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Tallow Candles and Meaty Air in *Bleak House*

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In four scenes from Charles Dickens's *Bleak House* (1852–53) there is a strange — and disgusting — pattern of characters feeling that they can 'taste' the air, and that air tastes either greasy or meaty. Each of these scenes involves burning animal matter in the form of tallow candles made from animal fat. The first infusion of tallow occurs when Esther, Richard, and Ada visit the Jellybys:

'You find me, my dears', said Mrs. Jellyby, snuffing the two great office candles in tin candlesticks, which made the room taste strongly of hot tallow (the fire had gone out, and there was nothing in the grate but ashes, a bundle of wood, and a poker), 'you find me, my dears, as usual, very busy; but that you will excuse.'¹

In this aside we get a brief sense of the foul smell a tallow candle gives off, expressed in the language of 'taste'.² By specifying how the room tastes rather than smells, Dickens subliminally reminds readers that the candles are made of animal fat, or tallow, a substance that, when burned, produces an effect unnervingly similar to meat, bacon, and other cooked food. This article focuses on Dickens's treatment of tallow candles and their meaty residue in *Bleak House*. The suffocating disgust Dickens elicits in these scenes uncovers anxieties about modern modes of production and the waste that they create. By representing animal fat in its liquid and gaseous states, Dickens creates an eerie sense that inhabiting the modern urban world means ingesting undesirable matter.

Tallow candles were made from sheep, pig, cow, or ox fat — fat that remained solid at room temperature but melted when heated by a flame. These candles were either dipped or formed with a cylindrical or conical

¹ Charles Dickens, *Bleak House*, ed. by Nicola Bradbury (New York: Penguin, 2003), p. 53.

² Tallow candles and their more expensive and less smelly counterparts, beeswax candles, were markers of both class and aesthetic taste. Janice Carlisle notes that in *Felix Holt* (1866), both Esther and Felix are unusually sensitive to delicate scents and prefer beeswax to tallow. See *Common Scents: Comparative Encounters in High-Victorian Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 8–9, 23, 95.

mould, and burned with a wick, usually made of twisted strands of cotton, which were not self-consuming like the wicks we are used to today. Far less expensive than candles made from beeswax, tallow candles were also much messier. In 'Reading by Artificial Light in the Victorian Age', Simon Eliot notes that, while beeswax candles were 'low in odour' and possessed 'a bright flame', 'tallow was an unappealing substance [...] smelly and greasy.' He emphasizes the offensive residue that these candles often produced:

Unless it had been highly purified so that every trace of anything that would go rancid had been removed, the stench might be very unpleasant, particularly once extinguished when a cloud of greasy, choking smoke would be sent up to perfume the room and deposit soot and grease upon the ceiling.³

With regard to *Bleak House* in particular, Eliot argues convincingly that 'Krook's spontaneous combustion is [...] described in terms of the burning of a giant tallow candle [...] that distributes the constituents of Krook's body in a proper thermodynamic way: that is, widely and randomly' (p. 29), a point I return to below.

In this article, I connect *Bleak House's* images of noxious burning tallow to larger narratives of unhealthy and unsustainable consumption. Dickens uses tallow to explore continuities across four modes of Victorian consumption: eating food, spending money, using up human energy, and burning fuel (whether fat, oil, wax, wood, or coal). In *Victorian Literature, Energy, and the Ecological Imagination*, Allen MacDuffie draws a helpful distinction between literary works that register the 'material pressures of environmental contamination and resource exhaustion' and canonical thermodynamic texts, which tend to normalize energy use. He points out, for example, that 'depending on the argument being made, the natural world could either be depicted as a reservoir of fuel leaking out everywhere, or as an abstract bookkeeping system tracking every drop'.⁴ He describes a culture 'haunted by the question of irreversible depletion', a problem that becomes particularly vivid in urban spaces, thanks to the 'obvious environmental disorder of the city, the mounting presence of noxious gases, effluvia, soot, smoke, ash, and all the other unrecoverable by-products of aggregated energy consumption' (pp. 9, 15). He discusses

³ Simon Eliot, 'Reading by Artificial Light in the Victorian Age', in *Reading and the Victorians*, ed. by Juliet John and Matthew Bradley (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), pp. 15–30 (p. 18).

