Mind (1874–79: 401): “Even to this day, in all the glare of Science, the clouds which gather round the conception of Cause are wafted from the mysterious region of Will, and many thinkers hold that no explanation of causation is possible except that which is furnished by volition”. Concomitantly, in the physical sciences, as shown by Bruce Haley in The Healthy Body and Victorian Culture, Anson Rabinbach in The Human Motor: Energy, Fatigue, and the Origins of Modernity, and others, the concept of ‘energy’ “re-emerged as a physical concept [...] after an eclipse of more than a century for reasons primarily metaphysical, and especially religious, rather than physical”. Indeed, ‘energy’ now often comes to be synonymous with ‘will’ (Peterfreund 1986: 24; see also Haley 1978, Harman 1982, and Rabinbach 1992).

One crucial instance is the discussion of human habit and character formation. In his Principles of Mental Physiology (1874), William Carpenter claims that the psycho-physical nature of humans is nowhere more evident than in their capacities of forming habits (see Carpenter 1874: ch. VIII). Following eighteenth-century associationist psychology, Victorian physiologists considered habits to be material ‘paths’, ‘grooves’, ‘channels’ or ‘ducts’ in the human brain, and thus the boundaries between mind and body,
between scientific and moral theory became permeable.\(^2\) During the second half of the century especially, scientists were trying to define the Victorian virtues of self-control, will power and discipline as the results of ‘trained habit’, thus reintroducing the concept of intention where scientific materialism had only seen determinism, and Darwinism only random mutations. As Henry Maudsley emphasizes in *Physiology and Pathology of the Mind* (1867): “The strong or well-formed character which a well-fashioned will implies is the result of good training applied to a well-constituted original nature” (1867: 158). Moral decisions, contemporary scientists maintained, are taken by a character thus formed unconsciously and spontaneously, but due to a practised and ingrained ‘moral instinct’.

Influences of early childhood were seen as essential determinants. Carpenter, emphasizing “the ‘strength of early associations’”, compares such organic modifications, “fixed” in the child’s “growing Brain”, to “the scar of a wound”, emphasizing both the materiality and the irreversibility of this process (see Carpenter 1874: 344–5; see also Bourne Taylor and Shuttleworth 1998: 289). In his precepts for a careful ‘training’ of mind and body, Carpenter takes up the famous passage on necessity and free will from John Stuart Mill’s autobiography, which declares the universe, although deterministic, to be partly subject to our conscious, intentional modifications:

> ‘I saw’, he says (*Autobiography*, p. 169), ‘that though our character is formed by circumstances, our own desires can do much to shape those circumstances; and that what is really inspiring and ennobling in the doctrine of free will, is the conviction that we have real power over the formation of our own character; that our will, by influencing some of our circumstances, can modify our future habits or capacities of willing.’ (1874: xii; see also Mill 1949: 143–4)

In fact, Mill’s autobiography here parallels his assertion in “On Nature” that although we are ourselves subject to natural laws, we can yet to a certain extent adapt and act upon nature, because “every alteration of circumstance alters more or less the laws of nature under which we act; and by every choice which we make either of ends or of means, we place ourselves to a greater or less extent under one set of laws of nature instead of another” (Mill 1874: 379). In a similarly dialectical way, physiological writers saw personal will power as the only bulwark against a passive submission to unwanted habit, to nervous ticks and compulsions – “[it is] in virtue of the Will, that we are not mere thinking Automata” (Carpenter 1874: 98). But paradoxically, this will power itself had to be developed through education and training, as a ‘habit’: “A man can no more will than he can speak without having learned to do so” (Maudsley, cited in Bourne Taylor and Shuttleworth 1998: 277). Victorian ‘high-brow’ and ‘low-brow’ literature are very much in

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\(^2\) On the links with John Locke, David Hartley und David Hume, see Vrettos 1999: 399.
agreement on these topics: Mill’s doctrine of individualism joined Thomas Carlyle’s work ethics as well as the popular new genre of self-help literature, which proclaimed that individuals were able actively to develop their abilities and thus reach social success. Indeed, Mill’s On Liberty has been called “the intellectuals’ equivalent of Self-Help,” the best-known book by Samuel Smiles, “champion of middle-class utopianism” (Morris 1981: 109), which likewise saw humans as material to be shaped. Smiles’ celebration of free will was based on a view of body and mind as a unit: “the moral man lies concealed [in the physical]” (1859: 262). The key term was “energy”: “Energy of will”, Smiles declared, “may be defined to be the very central power of character in a man – in a word, it is the Man himself” (1859: 191).

