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Night Pollution and the Floods of Confession in Michael Wigglesworth's Diary

And if a man once go beyond those bounds of Gods speciall appointmet,
& what nature alloweth or calls for, I know now where he will stay.
—Michael Wigglesworth, untitled sermon

Extravagance! it depends on how you are yarded.
—Thoreau, *Walden*

The sabbath evening and the next day I was much distressed in
conscience, seing a stable dore of Mr. Mitchels beat to and fro
with the wind, whither, I should out of duty shut it or not; no
temptations perplex me so sorely as such like, when I am not
clear concerning my duty . . . this made me seriously and sol-
emnly cry to heaven for light to my mind, and grace to obey
with chearfulness all gods wil. And still I cry, Lord leave me
not to er from thy ways
subdue the enmity of my heart in tender mercy for thy name
sake: pittty my poor fainting decaying body.¹

AMONG THE MANY transgressions for which Michael Wigglesworth
reproaches himself in his diary, his failure to solve the riddle of the
stable door is arguably the most telling. As Edmund Morgan observes

in his introduction to the diary, Wigglesworth's deliberations in this passage are "almost ridiculously painful," and exemplify the zealous self-negation that makes him "more plausible as a satirical reconstruction than . . . as a human being." Yet the very exaggerations we find fantastic, Morgan contends, reflect a quintessentially puritan sensibility, which remains (mercifully, it seems) less developed in Wigglesworth's "more warm-blooded contemporaries." For Morgan, then, Wigglesworth's extremism represents the ideal, the distillation of puritan identity which emerges as little more than a travesty of itself. This unsettling claim evolves out of a critical tradition which takes for granted Wigglesworth's unbending orthodoxy and questions only whether his particularly fervent and repressive strain of puritanism renders him typical or not. Wigglesworth is either a representative figure of an unhealthy society, the argument runs, or an aberration in a fundamentally sound one. Thus Kenneth Murdock asserts that Wigglesworth's morbid imagination and "obsessive sense of guilt," though not altogether typical, are "simply exaggerations" of the "overwrought" puritan personality,² while, more recently, Robert Daly has countered that Wigglesworth's disdain for human tenderness and the beauty of the material world make him in fact "atypical."³ In their attempts to normalize Wigglesworth or to dismiss him, however, these critics ultimately evade the questions his presence raises. What is it, finally, in puritan culture which generates Wigglesworth's extreme responses, and what do these responses represent? Why, in other words, would the sight of an unfastened door provoke an attack of conscience as violent as this? Certainly, Wigglesworth seeks throughout the diary to recognize and repudiate the manifestations of his vile self, but elsewhere in the text the sinfulness of the actions and attitudes he confesses is self-evident. Repeatedly he decries his irrepressible pride, vain thoughts, failure to delight in holy ordinances, insistent "carnal lusts," and inability to regret his father's death. Only in this passage does Wigglesworth's scrupulous self-examination produce such an apparently senseless crisis, a crisis that is hardly explained by suggesting that Wigglesworth is "high-strung" and enervated by the jolting noise.⁴

It is, however, revealing that Wigglesworth's anxiety is realized not just as a crisis of duty, but, specifically, as indecision about whether or not to speak:

I cannot tel whether it were my duty to giue them some hint that owe them. When I think 'tis a common thing, and that 'tis impossible but that the owners should haue oft seen them in that case, and heard them blow to and fro, and that it is but a trivial matter, and that I haue given a hint to one that dwels in the hous, and he maketh light of it; and that it would rather be a seeming to check others mindlesness of their own affairs, and lastly that there may be special reasons for it that I know not; why the case seemeth clear that 'tis not my duty. yet I am sorely affraid I should regard iniquity in my heart, and god upon this ecclypseth the sweet beam's of his love, he hideth his face and I am troubled. (*Diary* 71)

Thus Wigglesworth can resolve neither to shut the door, nor to furnish more than a "hint" to his neighbors (a hint, moreover, which is ridiculed, misunderstood). But the stable door is itself the site of an unresolved ambiguity: the agitated door alternately invites and excludes the observer, solicits and bars his intervention, exposes and conceals the inside of the barn. One moment, that is, it threatens to reveal to the communal gaze a scene of carnal indulgence, of bestiality or other illicit gratification, only to shut itself the next on these inadmissible possibilities and preserve the secrecy of the barn's dark and secluded interior. The stable door, in other words, ambiguously represents at once the containment of the self's subversive energies and the refusal to contain them. Wigglesworth's uncertainty, then, implicates him in this ambivalent play of containment and release. Unable to speak the door's destabilizing ambiguity or to erase it, he inscribes an anxiety he can neither explain nor overcome. His doubts concerning his duty are the affect of a repressed conflict which the spectacle of the errant door has renewed.