⁴ Allen MacDuffie, *Victorian Literature, Energy, and the Ecological Imagination*, Cambridge Studies in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Culture, 93 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 70.

the waste and leakiness involved in heating the Dedlock mansion in *Bleak House* with ‘blazing fires of faggot and coal — Dedlock timber and antediluvian forest’ and ‘hot water pipes all over the house’ (cited in MacDuffie, p. 94). Here, resources are being wastefully consumed, and heat inefficiently dissipates into the air. While MacDuffie focuses neither on candles nor on the energy supplied by food, the distinction he makes between narratives that register anxiety and those that close such anxieties down is markedly apparent in Dickens’s treatment of tallow.⁵ Tallow candles — everyday objects that burn fuel like miniature furnaces — make these industrial issues manifest in interior and even domestic spaces. In Sir Leicester’s terms, this is one way that Dickens draws ‘a parallel [...] between Chesney Wold [...] and a factory’ (p. 454), bringing broad questions of industrial energy down to a human scale and into domestic or semi-domestic spaces such as Mr Krook’s and Mr Vholes’s.

Eating, spending money, using energy, and burning fuel all involve systems that can be conceived of as more or less healthy, more or less renewable. But while some systems (like agriculture) are cyclical and renewable, others can be characterized as predatory, wasteful, or irreversible, in the sense that they use up a finite store of resources. Tallow candles become particularly vivid objects through which to link these forms of consumption because they can function as firelight, as food, as a visible source of fuel that can be wasted, and, like money, as a discernibly finite resource that can be used up and can melt away. My larger argument is that Dickens is actively using taboos about food, greasy smells, and meaty tastes to trigger readerly disgust in scenes from the Jellybys’ house, the Rag and Bottle Shop, and Vholes’s office. That disgust evinces a sense of a coherent natural order gone fundamentally awry in the modern world of industrial capitalism. Taste and smell and meaty air register concerns about harmful forms of resource depletion by activating taboos about what should or should not be ingested.

While clean air has the effect of signalling healthy, efficient processes of consumption, Dickens’s dirty and meaty air serves as a warning about the waste, starvation, and pollution involved in modern industrial life.⁶ At

⁵ While he helpfully identifies these two narrative tendencies, MacDuffie notes that individual texts often include incompatible narratives. He claims that Dickens is particularly adept at controlling the narratives he employs, suggesting in *Our Mutual Friend* (1865), for example, that Dickens repeatedly shows how ‘fictions of a fully recyclable, cyclical economy have been awkwardly grafted upon a system of non-renewable resource exploitation’ (p. 127).

⁶ Jesse Oak Taylor dates a concern with the dirtiness of London’s smoky air back to Queen Elizabeth I’s reign, in *The Sky of Our Manufacture: The London Fog in British Fiction from Dickens to Woolf* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2016), p. 4.

Vholes's office, candles retain their sheepy aromas and release them into the surrounding air when consumed. The narrator tells us:

A smell as of unwholesome sheep blending with the smell of must and dust is referable to the nightly (and often daily) consumption of mutton fat in candles and to the fretting of parchment forms and skins in greasy drawers. (p. 621)

The 'consumption' of mutton fat in this instance means the literal burning of candles, but Dickens's mention of mutton calls up the alternate meaning: eating, ingesting, taking into the body. This ingestion is exactly what happens when one smells and, especially, tastes the air — particulates of animal products are taken into the body. Consumption by fire can be cast as purifying or cleansing — making way for future life and regeneration. But in Mrs Jellyby's home and Vholes's office the effect of fire is not to purify. Instead, fire activates the air, overwhelming the senses with the dirty residue of modern life.

Rather than reassuringly remaining in the category of inanimate things, Dickens's tallow candles are unnervingly close to being alive. They remain *too* embodied.⁷ Another way to think about this is that tallow candles are manufactured objects or commodities that reflect too closely the bodies from which they originate. There are times when narratives of production benefit from announcing the source of the product: grass-fed beef, free-range chicken, Italian leather, for instance. In other cases, an object's nearness to the animal world is a proximity that is supposed to disappear and stay hidden. In *Bleak House*, the bodily aura that tallow candles retain indicates the wrong kind of proximity, the wrong kind of continuity over time, creating anxiety and a feeling of form gone awry. Fire is the catalyst that drives that transformation — it is when the candle is lit or snuffed that it starts to act and taste like food. A cool tallow candle generally functions like a solid, bounded object. Once lit, melted, burned, and dispersed into the air by fire, the candle becomes something that penetrates boundaries and permeates air, walls, and ceilings.

