

THROWING UP AS A PHILOSOPHIC CONCEPT

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According to specialists in medicine, vomiting is an almost universal experience for human beings. But what does throwing up mean?

Throwing up can mean almost anything. Throwing up, as a non-specific symptom, is a *signifier* that can stand for many different *signifieds* - medical emergencies, ranging from an acute alcoholism, food poisoning or gastritis to scarlet fever, malaria, mumps, appendicitis or cancer. Vomiting might be experienced even when one's general health is good, as a consequence of severe exertion, pregnancy or great emotional or sensory disturbances. In addition, vomiting might be self-induced, as in various bulimic behaviours, as an escape response or in food or medication poisonings as a recommended first aid treatment. Vomiting thus might prove to be a warning sign, a relief, a form of self-harm, or a life saver.

If vomiting is an experience universal to all human beings, what does it mean when an idealist philosopher is thrown up? Is it even possible to say? What is possible to say within medical discourse might not be allowed in the humanities. So when I say that a Romantic poet throws up, am I still within the realm of the thinkable, or am I verily moving "beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable?"¹ With vomiting we are for sure leaving the border of the symbolic and approaching the "place where meaning collapses."²

To juxtapose idealist philosophy and vomiting is not, however, meaningless. Throwing up can cast light on our concepts of subjectivity, meaning and being. Travelling into the physical will not rule out the metaphysical.

The starting point of this paper will be Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection and her understanding of vomiting as a dark revolt "of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate" from an outside or inside.³ In vomiting, apprehensively, desire is turned aside - "sickened, it rejects"⁴ and the rejection protects. Vomiting "does not *signify* death."⁵ No, "these body fluids [. . .] are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border. Such wastes drop so that I might live."⁶

Kristeva shows that throwing up is not just an important physiological function of the organism, but also a powerful philosophic concept, encapsulating a conflict with one's own being and with the outside world, a concept that grapples with traditional philosophic concerns such as being, subjectivity, or the relation between the self and the other. She sees vomiting as revolt, rejection, protection. In her conception, vomiting separates her from those who pose a threat to her existence. Vomiting is self-defence against what was to nourish her well. Kristeva speaks of vomiting as of a "mute protest", which "to be sure, is inscribed in a symbolic system, but in which, without either wanting or being able to become integrated in order to answer to it, it reacts, it abreacts."⁷

Kristeva, however, is not the only source one can use when writing about vomiting. Although Romantic idealist philosophy has been criticised for overlooking, as Nietzsche puts it, "'little' things, which mean the basic concerns of life itself,"⁸ the philosophy of the Romantic thinkers, nonetheless, teems with metaphors of consuming and digesting, metaphors which, in fact,

³ Ibid., 1

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., 3

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1969), 256.

¹ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 1.

² Ibid., 2

frame their philosophic texts; and the recurrence of such metaphors of and their gradual shift from the figural to the literal, was noted as early as the nineteenth century by their less known contemporaries.⁹

Georg Hegel, might indeed be dubbed a philosopher of digestion. Hegel thinks of crowning philosophy by assimilating all previous systems, and to achieve this, his dialectical process has to digest everything. But his digestion leaves no traces: within his dialectical process, everything is eaten, absorbed, digested, and assimilated without a remainder.¹⁰ His dialectics, which refuses loss, is a "total incorporation" of the external world into itself;¹¹ and the Absolute Idea, the climax of the dialectical process, is something resembling "constipation,"¹² because excretion is a failure of the system of assimilation, creating an imbalance in the conversion of the other into the self; hence is a surplus "resistant to dialectical totalization."¹³

Hegel is essentially scared of otherness and the foreign, and his dialectical system incorporates and converses foreign matter into "a self-like unity"¹⁴ by negating "the specific unity of the other."¹⁵ Hegel distinguishes inorganic body from the human body: whereas, in chemical interactions, each inorganic substance "loses its quality."¹⁶ In the process of digestion, on the other hand, the human body always preserves itself by assimilating and negating the consuming object.¹⁷ Thus

Hegel's digestion exemplifies "the perfect crime," in which the other and the foreign are annihilated, invisibly, without any evidence left behind.¹⁸ Though for "Hegel this process constitutes life as such, enabling the living creature to ward off the inorganic", his contemporaries and his followers, however, asked what kind of life it "could be if it truly left nothing behind."¹⁹

