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# **The Narrating Stomach: Appetite, Authority and Agency in Sydney Whiting's 1853 *Memoirs of a Stomach***

Joyce L. Huff

*English abstract: Sydney Whiting's 1853 Memoirs of a Stomach provides a vehicle for investigating the body's potential to resist human control and influence human activities. Such work is important to fat studies because a fear of such bodily agency underlies current Western fatphobia. Memoirs is modeled on eighteenth-century it-narratives, in which fictional nonhuman narrators recount their circulation through human systems of exchange. By granting the stomach authority over an erring "self," Whiting's embodied manifestation of the it-narrative reverses the usual hierarchy of mind over matter. However, the comic nature of Whiting's tale simultaneously undermines the authority it assigns to the stomach. This ultimately destabilizes meaning in the text, opening up space for new ways of thinking about bodies and agency that extend beyond Cartesian dualism.*

Much of our current discourse about fat in the West relies on the fear and suppression of the body's agency. Fears of material agency, of the power of things to resist human mastery and influence human activity, have been central to fatphobic discourses in the Western world since at least the nineteenth century. In Victorian Britain, fatness was commonly characterized as symptomatic of a "disease of the will."<sup>1</sup> This depiction is grounded in a Cartesian split between body and mind, one that casts the stomach as an unruly object that can and should be monitored and carefully controlled by a superior human "self." In the twenty-first-century West, we have inherited the notion that fat people lack the necessary will power to properly manage their bodies, their desires, and their lives. Fat has been stigmatized as the visible sign of failure to contain the stomach's demands. Mainstream discourses of diet reinforce the belief that the body is ultimately subject to our conscious control if only we would exercise our wills, a reassuring fantasy that soothes cultural anxieties regarding aging, disease, impairment, and death. But the materiality of the body inevitably reasserts itself, revealing its own form of perverse agency.

I would like to thank my graduate research assistant, Abdullah Al-Sheikh Hasan, for his able assistance with this project and my colleagues Amit Baishya and Adam Beach for their insights during our discussions of things.

1 Sander Gilman, *Fat Boys: A Slim Book* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), 101.

Today fat serves as a focal point for a generalized unease about the agency of bodies. Anxieties about fat and agency are not limited to a fear of fat activism, a societal dread that certain hierarchies of value will collapse if fat individuals rebel against social norms and reclaim their rights to self-definition and self-worth. Body fat is seen as capable of its own form of rebellion. Despite human efforts at management, body fat often proves peculiarly recalcitrant, resisting attempts to remove, control, or produce it or even to abject it from our somatic identities. Yet, even as we acknowledge fat's intractability, individuals are held accountable for their failure to discipline their body fat in accord with socially determined standards.

In this view, fat not only underscores the limits of human will but also endows the body with a will of its own. In other words, Western fatphobia is a fear not merely of being out of control of one's body but rather of being under its control. Fat people are often depicted as acted upon by some form of bodily agency, variously constructed as appetite, genes, disease, or addiction. Imaginatively, this notion is embodied in literature and popular culture, in stories of fat exercising some form of agency outside of or over a "self" from which it is alienated, ranging from H. G. Wells's "The Truth About Pyecraft"<sup>2</sup> to Shelley Jackson's *The Melancholy of Anatomy*<sup>3</sup> to the *Doctor Who* episode "Partners in Crime,"<sup>4</sup> which depicts human fat as literally alien. This way of conceptualizing fat leaves Cartesian dualism intact but provokes fear of the reversal of the culturally mandated hierarchy of mind over matter. But what if, instead of reifying the Cartesian view, we were to acknowledge multiple forms of agency, both conscious and material, at work in the formation, maintenance, and performance of the body?

Sydney Whiting's once popular but now nearly forgotten book *Memoirs of a Stomach: Written by Himself, that All Who Eat May Read* provides one way of thinking through the issues of bodily agency that today circulate around fat. In 1853, when Whiting's book was first introduced to the British public, the stomach, rather than body fat, was the primary object of disciplinary discourses that sought to tame the human appetite. *Memoirs* is not just addressed to fat folks but rather written "that all who eat may read," as its subtitle proclaims. This is not surprising because, in Victorian Britain, bodily discipline was frequently portrayed as a universal good and the regulation of the appetite as an end unto itself.

2 H. G. Wells, "The Truth About Pyecraft," in *The Country of the Blind and Other Stories* (Edinburgh: T. Nelson and Sons, 1911), Kindle file.

3 Shelley Jackson, "Fat," in *The Melancholy of Anatomy* (New York: Anchor Books, 2002), Kindle file.

4 "Partners in Crime" (*Doctor Who*, BBC One, 5 Apr. 2008).

When, a mere decade after *Memoirs* appeared, William Banting's *A Letter on Corpulence* sparked the first major British reducing craze, Banting's exclusive focus on weight-loss as a goal was considered controversial.<sup>5</sup> As Michel Foucault has pointed out, the ideal disciplinary culture would consist of a never-ending regimen with an ever-receding endpoint.<sup>6</sup>

What *Memoirs* offers today's readers is a glimpse of bodily agency represented in a way that confounds the dualistic model so familiar to us. It employs the conventions of the eighteenth-century it-narrative, a genre primarily concerned with the exploration of material agency, to dramatize the tension between the endeavor to narrate the body into the realm of human control and the body's exertion of its own form of mastery. It also attempts to universalize an experience of the stomach grounded in the values and practices of a middle-class Englishman. Although *Memoirs* appears at first to simply reverse the hierarchy of mind over body, it ultimately explodes this duality, leaving a gap in which to reimagine the body as a complex assemblage formed by multiple agents.