The idea that tallow candles could become food for human beings was by no means unthinkable in Victorian Britain. Simon Eliot notes that desperately hungry lighthouse keepers did ingest tallow candles 'to bulk out their inadequate food rations' since 'being made of animal fat, they could, in extremis, be eaten' (p. 26). The Baptist preacher Charles Spurgeon included an image of mice nibbling on a candle in his *Sermons in Candles* (Fig. 1). This is a classic example of a slippage between candle as light source and candle as food. *Sermons in Candles* uses candles as

⁷ Compare John Carey's account of the overlaps between corpses and waxwork in Dickens's imagination in *The Violent Effigy: A Study of Dickens' Imagination* (London: Faber and Faber, 1973; repr. 2008), pp. 84–85.

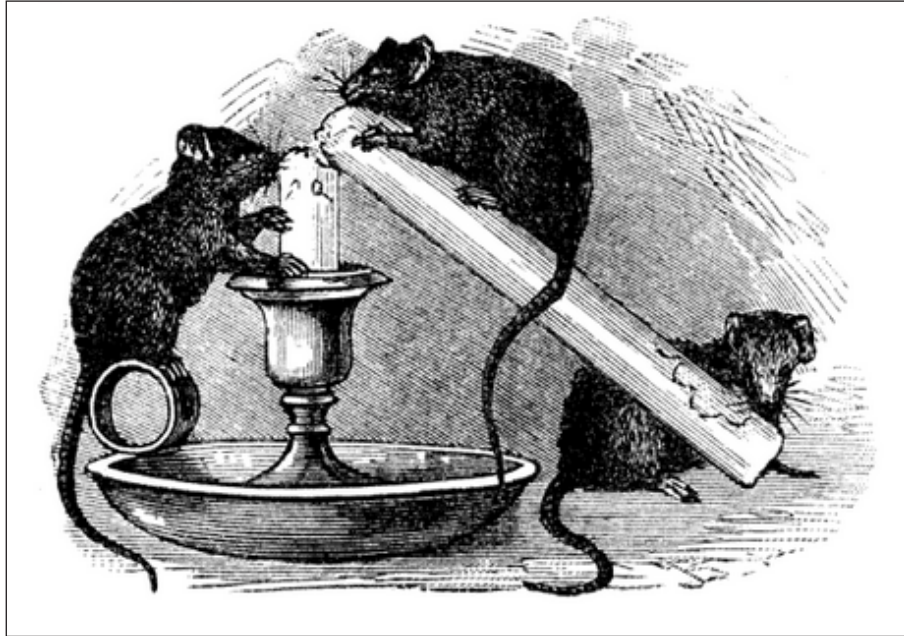


Fig. 1: Charles Spurgeon, *Sermons in Candles* (London: Passmore and Alabaster, 1891), p. 106.

illustrations in a series of moral lessons; in Spurgeon's sermons, fire can signify salvation, a life force that gutters or blows out, and even the dangerous distractions of the secular world, as when a household fire melts a pound of tallow candles into 'a mass of fat on the floor'.⁸ In the case of the mice nibbling at the candle, Spurgeon uses the fate of the unlighted candle as a metaphor for the ills of idleness: 'For every evil brought upon us by excessive labour, ten will come to us by laziness' (p. 80). He uses candles as a metaphor for human beings who must burn bright rather than 'be eaten by mice' (p. 80). Janice Carlisle cites Felix Holt, who claims that he is 'not a mouse to have a nose that takes note of wax or tallow' (Carlisle, p. 8), suggesting that mice would disdain the cleaner wax but be attracted to the meatiness of tallow. In *Felix Holt*, as in *Bleak House*, when one can taste the fat from which the tallow candle has been made, it means that something has gone awry in the order of things. The idea of candles turning into food triggers a feeling of unstable boundaries between object and being. In this image, it is not fire but the *absence* of a lighted match that makes the candle revert back from an inert household object to a form of edible animal matter.