Yet there were more pessimistic interpretations of habit formation as proving humanity’s status of “thingness” or will-less material. According to William James, for instance, collective behavioural dispositions like bodily bearing, gait or pronunciation are internalized through social conditioning, and individuals come unconsciously to reproduce the tastes, value judgments and lifestyles of their class – as James himself emphasizes: “Habit is thus the enormous fly-wheel of society, its most precious conservative agent” (1890: 125–26). Such processes, much later also to be described by Marcel Mauss (1934), Norbert Elias (1939) or Pierre Bourdieu (1974), are here seen in material terms as a ‘hardening’ of the body and psyche, “the little lines of cleavage running through the character, the tricks of thought, the prejudices, […] from which the man can by-and-by no more escape than his coat-sleeve can suddenly fall into a new set of folds. […] in most of us, by the age of thirty, the character has set like plaster, and will never soften again” (James 1890: 125–26). Indeed, Victorian physiological psychologists routinely describe such processes of formation by referring to the ‘habits’ of dead matter. Thus inscriptions of habits into the body function in the same way “as when a bar of iron becomes magnetic or crystalline through the action of certain outward causes, or India-rubber becomes friable, or plaster ‘sets’” (James 1890: 110). At the core is the nineteenth-century dialectical interface between humans and material environment: as Kate Flint notes, James here investigates “the way in which habit constitutes the material world for the perceiving subject at the same time that it works to constitute the self” (2004: 12). Such interfaces between biology and society, between humans as part of nature and as acting upon nature (or themselves), held a great fascination for literary authors as well as for scientists. However, in their debates about determinism versus free will and the question of ‘energy’ a gradual transition from animate to inanimate, from movement to stasis, is
opened up – as I will now demonstrate, in the remainder of this article, with reference to the specific cases of Ruskin and Dickens.

3 Crystal Formation and Moral Refinement in John Ruskin

John Ruskin subscribed to the views on education put forward by physiological psychologists, especially the idea that a child’s every single act contributes towards fixing permanent habits in the organism: “Remember that every day of your early life is ordaining irrevocably, for good or evil, the custom and practice of your soul. […] Now, therefore, see that no day passes in which you do not make yourself a somewhat better creature.”4 Like Mill, he emphasized that meaningful self-formation could only be attained by careful selection of the influences children were exposed to. In The Queen of the Air (1869), for instance, he argues: “No one ever gets wiser by doing wrong, nor stronger. You will get wiser and stronger only by doing right, whether forced or not; the prime, the one need is to do that, under whatever compulsion, till you can do it without compulsion. And then you are a Man.” (19: 409) For him, virtues are not innate, but have to be produced through education; “the point of the disciplinary process is to instill them in the first place” (Stoddart 1998: 80). Education consists to a great part, as he claims in Fors Clavigera (1871–84), in “habits enforced” and trained in youth (27: 468).

Ruskin’s conceptions of nature and humans’ place within it were to undergo several transformations, most severely so towards the end of his life when he famously came to regard nature as essentially corrupted. As Frederick Kirchhoff has argued, “the price Ruskin pays for his imaginative vision of Nature is the possibility of its negative counterpart” (1977: 257). In the lectures that form The Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth Century (1884), written under the influence of mental illness, Ruskin sees industrial pollution as an apocalyptic sign as well as, paradoxically, “the evil working of nature herself” (letter to Charles Eliot Norton, April 3, 1871 [37: 30]; see also Rosenberg 1961 and Fitch 1982). However, throughout the greater part of his life, he had emphasized the moral and allegorical implications of natural forms as well as their beauty and, in violent opposition to Darwinism’s new claims, their uniqueness. He insisted on underlining, as Stephen Finley has phrased it, “the immutable bond between form and significance” (1987: 18). As an important part of this more optimistic phase, Ruskin’s series of ten lectures on crystallization, conducted in a girls’ school, Winnington Hall in