As that which both marks a boundary and breaches it, the door functions exactly as the text of the diary itself. The diary continually resists what it affirms, subverts the closure to which Wigglesworth would have it tend; the self-castigating sinner learns to delight in the penance, in a narration of sin which becomes a gratification rather than a renunciation of vile proclivities. At every moment, that is, Wigglesworth's self-abasement before God for the pleasures he has

indulged threatens to become pleasurable indulgence in self-abasement. The question, then, both for Wigglesworth and for the reader, is whether the confessional narrative separates the speaker from his sin or from the social and symbolic order that abominates it.

Within that puritan social order, a man occupies essentially different positions in the transcendent and the worldly economies. In relation to God, he must be humbly submissive, self-effacing, joyfully conforming to God's word as inscribed in signs and Scripture. The rigidly patriarchal structure of puritan society, on the other hand, grants him a position of complete authority over his family, in particular, and over women, youths, and the disenfranchised in general. Depending on the frame of reference, the puritan male experiences both supremacy and servitude, is constituted both as subject and as object in the universal scheme of things. His subjectivity, however, is founded on his willingness to relinquish it. Only the exemplary servant of God may acquire influence in temporal affairs, so that the puritan man's position in society rests on his ability to inhibit and redirect his errant impulses. To the extent that conscience succeeds in repressing desire, or at least in preventing its expression, it channels the subject's investment in the creature back to the self. In his anxious retreat from a seductive world, the puritan man grows self-centered, obsessed with his own nature as he becomes alienated from the realm of objects in which he no longer discerns his place. The inhibition of desire, then, as Julia Kristeva has argued, renders the subject defensive, compels him to withdraw in the face of a dissolute world that menaces his integrity: the differentiated world of the object, which the subject rationally perceives and circumscribes, begins to appear abject—distinctions collapse and all that which is 'not me' becomes a single, undifferentiated entity that threatens to overcome and defile the individual henceforth under siege.⁵ For the puritan man, that is, the very opposition of subject to object tends to crumble and that which is other (not me) becomes abject—inadmissible, yet, in the very prospect of loss of identity, of self-abandon that it presents, dangerously alluring. Thus the price of authority in puritan society is the apprehension of the abject which never ceases to challenge this authority. The puritan man rules on the brink of an abyss, on the verge of his disintegration.

The puritan woman, on the other hand, identified with all that threatens to subvert the order, with unholy desires and lack of self-discipline to overcome them, becomes the object of surveillance and

regulation in both the worldly and transcendent orders. Although the puritan woman reared her children, tended her household and, ideally, entered into a mutually beneficial partnership with her husband, she nevertheless represents in the puritan imagination a dangerous and abject otherness. The righteous woman might rise above the weakness of her sex, become a shining exemplum in the community, but the feminine nature remains fundamentally corrupt and woman's powers of self-control deficient by comparison to the male's. As this society imagines her, the woman is constituted in and of the abysmal world which it is in the masculine nature to exclude. Significantly, puritan society proves at the same time reluctant to acknowledge the existence of errant female desires, and specifically of sexual desire. As Lyle Koehler has shown, a woman's expression of an active sexuality was not infrequently overlooked or discounted. In cases of adultery, for instance, the male offender was often judged *a priori* the seducer. Openly and defiantly licentious behavior on the woman's part, moreover, was considered a 'fit' and attributed to the influence of demons.⁶ But this reluctance to recognize testifies to the perceived enormity of woman's waywardness and the danger it represented, rather than to any belief in her intrinsic godliness. If society's denial created opportunities for undetected transgressions, it was no less a strategy for containment, erasing women's subversive potential by refusing to see it, much less to speak it.

The puritan male, then, claims a tenuous subjectivity, constituted socially as well as psychically at the expense of the woman, a subjectivity which he must freely renounce in his self-negating relation to God. The puritan woman, meanwhile, submits to God by submitting to his earthly authority, represented by father and husband. As John Winthrop defines the structure of this voluntary hierarchy, the woman is wedded to her husband as the church is to Christ:

The woman's own choice makes such a man her husband; yet being so chosen, he is her lord, and she is to be subject to him, yet in a way of liberty, not of bondage; and a true wife accounts her subjection her honor and freedom, and would not think her condition safe and free, but in her subjection to her husband's authority. Such is the liberty of the church under the authority of Christ, her king and husband. . . .⁷