⁸ C. H. Spurgeon, *Sermons in Candles: Being Two Lectures upon the Illustrations Which May Be Found in Common Candles* (London: Passmore and Alabaster, 1891), p. 18.

The fact that idleness consists in *not using* a candle highlights a confusion around the concept of what it means for something to be wasted. Is not using a manufactured object designed to be used consuming too much or not consuming enough? A capitalist model that validates work and production of goods would suggest, as Spurgeon does, that producing and consuming as many goods as possible signals a flourishing economy.⁹ Yet, using up fossil fuels too quickly — making use of what had been stored up over millions of years — had already become a concern by the 1860s (MacDuffie, p. 27). The image of the mice nibbling a neglected candle (whose owner may well be lazily sleeping) reminds us that physical waste products or category confusions are frequently invoked to flag concerns about the moral consequences of human activity. In this case, fire would signify productive use; in its absence, the candle reverts unnervingly back to its bodily form. In another instance — such as accidentally melting a bunch of candles — fire represents the dangers of carelessness. This image ties idleness to the other sin of gluttony. The spaces in which Dickens's tallow candles appear are often those in which resources are being hoarded by one person (Krook, Vholes, or Jellyby) while others are bankrupt, cold, emaciated, hungry, or dying. An anxiety about survival, not being fed, and even becoming food unites all three spaces.

Tallow candles are part of a cluster of animal products in *Bleak House* — including sheepskin, parchment, and wigs — that repeatedly threaten to revert to their original animal forms. The homes and offices of Mrs Jellyby and Vholes are two places in which Dickens suggests that the process of turning organic animal bodies into urban commodities (candles, parchment, wigs) has not quite been completed. Candles and parchment — the scraped and specially prepared sheep or calfskin used for legal documents — are part animal, part object. When candles are lit and then heat up, Dickens shows their animal nature becoming reactivated.¹⁰ The commodification of animal bodies occurs primarily in the city, where parts of formerly living bodies are manufactured into things. Unlike the fields of Chesney Wold, Lincoln's Inn Fields are 'pleasant fields, where the sheep are all made into parchment, the goats into wigs, and the pasture into chaff' (p. 661). Parchment, wigs, and chaff are each manufactured commodities made from parts of larger organic bodies (a whole sheep, a whole goat, a wheat plant). Ideally, the stages of production ensure that once they have been removed from that body, they achieve the status of thing, and

⁹ See MacDuffie's discussion of waste, pp. 107–11.

¹⁰ Leah Price notes the way that books do and do not 'remind handlers of the book's animal origins' in *How to Do Things with Books in Victorian Britain* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), p. 132. She points out that 'as a clerk like Dickens would well have known, parchment itself *is* skin' (p. 102).

no longer call attention to their organic origins. But, in Dickens's meaty settings, those animal origins become hauntingly perceptible.

The cycle of producing and consuming candles works efficiently in many of the spaces that Dickens describes in *Bleak House* — objects retain their identities and do not slip dangerously into other categories.¹¹ Candles are candles, shrimp are shrimp, and people are people. But there are certain spaces in which category confusion is the governing principle, and everything leaks and shades into something else. Such category confusion is characteristic of the Jellybys' house, a place characterized by 'waste and ruin' that manifests itself in food being mixed in with commodities (p. 480). The list of what comes 'tumbling out of the closets when they were opened' is exemplary:

Bits of mouldy pie, sour bottles, Mrs. Jellyby's caps, letters, tea, forks, odd boots and shoes of children, firewood, wafers, saucepan-lids, damp sugar in odds and ends of paper bags, footstools, blacklead brushes, bread, Mrs. Jellyby's bonnets, books with butter sticking to the binding, guttered candle ends put out by being turned upside down in broken candlesticks, nutshells, heads and tails of shrimps, dinner-mats, gloves, coffee-grounds, umbrellas. (p. 480)

The catalogue goes back and forth between the edible, the no longer edible, and the already half eaten, reminding us that waste is matter out of place, and *everything* is out of place here. When he describes these meaty spaces, Dickens moves us into worlds in which boundaries are radically unstable. This is part of his extraordinary use of metaphor and metonymy, in which imagery often confuses readers about what is and is not alive. Such disgusting unboundedness occurs primarily in urban spaces where people eat and sleep but the domestic economy or ecosystem is off kilter. Mr Krook is a hoarder; Miss Flite barely eats; Mrs Jellyby produces paper and uses up her family; Mr Vholes is repeatedly compared to a predator or cannibal who feeds on human flesh.