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Cheshire, and published as *The Ethics of the Dust. Ten Lectures to Little Housewives on the Elements of Crystallisation* (1865), combines the description of scientific knowledge with the appeal to virtuous self-culture. This text which, according to Carlyle, “twists symbolically in the strangest way all its geology into morality, theology, Egyptian mythology, with fiery cuts at political economy” (quoted in Ruskin 1969: 479), anthropomorphizes mineralogical processes in order “[to demonstrate] the general conditions under which the Personal Creative Power manifests itself in the forms of matter” (18: 203). It is a perfect example of how Ruskin perceives the formative influence of the spirit – or “energy” – on biological or material processes. At the same time, in its implications for human education, it is an extended treatment of a metaphor used by Smiles: while Ruskin claims that growing up in a “crystalline household world of truth” (19: 235), a child would learn right behaviour automatically, Smiles proclaims that moral discipline “shapes and forms the whole character, until the life becomes crystallized in habit” (1871: 160–1).

In *The Ethics of the Dust*, composed of lectures masquerading as dialogue in the tradition of eighteenth-century didactic dialogues (see Myers 1989: 171–200), Ruskin’s girl students become subjects as well as objects of the analysis. The lecturer restricts his topic accordingly: “[The] mathematical part of crystallography is quite beyond girls’ strength; but these questions of the various tempers and manners of crystals are not only comprehensible by you, but full of the most curious teaching for you.” (18: 259) At the centre of the text is the analogy between crystal ‘growth’ and human growth. Throughout, the perfect order of crystalline structure is taken as a model for human society. For Ruskin as educator, scientist and art critic, morally good life and defined form are a unit: “You may always stand by Form, against Force.” (18: 341) The form of crystals, the “Old Lecturer” explains, is produced by the crystals alternately assimilating and repelling material. Perfectly formed crystals are moralized as “resolute, consummate, determinate in form”, whereas an irregular structure is seen as the outcome of indecisiveness, of a crystal “[having] never for one instant made up its mind what thickness it will have.” (18: 263) The difference, the lecturer emphasizes, is not to be found in the crystals’ substance: “The impurity of the last is in its will, or want of will.” The deformed crystal’s symbolical “distortion in the spine” underlines its mental deformity (18: 263–4). Energy or will, whether in art or nature, creates form out of chaos, as Ruskin also states in *The Queen of the Air*, quoting himself: “This force, now properly called life, or breathing, or spirit, is continually creating its own shells of definite shape out of the wreck around it: and this is what I meant by saying, in the *Ethics of the Dust*: – ‘you may always stand by form against force’.” (19: 356–7)

In the writings of Victorian physiologists, the ‘true’ strength of a character is fully revealed at the moment of crisis – thus the advice “Keep the faculty
of effort alive in you by a little gratuitous exercise every day […] so that when the hour of dire need draws nigh, it may find you not unnerved and untrained to stand the test” (Carpenter 1874: 424; italics in the original). As James proclaims, only a trained character “will stand like a tower when everything rocks around him, and when his softer fellow-mortals are winnowed like chaff in the blast” (1890: 130). Such a heroic fight against external difficulties or the forces of a hostile material environment forms a large part of Ruskin’s *Ethics of the Dust* – an ‘instinctive virtue’ helps his ‘good’ crystal to preserve its purity:

Here, for instance, is a rock-crystal of the purest race and finest temper, who was born, unhappily for him, in a bad neighbourhood […] and he has had to fight with vile calcareous mud all his life. See here, when he was but a child, it came down on him, and nearly buried him; a weaker crystal would have died in despair; but he only gathered himself together, like Hercules against the serpents, and threw a layer of crystal over the clay; conquered it, – imprisoned it, – and lived on. […] (18: 279–80)