Beneath Hegel's logic of digestion, there lies an "assimilative violence" that negates the specificity of the other;²⁰ it might be also understood as a violence of "position"; with the subject establishing its own position by negating another.²¹ Hegel's digestion essentially is voracious and violent, bent on the destruction of the other, a destruction that will enable the subject to replicate itself, to posit itself as the subject, thus to live and flourish: "This system of living movement is the system opposed to the external organism; it is the *power* of digestion – the power of overcoming the outer organism."²² But for Hegel's contemporaries and followers, his "voracious system" smacked, instead of life that it sought to sustain, of violence and lifelessness, with death being the most appropriate and the closest analogue to Hegel's logic of digestion.²³

Ludwig Feuerbach - who, under the influence of Marx, brings the speculative dialectic from its transcendent spheres down to earth - also uses the physiological process of digestion to define the relationship between the self and the other.²⁴ His pun "you are what you eat" (*Der Mensch ist, was erisst*), coming from his 1850 review of Jakob Moleschott's *Theory of Nutrition. For the*

⁹ David L. Clark, "Hegel, Eating: Schelling and the Carnivorous Virility of Philosophy," in *Cultures of Taste / Theories of Appetite*, ed. Timothy Morton (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 124.

¹⁰ Ibid., 117-8.

¹¹ Ibid., 119.

¹² Tilottama Rajan, "(In)digestible Material: Illness and Dialectic in Hegel's *The Philosophy of Nature*," in *Cultures of Taste / Theories of Appetite*, ed. Timothy Morton (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 221.

¹³ Ibid., 222.

¹⁴ Ibid., 221.

¹⁵ Ibid., 219.

¹⁶ Ibid., 218.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ David L. Clark, "Hegel, Eating," 130.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid., 135.

²¹ Tilottama Rajan, "(In)digestible Material," 219.

²² G.W.F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of Nature*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Clarendon, 1970), 120.

²³ David L. Clark, "Hegel, Eating," 120-1.

²⁴ Jay Geller, "'It's Alimentary': Feuerbach and the Dietetics of Antisemitism," in *Cultures of the Abdomen: Diet, Digestion, and Fat in the Modern World*, ed. Christopher E. Forth and Ana Carden-Coyne (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 127.

People, has sunk into the everyday usage. The pun, nonetheless, exemplifies a radical shift from Hegel's view to that of the subject being transformed by the digested food. For Feuerbach, who draws here upon old Greek, as well as Christian, theories that people and animals are defined by what they eat, being is "one with eating, to be means to eat."²⁵ Feuerbach's theory thus stands in sharp opposition to that of Hegel's: the other is not assimilated, but, on the contrary, the self is defined, transformed, and constituted by the other. Feuerbach's (re)location of otherness within the self shakes with the self-confidence and sovereignty of the self, making it extremely vulnerable to the external world and its influences.

To finish off idealist philosophy, Friedrich Nietzsche modifies Kant's famous inaugural claim: When "Kant says: 'Two things remain forever worthy of reverence,' that is, the starry heaven and the moral law, today we should sooner say: 'Digestion is more venerable.'"²⁶ It might be due to his life-long desire for physical health that the theme of digestion pervades "Nietzsche's writings, and like many of Nietzsche's important terms, it metamorphoses, accrues different implications, and serves various functions."²⁷ Nietzsche's conception of digestion is closer to that of Feuerbach's, because Nietzsche, like him, believes that being and subjectivity emerges from "the food choices we make or are able to make,"²⁸ to eat badly simply means to live badly. His conception, on the other hand, is in complete opposition to that of the total digestion of Hegel's, because, *also sprach Zarathustra*, to "chew and digest everything, [...] – that is a genuine swine-nature!" But this essentially is a Germanic problem: "The German spirit is an indigestion: it does not finish with anything."²⁹

Nietzsche sees the digesting body as "permeable, unstable, invaded and inhabited by other (parasitic) bodies," thus being constantly transformed by and according to the other.³⁰ To keep his spontaneity, instincts and himself alive, Nietzsche therefore proposes to "react as rarely as possible,"³¹ to close himself off, to make "his body impermeable, [...] refusing osmosis or *Stoffwechsel*, the German word for metabolism which means, literally, change of stuff, a transformation of materials."³²