But Winthrop's analogizing is misleading insofar as it makes the nature of this subjection appear at each level identical. For the woman, that

is, to defy her husband's rule is to shed her veil of modesty and demonstrate the frailty of her sex. For her husband to throw off the sweet yoke of submission to Christ, however, is not simply to yield to *his* lower nature, but to show himself possessed of *a* lower nature—to figure himself as woman. A man given over to unholy desire, in other words, to any ungoverned yearning but the yearning for God's grace, is thought to violate his nature as God has constituted it and thus identifies himself with that lower state of being, with the errant feminine. Thus male sexual desire, in the puritan scheme of things, feminizes the man who has not taken measures to control it, to satisfy his needs in the socially prescribed manner. According to Samuel Danforth, for instance, a minister with a particular bent for declaiming against indulgence of the flesh, the man guilty of "selfe-pollution" would be made "soft or effeminate."⁸ Since puritan society recognized that unrelieved sexual tension could have explosive consequences, moreover, it did not approve of the (apparently) abstemious male. The only socially acceptable option for the man was to seek a legitimate outlet in marriage.⁹

Given the importance of marriage for sustaining a properly masculine self-image, it is worth noticing that Wigglesworth's diary treats, at least in part, his decision to marry, his courtship and the first years of wedded life. In this sense, it is a normative puritan text, chronicling the writer's efforts to avoid temptation and find delight in a godly existence. The unsettled Harvard scholar of the early entries has become husband, father, minister by the diary's end. But Wigglesworth's undiminished obsession with his own intractable sinfulness, his continuing insistence on the precariousness of his new-found existence, undermines this thematic closure. His interest in himself is less in his progress than in his unalterably corrupt nature. The "vileness of [his] owne heart" absorbs him and the "ocean of deadly poyson" he discerns there generates a tide of abjection that subverts the conventional narrative development of the male subject.

In his relentless examination of his own corruption, in his virtual cultivation of the abject, Wigglesworth ultimately resists the puritan standards of propriety he has internalized. This resistance appears to originate in his resentment of his father as well as to account for it. Denied paternal approval, berated for his "weak and silly management of every business," Wigglesworth strives nonetheless to exhibit appropriate filial humility. His father's contempt, he insists, "makes my savour to stink in my owne nosethrills" (*Diary* 14). But this particular

expression of self-abhorrence looks back on and reactivates a childhood trauma. Wigglesworth's shame here is that of the child who has soiled himself, whose smells and excretions, once delightful to him, have been made vile, repellent, abject. Remarkably, Wigglesworth himself comes to suspect a connection between forgotten experiences and his confessed bitterness toward his father:

. . . afternoon I was assayed with feares in reference to my unsensibleness under gods visitation in my father's death and I feared least there should be some root of bitterness that I were not willing to part with, unsearched out. (*Diary 55*)

Wigglesworth imagines, then, that a concealed, subterranean past has come between his father and himself, generating an animosity he is unable to explain. If puritan society represents the relation of father and son as continuous, the pattern of the father's life setting the pattern for the son's, in the diary a lost history intervenes and disrupts the continuity between Wigglesworth and his father. Thus he distances himself from the father whose rebuke has made him abject, though only at the cost of his continued abjection, in the very act, that is, of admitting his sinful inability to grieve, of inhaling his own stench.

The abject overturns puritan norms in the diary much as eloquence overturns men's affections in Wigglesworth's "Prayse of Eloquence," an undergraduate oration presumably designed to display his oratorical ability and his mastery of orthodox positions. Eloquence is figured in the oration as a raging flood, as an overwhelming and unlimited force:

In like manner for the affections. Look as a mighty river augmented with excessiue rains or winter snows swelling above its wonted channels bear's down banks and bridges, overflows feilds and hedges, sweeps away all before it, that might obstruct its passage: so Eloquence overturn's, overturn's all things that stand in its way, and carrys them down with the irresistibile stream of its all controuling power.¹⁰

The "mighty river," in other words, tends to identify eloquence with the very expression of unbounded self that in its righteous function it should constrain. Admittedly, the power of eloquence released is nonetheless "controuling," implying that the "mighty river" is an instrument of God, rather than a mirror of the speaker's vanity. For Wigglesworth, then, eloquence would be defined *a priori* as eloquence

in the service of God's truth, as that which appeals to the regenerate affections. In this context, the oration would be aligned with contemporary teaching on the subject. Norman Fiering, in his account of seventeenth-century Harvard curricula, notes the influence of Bacon, who drew on elements of the Platonic tradition to encourage a "lively representation" of virtue, that would shape the affections where "naked propositions and proofs" failed.¹¹ In his chapter on the passions, Fiering cites Fenner and Shepard as well, who construct related figures and whom Wigglesworth had doubtless read:

Grace runs along in the affections as water in the pipe.
 . . . a man's affections like streams must run some way . . .
 stop the affections from running to the Creature and in a sincere heart [they] will run unto Christ.¹²

But, if in Fenner's simile the affections are a solid conduit and in Shepard's the affections, like the vagrant stream, can be dammed and diverted, Wigglesworth's eloquent flow of words dissolves all things that resist it, transforming the "banks and bridges, feilds and hedges" of man's stubborn affections into things as fluid as itself. By liquifying both eloquence and the affections to which eloquence speaks, Wigglesworth substitutes for the calculated metaphors of well-ordered plumbing and governable nature an image of abandon, of a river in flood freed of all restraints.