Here the threatening idea of antagonistic environmental forces that was to overwhelm Ruskin in later age can still be countered successfully by the moral concept of ‘energy’. At the text’s climax, the natural laws by which a crystal refines itself in an age-long process become an allegory of the transmutation of humankind in a life after death (see 18: 358). There are similarities here with Gerard Manley Hopkins’ “immortal diamond” and with alchemical notions of self-refinement (1986: 180–81, ll. 23 and 24). Indeed, alchemical metaphors were used by Ruskin in “Of Public Education” (in *Time and Tide*, 1867) to describe human education, calling it the “Philosopher’s Stone […] to turn base souls into noble souls” (17: 394–5). Later social reformers explicitly reapplied Ruskin’s metaphor to their work; a tract written at the turn of the century, *Diamonds from Dust*, celebrates the London Female Guardian Society’s work in the city’s poorhouses as “a process excelling that of which Ruskin dreamed – human lives which seemed so unlovely and worthless becoming refined under the patient alchemy of loving hearts and tender hands” (Flint 2000: 49). Ruskin’s moral theory of self-formation thus sees humans as part of nature but also as transcending it.

However, it has to be said that in *The Ethics of the Dust* the ideal state of humans and matter for Ruskin is, finally, arrested motion. As Cathy Shuman has it: “[for Ruskin, […] change inevitably results in ‘movelessness’, and […] the meaning of history is the end of history” (2000: 209). While ostentatiously talking about the development and formation of children, he simultaneously fixes them in a timeless present. Indeed, his *alter ego*, the “Old Lecturer” of the text, is paradoxically associated with modernity, and the young girls with age-old crystals and ancient mythology (18: 207). This paradox is reinforced by the fact that their destiny as ‘Angels in the House’
is proleptically stated in the book’s title, “little housewives”. In similar terms Ruskin had written about himself in the nostalgic autobiography *Praeterita*, “that all significant development ceased before he attained maturity, [and] that the crystallized identity of childhood persisted as the true self throughout his life and into old age” (Robson 2002: 44). As is well known, Ruskin shared his idolizing of children and his fear of their “woeful transformation” into adults with other writers of the period, such as Dickens.5

### 4 The Circulation of Matter and Self-Formation in Charles Dickens

Despite differences in their social outlook,6 Ruskin and Dickens converge in their fundamental ambivalence about the role of innate versus acquired characteristics: both believe in moral and physical education as much as in a character’s ‘essential virtue’ – their concept of a trained ‘moral instinct’ loosely connecting the two positions. Indeed, Ruskin states in *Sesame and Lilies* (1865), “All good work is essentially done […] without hesitation, without difficulty, without boasting; and in the doers of the best, there is an inner and involuntary power which approximates literally to the instinct of an animal” (18: 167). Both Ruskin and Dickens, moreover, describe the process of individual development in terms of material formation and deformation; Dickens’ convict Abel Magwitch in *Great Expectations* (1860/61), for instance, is a famous study of how habits inscribe themselves physically into the body.7 In a more systematic way, Dickens’ depictions of childhood development made extensive use of contemporary ideas by Johann Pestalozzi, Friedrich Froebel, Herbert Spencer and others, reflecting his awareness of the links between mental and bodily formation as well as between social situation and healthy physical growth. As a physiologist Spencer saw human beings as machines whose mental development depended essentially on the support of bodily needs: “the mental must not be

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6 In *Unto This Last* (1862), Ruskin recommended “especially *Hard Times*” to all “persons interested in social questions” (17: 1–114, 31n.); but subsequently he became more critical: “Dickens was a pure modernist […]. His hero is essentially the ironmaster; in spite of *Hard Times*, he has advanced by his influence every principle that makes them harder – […] the fury of business competition, and the distrust both of nobility and clergy […]. The literary loss is infinite – the political one I care less for than you do.” (Letter to Charles Eliot Norton, June 19, 1870; 37: 7)