## First Course: The Speaking Stomach

Because of the stomach's centrality in Victorian discourses of body management, examining *Memoirs* can provide insight into the period's attempts to grapple with the issue of bodily agency. *Memoirs* appeared at a time when the stomach had assumed a key role in dominant understandings of the body. According to Ian Miller, who briefly touches on Whiting's text in *A Modern History of the Stomach*, "Mr. Stomach's memoirs are illustrative of the organ's pivotal positioning in constructs of both the healthy and unhealthy nineteenth-century bodily system."<sup>7</sup> The book's popularity corroborates its relevance to Victorian health discourses. According to an 1856 advertisement in *The Athenaeum*, it went through at least seven English editions; Miller notes that it was also translated into French.<sup>8</sup> A contemporary reviewer from the *News of the*

5 William Banting, *A Letter on Corpulence*, 3rd ed. (London: Harrison, 1863). See also Joyce L. Huff, "A 'Horror of Corpulence': Interrogating Bantingism and Mid-Nineteenth-Century Fat-phobia," in *Bodies Out of Bounds: Fatness and Transgression*, ed. Jana Evans Braziel and Kathleen LeBesco (Berkeley: U of California P, 2001).

6 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, 1975, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1979), 227.

7 Ian Miller, *A Modern History of the Stomach: Gastric Illness, Medicine and British Society, 1800-1950* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2011), Kindle file, ch. 1.

8 Miller, *History of the Stomach*, ch. 1.

*World* claimed, “It is the most witty, learned, and truthful book we have seen for a long time,”<sup>9</sup> while, in 1939, an article appearing in *The Lancet* found its advice to be still relevant and stated that it “wittily and unobtrusively conveys wise counsel.”<sup>10</sup>

Yet, unlike Banting’s pamphlet and other medical treatises, Whiting’s text mixes fact with fiction. The stomach itself dispenses advice for healthy living while narrating its own mock autobiography. Exactly how this is accomplished Mr. Stomach never reveals, but it is dependent upon the services of an editor punningly referred to as the “Minister of the Interior.”<sup>11</sup> The Minister stands in the position of the Cartesian self in relation to body, endeavoring to both minister to (or serve) and administer (or control) the stomach-narrator. Subjected alternately to overfeeding and starvation, and troubled by quack medicine, strong spirits, and emotional upset, Mr. Stomach tells a tale of woe that satirizes human behavior. His narrative stance veers between commanding human obedience to his laws and presenting himself as the “poor dependent inside.”<sup>12</sup> The story he recounts progresses haphazardly through a variety of literary genres, such as poetry, advice, and drama, with numerous interpolations and digressions. It covers a wide range of subjects, addressing medicine, etiquette, diet, history, travel, and law amidst social satire, purely literary flourishes, and humorous anecdotes.

In compelling the stomach to “speak for itself,” *Memoirs* both acknowledges that the stomach possesses some degree of independence from conscious human will and attempts to reframe the errant organ within the sphere of human mastery, a mastery that is at once discursive (through narrative) and embodied (through the inculcation of discipline in its readers). But this attempt is never fully successful, and so *Memoirs* remains as much a celebration of bodily agency as it is of disciplinary exercise.

In this way, *Memoirs* reveals its literary debt to an earlier genre, the eighteenth-century “it-narrative,” in which the agency of matter forms the central interest. In fact, Whiting’s book appears on Liz Bellamy’s extensive listing of it-narratives, which is based on a review of the British Library and Cambridge University Library catalogs. According to Bellamy, these stories usually contain a nonhuman narrator, such as a commodity or animal, and a focus on that narrator’s circulation within a system of

9 “Memoirs of a Stomach,” *The Athenaeum: Journal of Literature, Science and the Fine Arts* 1479 (1 March 1856): 280, *Google Books*, accessed Dec. 1, 2014.

10 “Grains and Scruples,” *The Lancet* 233, 6029 (1939): 661–662, *ScienceDirect*, accessed June 24, 2014, 661.

11 Sydney Whiting, *Memoirs of a Stomach: Written by Himself, That All Who Eat May Read* (London: W. E. Painter, 1853, *Google Books*, accessed 12 Oct. 2013), vi.

12 Whiting, *Memoirs of a Stomach*, 135, 77.

economic exchange.<sup>13</sup> The narrator may remain static, as in the case of a building, but the focus then turns to the individuals and items that circulate within and through it. The things featured in such tales are anthropomorphic at the same time that their alien viewpoint is accentuated, creating curious hybrids of self and other.