Klaus Theweleit suggests that the image of the flood represents in its very essence a violation of boundaries:

The flood is abstract enough to allow processes of extreme diversity to be subsumed under its image. All they need have in common is some transgression of boundaries. Whether the boundaries belong to a country, a body, decency or tradition, their transgression must unearth something that has been forbidden.¹³

The flood in other words is always abject. Because it has burst its restraints, poured into the place of its exclusion, the flood invariably contaminates, defiles. But it also seduces the man who would hold it at bay or stand firm in its midst, by exposing him to the "forbidden," that is, to the pleasure of the flood itself, of unrestrained release. Conversely, then, inasmuch as it invites release, the abject is always flood:

“And yet, from its place of banishment, the abject does not cease challenging its master. Without a sign (for him), it beseeches a discharge, a convulsion, a crying out.”¹⁴ Thus if Wigglesworth means to speak his abjection in order to cleanse himself, to defend against it, his ‘eloquence’ tends to undo him. It is in the very act of signifying his abhorrence that his defenses fail; the ‘flood of words’, the verbal release, becomes complicit with the abomination it denounces. As Sacvan Bercovitch notes on this point, self-abhorrence implies no less of an involvement with self than does its opposite. The sheer investment of energy in the practice of self-denial testifies to the vigor of that self.¹⁵ Not surprisingly, then, Wigglesworth’s obsessively searched-out sinfulness—the very essence of self in the puritan imagination—begins to resist his project of separation and holds out the tempting and terrifying prospect of absorption in its place.

This process is most readily discerned in Wigglesworth’s representation of his “carnal” nature. Already the opening sentence of the diary’s first entry laments the “unnatural filthy lusts that are so oft and even this day in some measure stirring in me” (*Diary 3*). The phrasing of this opening immediately exemplifies the attitude of utter passivity which recurs in all Wigglesworth’s admissions of sexual urges. He never portrays himself as the agent of his own insistent drive, but always as its object, as that which is acted on by a force it cannot subdue:

I find such unresistable torments of carnal lusts or provocation unto the ejection of seed that I find my self unable to read any thing to inform me about my distemper because of the prevailing or rising of my lusts. (*Diary 4*)

Continually troubled by wet dreams, Wigglesworth describes their occurrence in a turn of phrase which literally makes his ejaculate the active element:

The last night a filthy dream and so pollution escaped me in my sleep for which I desire to hang down my head with shame.
(*Diary 5*)

Some night pollution escaped me notwithstanding my earnest prayer to the contrary. (*Diary 93*)

The last night some filthiness in a vile dream escaped me for which I loathe myself and desire to abase myself before my God. (*Diary 50*)

Thus Wigglesworth figures only as a reluctant vessel at the moment of his sexual release, as the abject, acquiescent 'other' of the masculine subject. In the representation of his wet dreams, in other words, he fantasizes a passive form of sexual gratification which the puritan imagination marks as feminine.¹⁶ His frequent claims to being "overpowered," "overcome," or "impotent" are realized, then, in his depiction of his sexual disempowerment. Given the double valence of the term "impotent," moreover, which in Wigglesworth's time could signify not only the absence of (sexual) power, but also the absence of self-restraint in men of immoderate passions, the full ambiguity of this self-portrayal becomes apparent.¹⁷ Wigglesworth is impotent both in the sense that he is powerless to prevent these "night pollutions" and, when they do occur, that they show him to be of a passionate nature.