7 Pip – who is not unbiased, of course – observes: “I believe too that he dragged one of his legs as if there were still a weight of iron on it, and that from head to foot there was Convict in the very grain of the man. […] In all his ways of sitting and standing, and eating and drinking […] – in these ways and a thousand other small nameless instances arising every minute in the day, there was Prisoner, Felon, Bondsman, plain as plain could be” (Dickens 1860–1: 333–4).
developed at the expense of the physical”. Undue emphasis on intellectual development, according to him, would have direct consequences “either in illnesses; or in stunted growth; or in deficient energy” (Spencer 1851: 12) – and it has been well rehearsed how Dickens applied this lore in his famous schoolroom scenes. Dickens also publicized Froebel’s similar principles in an 1855 *Household Words* article by Henry Morley:

> How many men and women go about pale-skinned and weak of limb, because their physical health during infancy and childhood was not established by judicious management. It is just so, thought Froebel, with our minds. There would be fewer sullen, quarrelsome, dull-witted men or women, if there were fewer children starved or fed improperly in heart and brain. To improve society – to make men and women better – it is requisite to begin quite at the beginning, and to secure for them a wholesome education during infancy and childhood. […] since they are […] so created as to find happiness in the active exercise and development of all their faculties, we, who have children round about us, shall no longer repress their energies […]. (Morley 1855: 577–8)

Dickens’ depictions of children similarly underline the physical aspects of childhood development, often *ex negativo*: in *Hard Times* and elsewhere, his child characters are “starved or under-nourished, rendered unsound of body or mind. They are forced into a conformity which ignores their individual tastes and capacities, or into a premature state of adulthood, or into an academic diet of sowthistles” (Collins 1965: 173). Examples abound, such as Oliver Twist’s tender frame during early childhood or Jenny Wren’s “bad back” and “queer legs”; like other social reformers Dickens here emphasizes environmental influence above ideas of ‘innate’ or biologically ‘acquired’ characteristics (Dickens 1864–5: 222; see also Stoddard Holmes 2004). In his criticism of the deformation of labourers through factory work and the deformation of pupils in a rigid utilitarian school system, he is at one with Ruskin: factory workers, Ruskin complained in *Unto this Last* (1862), were “broken into small fragments and crumbs of life”, and the contemporary educational system was “roll[ing] the students up into pellets, flatten[ing] them into cakes, or stretch[ing] them into cables” (17: 10; 26).

Like Ruskin, Dickens emphasized, especially in his late novels, that individual formation has to be achieved in the face of massive adversity, symbolized by the mud, dirt and polluted air that in his texts represent the life-threatening forces of a deterministic universe. The atmosphere of *Bleak House* has been seen as entropic, tending towards “the putrefaction of every organic form and […] the pulverization of every structured inorganic thing” (Hillis Miller 1958: 192; see also Wilkinson 1967: 225–47 and Fielding 1996: 207–14), and various critics have also stressed that Dickens’ late novels represent a metropolitan version of the Darwinian struggle for survival – ambiguous as Dickens’ position on Darwin may have been (see for instance
Levine 1988, Flint 1995: 152–73, and Morgentaler 1998: 707–21). However, Mill’s concept of “Nature” as “a scheme to be amended [...] by Man” is certainly congruent with Dickens’ ideology of energy: in his novels, the active transformation of one’s environment is the key not only to survival but to success. As John Kucich has rightly pointed out, the opposites of “expenditure and conservation” (1981: 122) characterize Dickens’ figures and plots: the amount of energy, but also the capacity of channeling that energy into constructive work as well as resistance against overwhelming environmental antagonisms, are directly linked to a character’s achievement. While unbalanced, degenerate characters, such as the schoolmaster Bradley Headstone in Our Mutual Friend or Mr. Krook in Bleak House, are defined, in an exaggerated version of the humours theory, by their eruptive bodily fluids, various ‘strong’ characters, endowed with a surplus of ‘innate’ energy, are able to escape destruction and to maintain an identity “amid modern disintegration” (Hale 2000: 303) and symbolically as well as actual pollution. The physicist John Tyndall, making visible in an 1870 experiment the dirt in London’s air and water, emphasized that “It is so hard to be clean in the midst of dirt” (1870: 164), and this is exactly the task, literally and symbolically, that Dickens’ protagonists, like Ruskin’s ‘good’ crystal, are facing: “in a typical Dickensian manner many ‘good’ characters either shine through the slime or manage to wash it off” (Frank 1977: 132).