In Victorian times — as in our own — the use of energy is universally described in terms of spending, costs, benefits, supply, demand, consumption, and waste. MacDuffie emphasizes that 'economic metaphors [...] are crucial to the Victorian conception of energy' (p. 19). While agricultural life relied on a constant flow of energy from the sun, fuelling plants and animals that feed on them, industrial capitalism depended on energy stocks — fossil fuels — that had been built up over millions of years. Agricultural life is equated to living within one's income, while the use of fossil fuels

¹¹ John Carey provides an encyclopedic account of the way Dickens plays with animate and inanimate bodies in his chapter on 'Corpses and Effigies' (pp. 80–104).

amounts to consuming capital — an unsustainable practice.¹² Candles function as a domestic version of unhealthy energy use. Dickens explicitly links spending with burning candles after Richard and Ada are married. Esther remarks: ‘That the money Ada brought [Richard] was melting away with the candles I used to see burning after dark in Mr. Wholes’s office I knew very well’ (p. 921). Like tallow, money is quickly used up in an energy-sucking atmosphere — what Barri J. Gold refers to as a ‘heat sink’.¹³ When Nemo is dying in the Rag and Bottle Shop, he is described by the narrator as an inefficiently burning tallow candle: ‘He has a yellow look in the spectral darkness of a candle that has guttered down until the whole length of its wick (still burning) has doubled over and left a tower of winding-sheet above it’ (p. 165). Nemo’s body is envisioned as a candle that is wasting away. Guttering candles are a sign of neglect; to work well, candles needed to be cared for, constantly trimmed and snuffed. Nemo’s body has been wasted by poverty, isolation, and addiction to opium. Like the other palpably embodied tallow candles in the novel, the burning smell that Nemo gives off signals his inner deterioration.

To better understand how Dickens invokes disgust, we might contrast his scenes of greasy candles with other progressive narratives of candles as industrial innovation. In his Christmas lectures on the chemical history of a candle, first given in 1848, Michael Faraday does a lot of work to stress the efficient modernity of candles. He speaks about the ‘candles of commerce’ and emphasizes that through an elaborate process of purification a candle becomes a stable thing: ‘A candle you know is not a greasy thing like an ordinary tallow candle — but a clean thing, and you may almost scrape off and pulverize the drops which fall from it without soiling anything.’¹⁴ Faraday’s rhetoric reassuringly asserts technological control over candlelight. His ‘candle of commerce’ exemplifies a world in which things work well, processes can be understood, and burning fuel does not produce dirty residue. Dickens does the opposite: in the places where we most want there to be boundaries (in acts of eating, seeing, or staying clean and warm), he breaks down distinctions and raises our alarms.

Tasting the air in ‘The Appointed Time’

In the second part of this article, I turn to how Dickens plays on the touch, smell, and taste of burning tallow candles in Chapter 32, ‘The Appointed Time’. This is the famous chapter in which Mr Guppy and Tony Jobling wait to meet with Krook on a ‘close’ and greasy night, and then finally

¹² See Andreas Malm’s useful discussion of a ‘fossil economy’ in *Fossil Capital: The Rise of Steam Power and the Roots of Global Warming* (London: Verso, 2016).

¹³ Barri J. Gold, *ThermoPoetics: Energy in Victorian Literature and Science* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010), p. 195.

¹⁴ Michael Faraday, *The Chemical History of a Candle* (Mineola: Dover, 2002), p. 13.

discover that Krook's body has spontaneously combusted (p. 507). Fire consumes candles, cooks meat, and burns up Krook. Fire's combustive process ignites latent particles of meaty matter and circulates them throughout the neighbourhood. The repulsive effects in this extended scene depend on confusion 'in the air' between pork chops, tallow, and spontaneously combusted human (p. 506).