While the genre persisted through the nineteenth century, *Memoirs* harkens back to earlier forms of it-narrative. Victorian examples of the genre were often morality tales for children and featured dolls, toys, and pets. According to Lynn Festa, their primary aim was to form middle-class children into “responsible” property-owners.<sup>14</sup> *Memoirs of a Stomach*, however, is aimed at an adult audience, and it shares many of the other attributes of the earlier eighteenth-century it-narratives. Like them, it takes the form of a picaresque social satire. And like those narratives that focus on stationary objects, such as buildings, it deals with the circulation of commodities (in this case, foodstuffs) within and through its narrator. Festa’s description of one of the main purposes of eighteenth-century it-narratives is therefore helpful in coming to terms with Whiting’s book: “[T]he omnipresent surveillance of persons by their possessions serves as a powerful reminder of the all-seeing eye to which all mortal creatures are accountable in the end.”<sup>15</sup> In the case of the stomach, the surveillance of persons from within their own bodies serves as a reminder of the panoptic medical gaze. The it-narrative’s assumption that, in Festa’s words, “[p]eople are made by their possessions”<sup>16</sup> is literalized in Whiting’s text; People are made by their stomachs or, proverbially, you are what you eat.

Yet there are significant differences between *Memoirs* and earlier it-narratives. Although it shares the eighteenth-century concern with economic systems, it concentrates its satirical critique more on consumers and consumption than on goods and circulation, with alimentary consumption serving as a metonymic stand-in for the economic variety. Whiting’s tale speaks directly to the subject at the center of most it-narratives: the consumer appetites that drive circulation. Furthermore, *Memoirs* exhibits the more openly didactic thrust of its Victorian contemporaries. With its copious advice on dietary practice, Whiting’s book actively engages in the formation of socially acceptable consumers. However, this aspect of Whiting’s text should not

13 Liz Bellamy, “It-Narrators and Circulation: Defining a Subgenre,” in *The Secret Life of Things: Animals, Objects, and It Narratives in Eighteenth-Century England*, ed. Mark Blackwell (Lewisburg: Bucknell UP, 2007), 121.

14 Lynn Festa, “The Moral Ends of Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Object Narratives,” in Blackwell, *The Secret Life of Things*, 310.

15 Festa, “Object Narratives,” 310.

16 Festa, “Object Narratives,” 311.

be stressed too strongly, for, as we will see below, the stylistic and structural characteristics inherited from the eighteenth century serve to complicate and even undermine the book's teachings.

Finally, Whiting's text stands out as unique because, of the 248 tales listed in Bellamy's bibliography, only Whiting's centers on a body part. Christopher Flint remarks that "the eighteenth-century speaking object is almost always a product of manufacture rather than a part of nature, and its satiric vision of the world arises from its particular experience of human commerce."<sup>17</sup> The oddness of Whiting's choice of narrator did not go unnoticed by his contemporaries. In an 1855 letter, R. E. H. Greyson complains, "There is some smartness in [*Memoirs*], and a good deal of sense too; and yet it is impossible to get over the absurdity of thus personifying the respectable viscus, and making it chatter about anatomy, physiology, and chemistry!"<sup>18</sup> The focus on the body rather than on manufactured products naturalizes the relationships between health and consumption that *Memoirs* depicts and brings concerns about the agency of things into more intimate contact with readers by embedding the potential for nonhuman agency within their very bodies.

To employ a body part as an it-narrator, as Whiting does, is to treat it as a thing. But the human body is not objectified or denied agency by this characterization. In his book on it-narratives, *The Things Things Say*, Jonathan Lamb asks us to differentiate "between objects that serve human purposes and things that don't."<sup>19</sup> Things reveal the limits of our power. Not only do they resist human control but they also defy incorporation into human systems of representation, meaning making, and exchange, and they influence human will and action. In the nineteenth century the stomach was frequently figured as humanity's "task master." In 1861, for example, physician James Hinton wrote, "Civilization rests on hunger... The recurring and unfailing stimulus which the stomach supplies, lies at the root of all those energetic efforts by which men gradually rise from ignorance to knowledge."<sup>20</sup>

Those moments when bodies assert their thingness often invite narratives in an effort to reassert their ideological usefulness and reintegrate them, metaphorically, into those systems of meaning and exchange that they challenge, to tame them into objects for human use

17 Christopher Flint, "Speaking Objects: The Circulation of Stories in Eighteenth-Century Prose Fiction," *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America (PMLA)*, 113, 2 (March 1998): 212-226, *MLA Bibliography*, accessed Nov. 18, 2013, 212.

18 R. E. H. Greyson, "Letter XXVIII," *The Greyson Letters: Selections from the Correspondence of R. E. H. Greyson, Esq.*, ed. Henry Rogers (Boston: Gould and Lincoln, 1859), 338-341, *Google Books*, accessed Dec. 10 2014, 338-9.

19 Jonathan Lamb, *The Things Things Say* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2011), xi (italics mine).

20 James Hinton, "Food—What It Is," *Cornhill Magazine* (April 1861): 460-72, 460.

and make them signify. At first glance, this seems to be the function of the it-narrative. Yet the chaotic nature of eighteenth-century it-narratives creates a grotesque excess, in M. M. Bakhtin's sense, one that overflows any system meant to contain the narrator. It-narrators refuse to stay put, to be mastered, to be rendered serviceable, to mean. Their fictional autobiographies offer us one way of making it possible to think about the issues that Bill Brown raises in his introduction to *Things*: how things "organize our private and public affection" and how they "constitute human subjects, how they move them, how they threaten them, how they facilitate or threaten their relation to other subjects."<sup>21</sup> Western cultures have long constructed our bodies as objects to be controlled and subjected to the mind. Even contemporary oppositional discourses often reiterate this trope; in encouraging women, for example, to claim ownership of our bodies, we cast bodies, not simply as objects, but also as commodities capable of circulation in an economic system. To think of bodies as things is to acknowledge that they do not fit easily into the roles we assign them.