Indeed, Dickens’ ideology of a positive energy of self-formation is closely linked to the contemporary discourse on hygiene surrounding the 1848 Public Health Act and to debates on epidemics that social reformers had conducted from mid-century onwards. Edwin Chadwick, for instance, saw a parallel between miasmatic infection and moral degeneracy in his Report on the Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Population of Great Britain (1842), and in Dombey and Son and elsewhere Dickens explains that in the fetid air of poor people’s houses no moral development could be possible. In the same way that social reformers combined the concepts of “dirt and immorality”, cleanliness was associated with personal integrity (Otis 1999: 10). These ideas contributed, as Philipp Sarasin and others have shown, to the creation of the ‘modern’ bourgeois subject and its ideology of autonomy (see Sarasin 2001 and Michie 1999: 408–9); simultaneously, the new London sewage system was seen as a “mine of gold”: it recycled organic waste matter, hitherto a source of infection, into the agricultural system.

These ideas recur in Dickens: in Our Mutual Friend, for instance, Jenny and Lizzie

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8 "Vainly attempt to think of any simply plant, or flower, or wholesome weed, that, set in this foetid bed, could have its natural growth" (Dickens 1847–48: 619).
are, despite their poverty, presiding over a household described as “orderly and clean” (1864–65: 233), and the “iron master” in Bleak House, prominent exponent of Dickens’ hard-working self-made man, creates a microcosm of “perfect order and discipline” (1852–3: 883). In Our Mutual Friend the Boffins oppose their own cleanliness and moral purity to the ubiquitous literal and symbolic dust heaps: “She and her husband had worked [...] and had brought their simple faith and honour clean out of dustyheaps” (1864–65: 384). Bella Wilfer, finally, at the end of her paradoxical learning process in which she in fact unlearns her presumptions and regains her essential ‘good nature’, is defined against the desolate background of dust heaps as “true golden gold at heart” (1864–65: 772), representing “all the gold in the world” (1864–65: 683) to her husband John Harmon. Through her alchemical energy, dirt becomes gold, in the same way that the time’s sanitary reformers were detecting a “mine of gold” in urban waste – and, indeed, in the same way that Ruskin aligned moral self-formation and a crystal’s refinement process.

However, as with Ruskin’s little girls, the self-formation of Dickens’ female characters is paradoxical. Neither Bella nor Lizzie learn anything new, but only reveal their essential ‘knowledge of the heart’: “their self-contradictory plots enable them to resist development” (Shuman 2000: 160). Here Dickens is at one with Spencer’s warnings against the dangerous physical consequences of undue mental exertion in women; but this also points to a more general feature of his writings: although Dickens often depicts characters seemingly developing through education or self-discipline, these changes are, in the last resort, only superficial: with negative characters, education cannot efface their ‘animal essence’, while positive characters use self-discipline only to attain a position that in terms of the text’s ideology was already theirs from the start. Thus, while the pre-eminence of work ethics over the privilege of birth is a recurring theme in his novels, social climbing is still depicted in highly ambivalent terms. Like Ruskin, Dickens ultimately believed that people should remain within their ‘allotted’ social spheres.11 The power of formal education, in spite of his campaigning for school reform, finally appears, in

10 See Spencer 1860: 117–8: “In the pale, angular, flat-chested young ladies, so abundant in London drawing-rooms, we see the effect of merciless application, unrelieved by youthful sports [...]. Mammas anxious to make their daughters attractive, could scarcely choose a course more fatal than this, which sacrifices the body to the mind. [...] Men care little for erudition in women; but very much for physical beauty, good nature, and sound sense.”