This chapter's disturbing use of tastes and smells hinges on Dickens's slow release of information to the reader, his refusal to identify what is cooking until the very end of the chapter. It is essential to Dickens's effects that Guppy and Jobling discover Krook's body after it has been burned, rather than while he is actually combusting, encountering the residue of burning fat well before they understand which body is being burned. Dickens gets the reader to imagine tasting burning chops and touching and smelling tallow *before* then disclosing that what we have been imaginatively ingesting, smelling, and touching in this intimate way is actually burned human. Our defences come down when we imagine chops cooking (however burned and unfresh) — but once we realize Krook's unctuous body is in the air, on the walls, and collected in oily nauseous pools, and we have been imaginatively ingesting it, it is too late to put those defences up.

In this scene, Dickens takes his reader through a form of imaginative cannibalism. Once we realize that the apparent smell of chops and candles is in fact Krook's body, taking the air means inhaling particles of burning flesh. By getting us to imagine tasting, smelling, and touching burned human fat, he is invoking the taboo of eating human flesh. In having us try to figure out the mystery of what is 'in the air' (p. 506), Dickens has us at our most sensorially alert well before anyone could guess that a human being has combusted and been cooked into nothing but a burning smell, soot, and oil.

In fact, Jobling and Guppy's experience of tasting burning particles of Krook is part of a pattern of cannibalism throughout *Bleak House*. Later, Vholes 'takes off his close black gloves as if he were skinning his hands', and Vholes and his daughters are described as 'minor cannibal chiefs' who subsist on 'man-eating' (pp. 622–23). Tulkinghorn is described as a 'dingy London bird' 'smoke-dried and faded', who 'in the oven made by the hot pavements and hot buildings, [...] has baked himself dryer than usual' (p. 661). When an ecology is healthy, exuberant unboundedness is reassuring, but an ecology that is functioning poorly creates an imaginative confusion that deeply disturbs. In these scenes, Dickens makes visible a perverse food chain — not a chain of being but a sequence of using things up wrongly and irreparably. Like a classical chain of being, an ordinary food chain depends on a cycle that has appropriate hierarchies and distinctions. It narrates a process that absorbs individual beings but sustains the system of life as a whole.

The chapter begins at 9 p.m. in Lincoln's Inn with a sense of claustrophobia, thick air, and pollution linked to animal products — 'fat candles are snuffed out in offices' and

patches of candlelight reveal where some wise draughtsman and conveyancer yet toils for the entanglement of real estate in meshes of sheep-skin, in the average ratio of about a dozen of sheep to an acre of land. Over which bee-like industry these benefactors of their species linger. (p. 504)

Dickens invokes fat candles, sheepskin, a dozen sheep, and bees in the context of lawyer-like lucubrations. He then notes 'a general tendency towards beer and supper', bringing up the consumption of food directly after mentioning candles (p. 504).

The narrative point of view settles on Tony Jobling who is working under the pseudonym Mr Weevle. The narrator turns to the air and all the particulates of matter that city air contains, summoning up images of bodily waste and dead bodies, whether animal or human.¹⁵ His syntax links the physical waste, the 'plenty' that 'is in the air' with the uneasy feeling inside Jobling:

It is a close night [...]. It is a fine steaming night to turn the slaughter-houses, the unwholesome trades, the sewerage, bad water, and burial-grounds to account, and give the Registrar of Deaths some extra business. It may be something in the air — there is plenty in it — or it may be something in himself that is in fault; but Mr. Weevle, otherwise Jobling, is very ill at ease. (pp. 506–07)

Ordinarily freeing, air becomes dense. Dickens gives us a sense of air that is packed full of 'something', but we do not know yet what. Snagsby asks Jobling whether he is 'airing himself' — a phrase that connotes freshness, but here involves immersion in these body particulates. Andrew Stauffer has shown how prevalent the dust of dead bodies and paper is in *Bleak House* and *Our Mutual Friend* — but all of the examples he uses are of things old and desiccated, dried into dust.¹⁶ The examples that interest me here are particulates in an earlier stage of decomposition; they are still oily and meaty rather than dried and leathery. Unlike Krook's bags of hair or the

¹⁵ See Taylor's connection between 'particulates' and Guppy's 'London particular' (p. 22). While his focus is primarily on industrial rather than domestic pollution, he evocatively describes the 'embodied revulsion' that the 'Krook-besmeared climate' of this chapter creates (p. 42).