Nietzsche shares with Kristeva a belief in the rebirth of the self through sickness. Although he longs for health, Nietzsche, finally, learns to appreciate sickness. In *Ecce Homo*, he describes the circumstances of the origin of one of his texts:

The perfect brightness and cheerfulness, even exuberance of the spirit, reflected in this work, is compatible in my case not only with the most profound physiological weakness, but even with an excess of pain. In the midst of the torments that go with uninterrupted three-day migraine, accompanied by laborious vomiting of phlegm, I possessed a dialectician's clarity *par excellence* and thought through with very cold blood matters for which under healthier circumstances I am not mountain-climber, not subtle, not *cold* enough.³³

Nietzsche respects sickness, because life must be experienced from weakness as well as strength. It is his ability, he believes, to move smoothly from sickness to health that makes him master in reversing perspectives: "the first reason why a 'revaluation of values' is perhaps possible for me alone."³⁴ And he begins that revaluation by affirming to us that all the concepts like "God,"

²⁵ Ibid., 140.

²⁶ Nietzsche qtd. in Silke-Maria Weineck, "Digesting the Nineteenth Century and the Stomach of Modernity." *Romanticism* 12.1 (2006): 36.

²⁷ Ibid., 35.

²⁸ Ibid., 39.

²⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, 238.

³⁰ Silke-Maria Weineck, "Digesting the Nineteenth Century," 36.

³¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, 253.

³² Silke-Maria Weineck, "Digesting the Nineteenth Century," 35.

³³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, 222-3.

³⁴ Ibid., 223.

“soul,” “truth,” or “beyond” -that is, the concepts of “that damned ‘idealism’”³⁵ - are “mere imaginings – more strictly speaking, *lies*”, whereas nutrition is inconceivably more important, because it means the basic concern “of life itself.”³⁶

Till he himself realized its importance, Nietzsche “always ate *badly*: morally speaking, ‘impersonally,’ ‘selflessly,’ ‘altruistically’ – for the benefit of cooks and other fellow Christians.”³⁷ The consequence of this inadequate diet was an upset stomach: Oh, “German cuisine quite generally – what doesn’t it have on its conscience!”³⁸ He describes his German diet as “a completely senseless abuse of extraordinary resources. [...] Any refined self-concern, any protection by some commanding instinct was lacking; I simply posited myself as equal to nobody; it was [...] an oblivion of all distance between myself and others.”³⁹ Insufficient nutrition made him incapable of self-reflection; he was unable to listen to his instincts, or to see the reason for his unhappy situation. He did not see that he was close to the end because of the idealism he indigested, and only his sickness brought him to reason.⁴⁰

Nietzsche appreciates sickness, because sickness for him is not the problem: to swallow “‘Christian love’ as well as anti-Semitism, the will to power (to the ‘Reich’) as well as the gospel of humility, *without any digestive complaints*,”⁴¹ that is the problem. Not to vomit, but, on the contrary, to swallow indiscriminately what is on offer, to digest everything without reflection, the inability to reject, the inability to say No - that is a “swine-nature!” Not in vomiting but in staying healthy in a harmful environment, in eating as if nothing was happening - in that Nietzsche sees the problem.

³⁵ Ibid., 241.

³⁶ Ibid., 256.

³⁷ Ibid., 237.

³⁸ Ibid., 238.

³⁹ Ibid., 241-2.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 242.

⁴¹ Nietzsche qtd. in Silke-Maria Weineck, “Digesting the Nineteenth Century,” 38, italics mine.

“One has to know the size of one’s stomach,” says Nietzsche, “the biggest stomach, however, is not necessarily the best one.”⁴² And as Weineck reminds, one “must also know when to throw up what is already inside: Romanticism, Wagner, both anti-Semitism and Christian love, for example, all those overtly sweet stuffs that, if digested, will make you lazy and interfere with your instinct.”⁴³

Throwing up for Nietzsche is a life-saver, an instinct of self-defence: it commands us “to say No when Yes would be ‘selfless’”; it is “warding off, not letting things come close.”⁴⁴ Throwing up serves as “a barrier to push back everything that would assail [us] from this [...] cowardly world.”⁴⁵ Throwing up is a protection and remedy against that which is harmful.