## Second Course: The Stomach's Authority

The thingification of the stomach in *Memoirs* is exemplified in the book's frontispiece. The illustration depicts an agonized fat man splayed before the reader in an armchair, his gouty feet propped upon cushions and his head, aching from a hangover, covered with a cloth. Around him dance demonic representatives of the foods in which he has presumably overindulged, including a roast, a fish, several cows, some oysters and a turtle, amidst many bottles containing different types of alcohol. Above him is a coat of arms featuring foodstuffs and bearing the motto "MORE!!!" Over his head hover a pumpkin and a pig, both symbols of gluttony. Two creatures with enormous bellies sit to either side of him, one a pelican, the other possibly a crocodile, both clearly chosen for their large mouths. In the corner, two tiny doctors mix up some medicine for him. But the eyes are drawn to the center of the picture, to the white expanse of his swollen paunch. There are gaps between the buttons of his weskit, and his coat is pulled to the sides to make room for his huge belly. One hand rests on it, just over the stomach, to draw attention to the source of his misery.

21 Bill Brown, "Thing Theory," in *Things*, ed. Bill Brown (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 7.



The stomach itself, however, does not appear directly. Rather than being presented to the reader as an object to be apprehended, the stomach must be inferred from the activity it causes, the visible traces of its power legible upon a human body that lies prone and subjected to it. The stomach is imagined as a sort of prime mover, the unseen agent that is the cause of all that is represented within the picture. At first glance, this illustration appears to convey a familiar moral tale. The human has given in to his stomach; he has failed to exercise his agency in control of its demands and now receives his punishment, dyspepsia. Furthermore, he bears the visible stigmata of repeated failures in the form of fatness.

But, in fact, as the text of the narrative that follows makes clear, what the frontispiece represents is actually the opposite case. The man is indeed being punished but not for the failure to properly manage his body's desires. Instead, in overindulging, he has attempted to impose his will on an unwilling stomach incapable of handling the amount of food with which he has chosen to burden it. What is depicted is the stomach's rebellion against human efforts to master it. The diner's large belly serves as a metonym for the stomach's immense power to inflect pain or pleasure when flouted.

This insurrection on the part of the stomach is repeated throughout the text, whenever the human whose body houses Mr. Stomach gives in to societal pressures to overeat, get drunk, treat himself to an unfamiliar dainty, or sample a fad medication. After one binge is followed by course of medicine, Mr. Stomach states,

I rejected every overture at reconciliation, even a new dose in the form of quinine, and refused to receive either liquid or solid, save dry toast and a little tea. Nothing could induce me to make up the quarrel; and the moment the slightest degree of force was resorted to, I turned more obstinate than ever, till I received a formal deputation from all the members of the corporation, intreating me to resume my functions if only a little at a time.<sup>22</sup>

The stomach's mutiny lays to rest a fear that drives much of dietary discourse, the dread that the human capacity to indulge is limitless unless held in check.

Mr. Stomach resists our attempts to project our fears and fantasies of unrestrained appetite upon him. In the end, stomachs can only hold so much. This is dramatized repeatedly within *Memoirs*. Mr. Stomach occasionally boasts that he can comply with his master's will:

22 Whiting, *Memoirs of a Stomach*, 75.

It is wonderful what a deal of packing the whole of our family will stand. For myself I was a perfect dromedary in the quantity I could bear; and though I often thought the last mouthful would break my back, yet somehow it all shook down like passengers crowded inside an omnibus. I do not mean, by any means, to say that I never grumbled, for, like the animal just named, I had a groan for every package that I considered too heavy.<sup>23</sup>

But eventually, material agency reasserts itself and the body rebels: "I broke completely down, and from sheer incapacity was not to be removed by whip or spur."<sup>24</sup> In willingly subjecting itself and, even so, being unable to carry out its duties, the stomach reinforces the limits of its master's power. Thus, rather than demonstrating the need for conscious control over the body, the illustration, when read in the context of the story that follows, shows the folly of attempting to master the stomach.

Carstesian dualism is thus reiterated but with a difference. To paraphrase Judith Butler, Mr. Stomach does the mind-body split wrong,<sup>25</sup> which, as we will see in section four, opens up space for a critique of Victorian standards of body management. In his role as the privileged voice of nature, Mr. Stomach becomes an internal monitor with the moral and medical authority to preach restraint to a wayward appetitive intellect, which is under the influence of a corrupting culture. In *Memoirs*, dangerous appetites are imposed upon us from the outside rather than originating within; it is human culture, not the human stomach, that appears in need of regulation.