¹⁶ Andrew M. Stauffer, 'Ruins of Paper: Dickens and the Necropolitan Library', *Romanticism and Victorianism on the Net*, 47 (2007) <<https://doi.org/10.7202/016700ar>> (paras. 20–22).

dust of dead bodies that have not been burned, Krook's residue has not yet dried into dust; it is the residue of combustion and more resembles cooked meat. Jobling describes himself as 'stewing' in this air, which in the meaty context of this chapter, takes on the connotation of his being slowly cooked (p. 509). Yet another character begins to resemble food.

Dickens's emphasis on Krook's charred body as something we must imagine tasting comes to a head in the exchange between Jobling and Snagsby:

'Airing yourself, as I am doing, before you go to bed'? the stationer inquires.

'Why, there's not much air to be got here; and what there is, is not very freshening', Weevle answers, glancing up and down the court.

'Very true, sir. Don't you observe', says Mr. Snagsby, pausing to sniff and taste the air a little, 'don't you observe, Mr. Weevle, that you're — not to put too fine a point upon it — that you're rather greasy here, sir?'

'Why, I have noticed myself that there is a queer kind of flavour in the place to-night', Mr. Weevle rejoins. 'I suppose it's chops at the Sol's Arms.'

'Chops, do you think? Oh! Chops, eh?' Mr. Snagsby sniffs and tastes again. 'Well, sir, I suppose it is. But I should say their cook at the Sol wanted a little looking after. She has been burning 'em, sir! And I don't think' — Mr. Snagsby sniffs and tastes again and then spits and wipes his mouth — 'I don't think — not to put too fine a point upon it — that they were quite fresh when they were shown the gridiron.' (p. 512)

Dickens specifies that Snagsby not only 'sniffs' but 'tastes' the air, actually ingesting it. The word 'greasy' connotes oily bodies rather than objects. And Weevle echoes the language of food, referring to the air's 'flavour'. The scene conjures up a mini-mystery — what is the source of the smell? One possibility is food and 'chops at the Sol's Arms', but when Snagsby investigates further he notices that not only are the supposed chops burned — he 'sniffs and tastes again and then spits and wipes his mouth' — but they are also rancid or rotten: 'I don't think [...] they were quite fresh when they were shown the gridiron.' The smell of the chops suggests that too much time has elapsed between the meat's state as a living body and its current role as food. Fire, when applied to meat, disperses its smell and taste through the neighbourhood. Air is likewise doing a new kind of narrative work here, containing traces of an industrial ecosystem gone wrong. Rather than retaining its own chemical integrity, air becomes a container for social ills.

Dickens combines bodily imagery with acts of taking things into the mouth throughout this chapter. We see Mr Guppy repeatedly 'biting his

unsteady thumb’ — and then getting his hand covered with oil. Dickens consistently describes the liquefied solid residue of Krook in bodily terms, including ‘a little thick nauseous pool’ (p. 512). Once Guppy and Jobling are inside the Rag and Bottle Shop, signs of a human-sized tallow candle and its waste products are everywhere, in the ‘smouldering, suffocating vapour’, and the ‘dark, greasy coating on the walls and ceiling’ (p. 517). Phiz’s illustration shows Guppy ineffectually using a candle to solve the mystery of what has happened (*Fig. 2*). Fire creates more smoke and obscurity than light and clarity. While Guppy’s face wears an expectant look of curiosity, Jobling’s and the cat’s faces register fear, anxiety, or disgust. Soot falls and ‘smears, like black fat!’ (p. 512). The ‘stagnant, sickening oil’ has some ‘natural repulsion in it that makes them both shudder’