11 See, for instance, Ruskin’s explanation of his title Fors Clavigera: “The Fors is fortune, who is to the Life of men what Atropos is to their death, Unrepentant, – first represented, I believe, by the Etruscans as fastening a nail into a beam with a hammer [...] My purpose is to show, in the lives of men, how their Fortune appoints things irreversibly” (letter to Walter Severn, March 1875; quoted in 27: xvii-xc, xx).
his writings, as inferior to the power of innate capacity and goodness. On the one hand Dickens explains the rough morals of London slum dwellers by pointing to their desolate living conditions; but on the other he presents figures like Lizzie or Jenny, who, growing up in just such conditions, display a fairy-tale purity of heart. He describes states of being rather than development. Like Ruskin, he prefers “arrested motion”.

5 Conclusion

This brief analysis of selected texts by Ruskin and Dickens, in the light of contemporary scientific and educational writings, has shown that Victorian thinking about child development, habit formation, and the role of ‘energy’ in shaping humans’ surroundings is characterized by the same kind of dialectics so prominent in Mill’s autobiography and his essay “On Nature”: seeing humankind as part of nature, Mill also insists on humans’ power to alter their material environment, because “by every choice we make […] we place ourselves to a greater or less extent under one set of laws of nature instead of another”. This nineteenth-century debate thus anticipates contemporary secondary phase ecocriticism in its emphasis on the interdependence of nature and culture as well as on humans’ dependence upon the rest of the natural world. Moreover, the debate about the material constitution of the human body is characterized by the “corporeal imagination” that Cornelius Castoriadis has identified as part of society’s “imaginary institution”: a “socialization of the psyche” predetermines the individual’s apprehension of materiality and environment (1987: 334). The ways in which Victorian scientists, educationalists and literary writers described the material aspects of self-formation reveals much about the underlying cultural default positions. One dilemma especially was ever-present and integral to the kind of Victorian ‘idealist materialism’ that has been traced here: for both Dickens and Ruskin, bodies that “leak, bleed, drip, and drool” are symbols of moral failure (Federico 2000: 152), whereas the energetic formation by living beings of “shells of definite shape out of the wreck around [them]” is a symbol of moral success (19: 356–7). This Bakhtinian difference between the perfectly shaped, disciplined, ‘classic’ body and the shapeless, undisciplined, ‘grotesque’ body frequently recurs in mid-century Victorian literature as homonymous with the difference between the normative bourgeois and the deviant working-class or degenerate aristocratic body. However, the downside of such an emphasis on ‘form’ and ‘shape’ as indicators of moral righteousness is, as we have seen, the ever-present threat of stasis.

Let me conclude with the following example: The Ethics of the Dust was intended by Ruskin as didactics of science as well as moral teaching. As the preface to the second edition of 1877 states, he also considered it to be
'serious' science, seeing it as a supplement to Deucalion: Collected Studies of the Lapse of Waves, and Life of Stones, his geological and mineralogical lectures delivered at Oxford and London (1875–83) (18: 205). Indeed, in Proserpina (1886), he describes the importance of The Ethics of the Dust in terms reminiscent of the contemporary admiration of the ‘strong character’: “authoritative as far as it reaches, [it] will stand out like a quartz dyke, as the sandy speculations of modern gossiping geologists get washed away.” (25: 413) The Carlylean hero, the ‘strong man’ of Smiles’ and Mill’s writings, is repeatedly envisaged in moralizing scientific and literary discourse as a tower among the toppling stones, as a quartz dyke amidst the sand, or as a perfect crystal withstanding the onset of hostile forces. But obviously, the image of crystallization could also be used – even if humorously – in a derogatory way; thus the physical hardening process of the psyche in habit formation as described by physiological psychologists is eyed with wariness by physicist James Clerk Maxwell, who writes in an 1873 letter to Herbert Spencer – albeit tongue-in-cheek – that in order to prevent one’s own thinking from becoming fixed by the time one reaches forty one has to “put in some ingredient to check crystallization” (quoted in Duncan 1908: 429). By the age of thirty, “the character has set like plaster”, as we have heard, similarly, from William James. Opposing the language of scientific materialism with equally materialist metaphors in order to imagine the ‘forms’ and ‘shapes’ of their moral universe, and to imagine humankind as a part of nature that also acts upon nature, nineteenth-century scientists and literary writers risked implying not only the idea of form, but also of stasis – and death.

References


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