In asserting its authority over the self, Whiting's stomach goes so far as to usurp the role of the seat of reason from the brain:

[A]s far as intellectual faculties are concerned, I consider I hold a superior position to my helpmate Mr. Brain; for, while I reside in the drawing-room floor, he lives in the attics. Moreover, if he separated the good from the bad, and digested all matters which he receives as thoroughly as I do, he would have a greater right to look down upon me than he has at present.<sup>26</sup>

Mr. Stomach's reference to the drawing-room versus the attic (the domain of servants) reverses moral hierarchies. His "editor" endorses this and gives it the stamp of acknowledged authority by stating, "This boast is excusable. Van Helmont placed the seat of understanding in the stomach."<sup>27</sup> The text thus associates reason more with natural "gut" instinct than with the educated and enculturated intellect.

23 Ibid., 105.

24 Ibid., 39-40.

25 Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 15.

26 Whiting, *Memoirs of a Stomach*, vii-viii.

27 Ibid., vii.

This reversal of the mind-body hierarchy is not in itself revolutionary. In appointing the stomach as the internal monitor for the self, the narrative embeds common sense discourses about etiquette, morality, and health within the body itself and imbues cultural dictates with the authority of nature. In other words, the stomach speaks only to tell its audience what they already know about stomachs. For example, the stomach claims that

the necessary observances to sustain the body in health consist of MODERATION; MASTICATION; a careful CHOICE OF FOOD; REGULARITY; EXERCISE; SOCIETY AT MEALS; ABJURATION of PHYSIC; and in case of indisposition arising from an infringement of these rules, REST, and a STRICT REGIMEN.<sup>28</sup>

This would have been familiar advice to Victorian audiences. No matter where desire resides, the body or the mind, the moral is the same: rein it in. As the stomach advises, "If a person can fast from breakfast to six or seven o'clock, without feeling the necessity for food, there is not very much the matter with him."<sup>29</sup>

The authority that the stomach is granted in *Memoirs* extends beyond issues involving digestive health, on which a talking stomach might well be deemed an expert, to broader issues such as morality and literature. For instance, when he criticizes the love poems of the human in whom he resides, he serves as a panoptic check to human excesses beyond those involving alimentary appetite:

Some of his wretched outpourings I happen to remember; and I give the reader an idea of them here, as a warning to all whom it may concern, that when they believe they are spouting poetical nonsense to the winds, there may be a stomach within listening to it all, with a sneer on his lips.<sup>30</sup>

Even when speaking on health, Mr. Stomach goes beyond general prescriptions to take sides in contemporary medical debates, as when he continually asserts the superiority of homeopathic medicine over allopathic.

In reiterating the discourses that Victorian authorities had produced for rendering it knowable and manageable, the stomach-narrator actively participates in its own objectification. In this way, its claim to agency is rendered harmless. In presenting itself and its workings, Mr. Stomach frequently quotes acknowledged authorities both new (Justus von Liebig)

28 Ibid., 125-6.

29 Whiting, *Memoirs of a Stomach*, 130.

30 Ibid., 85.

and ancient (Hippocrates). Its self-presentation thus becomes detached from any lived experience of the body and embedded instead within existing institutional frameworks for producing knowledge. It knows itself only as the object of institutionalized discourses, such as those of medicine, fashion, and the law. However, as I will discuss in the final section of my argument, the eighteenth-century conventions that structure this tale do not lend themselves easily to the appropriation of the it-narrator by dominant ideologies. The subversive nature of the text lies in its undermining of its narrator's attempts to parrot disciplinary discourses.

The discourses of health and body management that the stomach espouses personalize societal problems. Whereas eighteenth-century it-narratives voiced systemic social critiques, *Memoirs* makes the ills of Victorian consumer culture appear to stem from the failure of specific individuals to properly regulate their desires, represented as culturally produced, in accordance with a very Victorian version of nature. Individual compliance with "nature's" dictates, represented by Mr. Stomach, will prove the cure for socioeconomic woes.

For instance, Mr. Stomach assures his readers that

I should ill fulfil the task I have undertaken were I not to endeavour, in as few words as possible, to impart what knowledge I possess of the means to keep, through my assistance, the entire corporeal system in health and comfort, so that when life is yielded up to its great Giver, memory may be eloquent of past blessings; and that gratitude and love may help to gently release the spirit from the miracle of life.<sup>31</sup>

Here the stomach claims the power not only to maintain "the entire corporeal system in health and comfort" but, in so doing, to also provide the basis for a morally healthy life filled with "gratitude and love." A well regulated individual body leads to a well regulated social body. This representation of the stomach as the author of spiritual and emotional experiences reminds the reader of Ebenezer Scrooge's certainty that the specter of Jacob Marley is merely the phantom of a brain disordered by eating "underdone potato": "There's more of gravy than of grave about you."<sup>32</sup>

31 Whiting, *Memoirs of a Stomach*, 109.

32 Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*, 1843 (New York: Bantam, 1995), 18.