In his conception of vomiting, Nietzsche stresses the same aspects as Kristeva does: protection, rejection, selection. The vomiting person, instinctively, “collects from everything he sees, hears, lives through”: he is “a principle of selection, he discards much.”⁴⁶ Because he digests nothing, but throws up before the food is digested, the vomiting person is not transformed by the other but manages to keep his integrity and subjectivity: “He is always in his company, whether he associates with books, human beings, or landscapes.”⁴⁷ He has a sense for what is good for him, and is sensitive enough to notice when his existence in the world is threatened.

Like Kristeva, Nietzsche also stresses the most important aspect about vomiting: its ambiguity. For Kristeva, the object is “above all ambiguity;”⁴⁸ but whereas excretion is a more or less regular, daily activity, an object that “I

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, 252.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 253.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 224.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 224.-5.

⁴⁸ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 9.

permanently thrust aside in order to live,"⁴⁹ vomiting is not a regular physiological function of the everyday; its occurrence is, therefore, always significant, always special. Vomiting might signal a banal disorder, but also a serious illness. It might be induced as first aid in the case of an organism poisoning to expel the harmful from the organism, but one is for sure, vomiting "does not radically cut off the subject from what threatens it," on the contrary, vomiting "acknowledges it to be in perpetual danger."⁵⁰ With vomit, rather than with the other body fluids, one is the more approaching "the border of my condition as a living being."⁵¹

For both Kristeva and Nietzsche, vomiting is a discourse of both life and death. As Kristeva asserts, it is a discourse where death interferes with what is supposed to save one from death. It "kills in the name of life, [...] it lives at the behest of death."⁵² And Nietzsche adds that through the constant need to throw up in order to ward off the harmful, "one can become weak enough to be unable to defend oneself any longer."⁵³ Therefore, the best word to describe their discourse is therefore fragility. Vomiting draws attention to the fragility of being and life. Both of them, however, are aware of the beneficial aspects of vomiting, because as Nietzsche famously puts it, "what does not kill him makes him stronger."⁵⁴ They both see a certain stimulus in vomiting: for Kristeva, vomiting constantly questions the "solidity of being" and impels the subject to start afresh, and Nietzsche speaks from his own experience that:

[B]eing sick can even become an energetic *stimulus* for life, for living more. This, in fact, is how that long period of sickness appears to me *now*: as it were, I discovered life anew, including myself; I tasted all good and even little things, as others cannot easily taste them – I turned my will to health, to *life*, into a philosophy.⁵⁵

Nausea gave Nietzsche the power and impulse to live and create, and his *Gaya Scienza* is the result of the most unexpected thing, "*convalescence*."⁵⁶ From such severe sickness as he has experienced:

one returns **newborn**, having shed one's skin, more ticklish and malicious, with a more delicate taste for joy, with a tenderer tongue for all good things, with merrier senses, with a second dangerous innocence in joy, more childlike and yet a hundred times subtler than one has ever been before.⁵⁷

But at the beginning of this new life of more intense joy and subtler sensitivity, there was nausea, a nausea "that had gradually developed out of an incautious and pampering spiritual diet, called romanticism."⁵⁸ It is the throwing up of Romanticism therefore that makes him live more, anew and more fully.

Nietzsche sees Romantic philosophy as impassionate, false and affected. He criticizes the style of Romantic philosophers for having pretentious phraseology, for being insincere and fake. There is something in Romanticism Nietzsche cannot digest. But how to get rid of the Romantic diet, this "careless mental diet and pampering"⁵⁹ which is being ingested in Western culture for more than two centuries? How to reconstruct one's own identity under the layer of the Romantic ideology?

For Nietzsche, vomiting is the answer. In his conception, throwing up is not just a physiological function. Vomiting is also the body's reaction to the bitter diet of Romanticism, to idealist philosophy, its pretentiousness and insincerity. It is the body's self-defending strategy to reject opinions, feelings and desires that are foreign to the body while presented as being its own.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 3.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 9.

⁵¹ Ibid., 3.

⁵² Ibid., 15.

⁵³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, 252.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 224.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 32.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 36.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 33.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

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