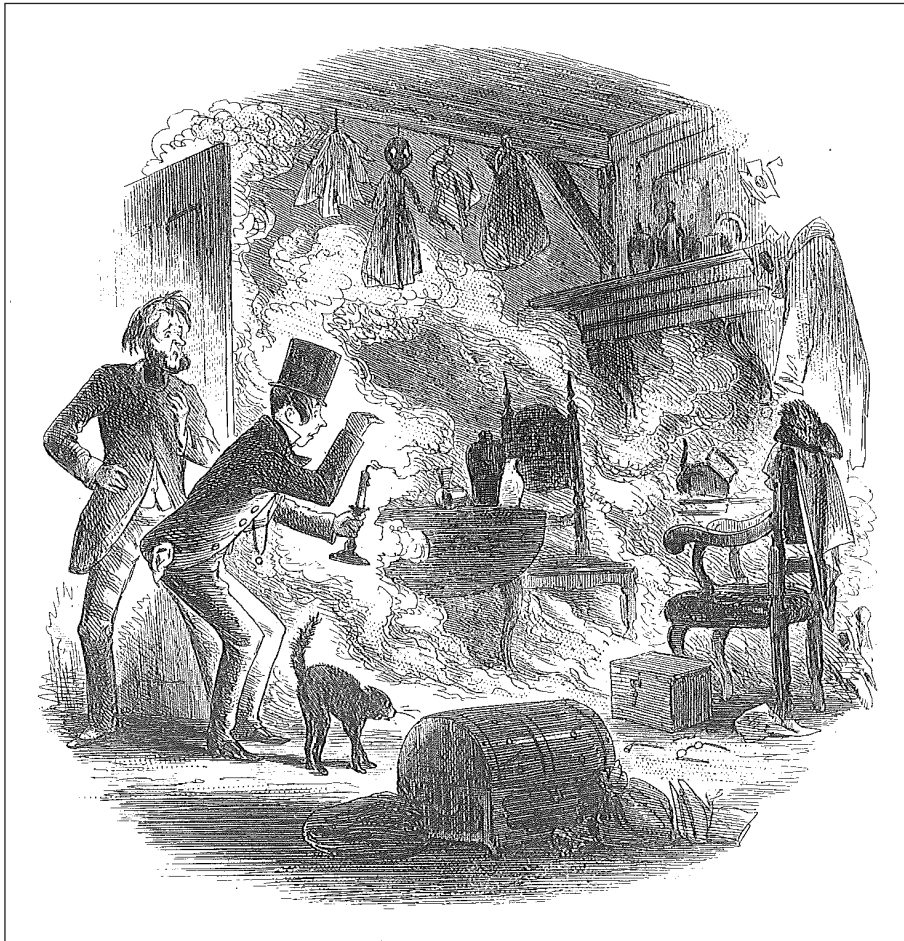


Fig. 2: Phiz [Hablot K. Browne], ‘The Appointed Time’, in *Bleak House* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1901), facing p. 519.

(p. 512). The word ‘natural’ takes on at least two meanings. First, it signifies the organic origins of this mess. Second, it suggests that the experience of taking in this type of air triggers a ‘natural’ aversion in Guppy and Jobling. Only at the end of the chapter do we finally discover the actual source of all these sensory traits. It is Krook’s combusted body: ‘the burning smell is there — and the soot is there, and the oil is there — and he is not there!’ (p. 517). Spontaneous combustion becomes especially frightening when it resembles burning a tallow candle, and leaves a residue that is too fleshy, too embodied, and too alive.

Dickens invokes repulsion and disgust in order to register a cognitive discomfort akin to industrial anxiety. These scenes create anxiety about using too much energy, a confusion about what is man-made and what is organic, what is body and what is thing. This feeling runs counter not only to other parts of the novel which are far less sensorially vivid, but also to other narratives that normalize industrial production, eating meat, and the consumption of energy. In these scenes of tallow candles, fire reverses the industrial process. Instead of turning a body into an object, as the production of parchment does, fire triggers a process in which the bodily aspects of tallow re-emerge and industrial production feels fundamentally incomplete and unstable. If we follow out the logic of MacDuffie’s work on energy, the figurative cannibalism that the reader of ‘The Appointed Time’ engages in stands in for being part of an earthly ecosystem that is no longer sustainable. Cannibalism becomes a metaphor for us eating ourselves, the earthly harming the earth, as if we are feeding unsustainably on the body that supports us.

MacDuffie points out that many of the sources of confusion about energy and consumption that characterize our own time date back to nineteenth-century narratives about energy and its use. In the scenes I have been analysing, distinctions between the inorganic city and its organic need for food break down. By choosing to show Krook’s body after it has combusted, Dickens evokes a peculiar type of embodiment: the greasy residue of a body already turned into fuel (and already consumed and turned into waste). The anxiety about consumption that Dickens creates in these scenes elicits two competing impulses: a realization of how interconnected everything is, and a desire to build a cognitive wall that keeps categories reassuringly distinct.