### Third Course: Universalizing the Stomach

At the same time that *Memoirs* individualizes more general social problems, it universalizes a particular experience of the stomach. Mr. Stomach plays a conflicted role, at once a representative speaking for stomachs everywhere and a specific male, middle-class, English stomach. Nicholas Hudson notes that, in centering the thing, the it-narrative offers its reader a point-of-view character who seems at first to be free from any markers of class, gender, and, I would add, race; this aspect of it-narratives serves “to construct the illusion of a socially and politically non-committed perspective—a goal that was meant both to include otherwise conflicting groups within a larger middle-class project and to exclude those that the emergent and unstable middle class wanted to exclude.”<sup>33</sup> Under scrutiny, the illusion falls apart. In spite of his role as a generic allegorical figure, the stomach that Whiting represents is a particular stomach with its own genealogy and history as well as personal attributes. Going back and forth between a particular narrative history and the universal ethnographic present, it simultaneously enters history and fixes itself in a timeless now.

Though there is tension between these two roles, the overall effect is to naturalize a specific experience of the stomach that is English, masculine, and bourgeois. In the following passage, Mr. Stomach, like the it-narrators to which Hudson refers, allies himself with the values of his middle-class readers. He boasts of his status as a gentleman of “high pedigree”<sup>34</sup> as a means of asserting his authority, although his outrageous puns (eating all, eating more) poke fun at his pretentiousness in doing so:

I was born of gentle parentage, being related, on the maternal side, to the celebrated Sternums, of Eaton Hall (since migrated to Eaton Moor), and, on my father's side, I dated my pedigree as far back as the first invasion of the Saxons, when the great Sir Hugh Stomach was created baron.<sup>35</sup>

The class allegiances of this stomach are further revealed by the nature of its complaints; it never has trouble getting enough to eat but only with consuming too much or the wrong things. When his lovesick master neglects him, he states, “The pangs of starvation I have never known; but, oh! how indescribably fearful they must be, for even a temporary

33 Nicholas Hudson, “It-Narratives: Fictional Point of View and Constructing the Middle Class,” in Blackwell, *The Secret Life of Things*, 294.

34 Whiting, *Memoirs of a Stomach*, 75.

35 Ibid., 10.

forgetfulness on the part of my master during his love-making produced cravings I shall always remember.”<sup>36</sup>

The particular stomach who narrates *Memoirs* is not only classed, but gendered as well. Of course, the person he resides within is male, but, in this text, gender suffuses every organ of the body, not simply those associated with primary and secondary sexual characteristics. Mr. Stomach’s experiences are frequently masculine ones, such as when he is injured in a schoolyard brawl:

[A]ll of a sudden I received such a thump as made me fancy I was knocked clean out of the osseous framework wherein I lay. This I discovered was owing to a polite interchange of blows, arising from the fact of a boy being pitted against the new comer as a trial to test his strength, so as to place him in his proper position in the sliding scale of pugilism. I acknowledge I disliked these “bouts” uncommonly, but any suffering was better than the pangs of being overloaded; and be it admitted to the youngsters’ credit, that it was not considered fair and manly to select me as the place of attack.<sup>37</sup>

This passage condones the establishment of a male hierarchy and tolerates the unpleasant means of demonstrating it while condemning the universal vice of gluttony. Mr. Stomach tends to generalize such masculine experiences along with his views on women:

Supposing you are neither a club-man at mealtime, nor a tavern-dining individual; and then, further, supposing there are ladies to join in the drawing-room, oh, happy mortal...steal away from table as soon as you can, and never feel ashamed of the humanising effects of female society; for let me tell you the whole race of Stomachs dearly loveth the music from fair ladies’ lips.<sup>38</sup>

This passage is clearly addressed to male readers, who may be tempted to linger at the table after the ladies retire from dinner. Yet its scope quickly expands to include the “whole race of Stomachs.”

The topic of stomachs was itself gendered in the period. As Helena Michie points out, female stomachs were a taboo topic due to the metaphorical conflation of alimentary and sexual appetites. Thus, most advice manuals tended to address a woman without hunger.<sup>39</sup> By contrast, Mr. Stomach’s human is in constant danger of giving in to gluttonous impulses. The female stomach, when it is depicted, is stereotypically weak and delicate; as such, it cannot represent the normal, healthy stomach that the book addresses. The bride of Mr. Stomach’s

36 Ibid., 110.

37 Whiting, *Memoirs of a Stomach*, 28.

38 Ibid., 133.

39 Helena Michie, *The Flesh Made Word* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1987), 12.

master, for example, is a “poor, tender Stomach ... incapable of enjoying the sterner dishes of life,”<sup>40</sup> while his mother stomach is “of a soft, yielding disposition, totally unfitted for the companionship of her husband, who I am bound to confess was of a coarse and robust nature.”<sup>41</sup>

Finally, this is a white Englishman’s stomach. Its casual assumption of English superiority becomes apparent when it theorizes about racial distinctions. It imagines a great alimentary chain of being that ranges from the cultured stomachs of British men of science at its pinnacle to those of “savage” colonized peoples at the bottom:

Now, the stomach of a human being is equally congenial to man's nature, and the higher his intellectual faculties the more sensitive and delicate is his inside. In organic structure it is, of course, the same in all men, and a Hottentot's digestive organs and those of a Sir Isaac Newton would present identical conformations, but the sympathy of the nervous energies mark the subtle difference.<sup>42</sup>

Furthermore, as in most Victorian it-narratives, Mr. Stomach schools his readers, not merely on how to consume goods, but also on how to be proper consumers of the labor of others in the context of imperialism. Lamb has written persuasively of the close connections between it-narratives and slave narratives.<sup>43</sup> *Memoirs* makes explicit reference to this connection. The self is the stomach’s “lord and master,”<sup>44</sup> while Mr. Stomach characterizes himself as both pack animal<sup>45</sup> and “galley slave,”<sup>46</sup> who must train his master in how to use him properly. A reviewer in *John Bull* picks up on the allusion when he jokingly declares, “[T]he author of this volume has done for the poor sufferer [Mr. Stomach] what Mrs. Beecher Stowe has done for the American negro—exposed the inequity and oppression to which the unhappy victim of selfish tyranny is exposed.”<sup>47</sup> The dehumanization of African-Americans in this attempt at humor, as well as its disregard of the fact that they might have stomachs of their own, highlights the focus in both Whiting’s and Stowe’s narratives on forming the subjectivities and engaging the sentiments of white readers who consume the labor of people of color.

The stomach manages his two roles—individual character and universal representative—self-consciously at times. At one point he both acknowledges his individuality and preaches universal doctrines for

40 Whiting, *Memoirs of a Stomach*, 103.

41 Ibid., 10.

42 Whiting, *Memoirs of a Stomach*, 125.

43 Lamb, *The Things Things Say*.

44 Whiting, *Memoirs of a Stomach*, 123.

45 Ibid., 105.

46 Ibid., 76.

47 “Memoirs of a Stomach”, *The Athenaeum*: 280.

stomachs in the same breath; he states, "Undoubtably, all stomachs have their own peculiar idiosyncrasy; and I do not pretend to put myself up as an authority upon all dietetic matters, but certain doctrines I will never give up."<sup>48</sup> Similarly, he recognizes his class privilege: "In my sketch of a little dinner it may be said, half the world could not afford the delicacies I name, and all I have to say is, make such selections out of my 'rules' as suit your purse and inclination."<sup>49</sup> This construction of difference actually reinforces his own role as norm. The slippage between general and particular thus has the effect of smoothing over differences by subjecting all stomachs, however idiosyncratic, to the same basic rules, which have their grounding in masculine, middle-class, English experiences.

### Fourth Course: Problematizing the Stomach

While the narrator of *Memoirs* may be said to claim his agency simply to reiterate cultural truisms, his authority to do so is so problematized by both the heteroglossic structure of eighteenth-century it-narratives and the comically grotesque vision of the body within the text as to invite questioning of the very Victorian health discourses it seems to sanction. Whereas nineteenth-century it-narratives tended to be more suited to didactic purposes, the eighteenth-century style that Whiting echoes is too loose and baggy a form to permit the endorsement of any single point of view. It is a genre that privileges excess, both in structure and in content, resulting in a wild proliferation of meanings. As Bellamy puts it, "these works are able to explore the social system from a range of ideological positions and with a satirical vision that avoids the reassertion of hegemony."<sup>50</sup>

The destabilization of meaning in *Memoirs* takes many forms. First, the book makes no distinction between the serious and the comical. How is a reader to interpret admonitions about health that appear next to a farcical mock epic, entitled, "ye legend of ye bagpipe," in which the Scots defeat the Vikings with the aid of a magical stomach?<sup>51</sup> Even the advice itself ranges from the consequential to the trivial, leaving its reader unsure which dictums are intended to be taken seriously.

Second, part of the humor of the book rests on the fact that the "editor" known as the Minister of the Interior consciously undermines the stomach's authority with his intrusive footnotes. At one point, the

48 Whiting, *Memoirs of a Stomach*, 114.

49 Ibid., 128.

50 Bellamy, "It-Narrators," 124.

51 Whiting, *Memoirs of a Stomach*, 22.



stomach claims to quote the philosopher Friedrich Schiller, but a footnote casts doubts on the quotation's authenticity. "In vain we have searched the works of this author," the Minister complains sarcastically. "Will the editor of Notes and Queries inform us?"<sup>52</sup> At another, a footnote describes how, in telling "ye legend of ye bagpipe," Mr. Stomach confuses Celtic with Greek mythology.<sup>53</sup> And it is when the stomach is giving advice that the Minister is most critical. For example, when Mr. Stomach is lecturing about the quality of his master's love poems, he decides to try his own metaphorical hand at poetry to illustrate how it should be done. The Minister does not merely mock his composition; he ultimately bemoans the necessity of including it at all, stating that he ought to have "indignantly erased this song from the MS." He concedes, however, that "it may be as well, perhaps, for the reader to perceive how very possible it is, when instructing others, to err, and that most egregiously, ourselves," a statement that could serve as the Minister's comment upon the stomach's narrative as a whole.<sup>54</sup> If the stomach is indeed as unreliable a narrator as its editor suggests, how is the reader to view its pronouncements on health and diet?

The narrative also destabilizes the stomach's authority by occasionally reminding the reader that Mr. Stomach is a fictional construct and that his stated opinions do not actually emanate from within. This happens whenever gestures are made toward the mystery of how the stomach was able to relate the tale in the first place. *Memoirs* gives a metafictional nod to the forces behind its own construction when the stomach invents avatars for reiterating his pronouncements on health. In arguing for the superiority of homeopathic over allopathic remedies, he suddenly switches to drama. The Minister prefaces the play by stating, "[o]ur author requires a poppet to express his own sentiments."<sup>55</sup> Such self-referential moments in *Memoirs* disrupt the association of its narrator with nature and thus destroy the ground on which his claim to authority rests.

The comic plethora that underlies the structure of the book also informs its representation of the body. The reversal of the mind-body hierarchy is itself a trope of the grotesque, according to Bakhtin.<sup>56</sup> To privilege the body, and in particular, the lower body, in which the stomach resides, carnivalizes the self. And it is a carnivalized body that appears

52 Ibid., 101.

53 Whiting, *Memoirs of a Stomach*, 25.

54 Ibid., 82.

55 Ibid., 53.

56 M. M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky, 1965 (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1984).

within Whiting's text, one in which body parts are fungible and redundant. I have mentioned before that Mr. Stomach metaphorically takes over the functions and authority of the brain, but he also claims the position traditionally assigned to the heart:

The ancients were wrong, when they attributed to [the liver] the seat of the affections; and the moderns are equally so in debiting love to the account of the heart. The stomach is the real source of that sublime passion, and I swell with pride and inward satisfaction when I make the avowal.<sup>57</sup>

This troubles the tropes that associate these organs more closely with the self: "My advice to every lover, therefore, is, take care of your Stomach, for his influence is greater than you imagine; and I feel perfectly persuaded, that more love matches have been broken off owing to this very respectable organ than to any other cause."<sup>58</sup>

Not only does the stomach supplant the heart, but it also claims to possess a heart of its own. "Reader," it confides, "*I fell in love*. Now, I beg that I may not be laughed at for this confession; but let me tell you a stomach has a heart, and a very tender one too."<sup>59</sup> In a passage mentioned earlier, it refers to the lips with which it sneers at its master's poetry. The outrageous images that result from this anthropomorphosis of the stomach disrupt the more serious moralizing tone of the book. The reader is left to contemplate the absurd possibilities inherent in these comic embellishments: does the stomach have a stomach of its own that dispenses advice? The humor and excess that dominate both the construction of the narrative and of its narrator in *Memoirs of a Stomach* explode all attempts to locate an ultimate source of authority within the text or to decide whether mind or body is, in the end, superior. The body that emerges from the space this explosion creates is complex and heterogenous, the result of the play of tensions between human and material agents.

## Fifth Course: Fat

While for Whiting, the stomach is central to exploring the thingness of the body, today fat anchors discussions of bodily agency. As Brown puts it, "[w]e begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us": "[W]hen the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when the windows get filthy, when their flow within the circuits of production and

57 Whiting, *Memoirs of a Stomach*, 100-1.

58 Ibid., 100.

59 Ibid., 77.

distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, however momentarily.”<sup>60</sup> Body fat works against rather than for cultural norms. It is valued primarily for its supposed potential to disappear; people spend large amounts of money and time attempting to rid themselves of it. When it refuses to vanish, it arrests cultural narratives and thus enters the realm of the thing.

Opening up our scholarship to exploring the thingness of fat would raise new questions for activists and scholars alike. To give one example, Jane Bennett’s influential discussion of the agency of food in *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* could be expanded and enhanced by a consideration of body fat as an agent. Bennett casts body fat as a product of the activity of other nonhuman agents. Fat formation becomes, for Bennett, “a banal instance of what Michel Foucault might have called the ‘productive power’ of food”: “That food can make people larger is a fact so ordinary and obvious that it is difficult to perceive it as an example of nonhuman agency at work.”<sup>61</sup> Not only food, but a complex assemblage of agents, contribute to the production of body fat:

The problem of obesity would thus have to index not only the large humans and their economic-cultural prostheses (agribusiness, snack-food vending machines, insulin injections, bariatric surgery, serving sizes, systems of food marketing and distribution, and microwave ovens) but also the strivings and trajectories of fats as they weaken or enhance the power of human wills, habits and ideas.<sup>62</sup>

Although dietary fat is included within this assemblage, body fat remains excluded, contained within the “problem of ‘obesity,’” acted upon rather than acting. What if instead of excluding body fat from our analyses, we viewed it as exerting its own forms of agency? How would this complicate, not only Bennett’s argument, but dominant narratives of health and beauty? Would it transform the ways in which we treated fat bodies and body fat if we no longer saw fat as inert and easily adaptable to outside forces? Would we then stop trying to make it serve our interests by disappearing?

*Joyce L. Huff, contact: jlhuff (at) bsu.edu, is an Associate Professor of English at Ball State University. Her research focuses on fat and disability in Victorian British literature. Her work on these subjects has appeared in The Fat Studies Reader (New York University, 2009); Bodies Out of Bounds (University of California, 2001); Historicizing Fat in Anglo-*

60 Brown, “Thing Theory,” 4.

61 Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke UP, 2010), Kindle file, 40.

62 Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 42.

American Culture (*Ohio State University, 2010*); Cultures of the Abdomen (*Palgrave Macmillan, 2005*); Victorian Freaks (*Ohio State University, 2008*), and the journals *Fat Studies* and *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies*. She is currently working on a book manuscript on fat in Victorian Britain.