Wigglesworth himself privileges the latter interpretation, inasmuch as he goes to considerable lengths to dispute it. At a certain point in the diary, he comes to believe that these emissions are the symptom of a disease which, though he never designates it by name, he is later assured was not "vera Gon" (*Diary* 86). In fact, Wigglesworth's conviction that he is ill plays a significant part in his decision to marry. No longer a question of social propriety, marriage has become a matter of life and death:

[Another trial] hath been my weakness . . . At first because it exposeth to sin and temptations by day which are too hard for me at some times in some degree. 2ly It exposeth unto dreams and self pollution by night which my soul abhors and mourns for. 3ly were it nothing els, but shame, and fear lest it *should be judged to arise from wantonness rather than weakness by those that know not the true caus*, that were some trial. But 4ly and principally becaus It driveth me to such a strait as I think few were ever in the like. To continue in a single estate, Is both uncomfortable many wayes, and dangerous (as I conceiv) to my life . . . To change my condition endangers to bring me into a pining and loathsom diseas, to a wretched life and miserable death, the beginnings where of I do already feel at sometimes, and dread more than death . . . (*Diary* 79, emphasis mine)

While it is clearly impossible to determine the exact nature of this illness, which finally seems to put the patient's life at risk whether or not he seeks relief in marriage, it allows Wigglesworth to represent

himself as helpless rather than licentious. His wet dreams, in other words, are shown to be the abhorrent symptom of a potentially fatal disease, rather than the manifestation of an abject nature.

Even within this defensive construction, however, the feminizing characteristics of Wigglesworth's emissions persist:

[The physician] could prove nor the excretio (which happened by the presence of such a friend) seminis [accumulation of semen] but quasi sudor partium genitatum [a sort of sweating of the genital parts]: as a little alumn wil caus the mouth to fil with water, so a little acrimony gathering there, cuaseth humours to flow thither amain, which might come away in great quantity, and yet there be plenty of veri seminis [actual semen] behind. And so I found it to be. (*Diary* 86)

His physician, as Wigglesworth records here with the hypochondriac's precision, likens his trouble to a 'sweating of the genital parts' and observes no discharge of seminal fluid proper. The abjection his illness induces is thus disassociated from a masculine sexuality. Wigglesworth becomes the victim of uncontrollable emissions, which represent a pollution, but not an abominable waste of seed.

Significantly, Wigglesworth's marriage does not put a permanent end to these involuntary self-pollutions. Even in his final entry, he complains of

the return of my nightly distemper occasioned by study about church Government, and my want of insight thereinto, or of strength to attain it . . . (*Diary* 99)

If this recurrence is here associated with an intellectual failing on his part, rather than a physical weakness, Wigglesworth's tendency to show himself the abject victim of his flesh is by no means attenuated. In one of his most striking self-representations, the feminine passivity so carefully imagined in the description of his wet dreams reappears, this time played out in imitation of his wife's labor pains:

The nearnes of my bed to hers made me hear all the nois. her pangs pained my heart, broke my sleep the most off that night, I lay sighing sweating, praying, almost fainting through wearines before morning. The next day. the spleen much enfeebled me, and setting in with grief took away my strength,

my heart was smitten within me, and as sleep departed from myne eyes so my stomack abhorred meat. I was brought very low and knew not how to pass away another night; For so long as my love lay crying I lay sweating, and groaning. (*Diary* 96)

The event of the woman's labor, which traditionally excludes the solicitous but superfluous father from the scene of his offspring's birth, here generates the father's complete identification with the wife. Though Wigglesworth's counterfeit labor is in some measure empathetic, his primary involvement at this moment is clearly with himself. His spleen and stomach discomforts and his general depletion duplicate the sensation of exhaustion, helplessness, surrender he reads in his wife's cries. As he lies "sweating, and groaning," Wigglesworth is not simply mimicking his wife's labor, but, in a more profound sense, seeking to experience it.

Throughout the diary, then, Wigglesworth's self-abasement, his willing submission to God, is realized in the cultivation of a distinctly feminine passivity that threatens to substitute one meaning of 'impotent' for another, to turn helplessness into the unrestrained enjoyment of helplessness. It is, paradoxically, in sustaining the objectifying look of God, that he learns to transgress, to move beyond the limits and elude regulation. The puritan code demands that he continually renounce his subjectivity, examine the corruption of his sinful self, discern the vileness of self's pleasures, so that he will strive to contain (him)self, to reinforce the internal boundaries that defend against corruption, to submit to the rule of his masculine conscience—in other words, to (re)constitute himself as subject. In speaking the sinful excesses of his self, however, Wigglesworth opens the stable door, releases the very thing he would contain, breaches his own boundaries. Thus he experiences the dissolution of his masculine subjectivity, and identifies, in his imagination, with the 'other' (such as he envisions her), finds his gratification in her helpless self-abandon. As this society conceives of her, then, the woman represents a destabilizing potentiality that can never be completely contained. The woman as abject invades the system of masculine authority predicated on her exclusion.

If the diary explores the universe of the object, or, more precisely, the disintegration of the subject in the very process of his construction,

the "Day of Doom" fantasizes the poet's absolute subjectivity. In Wigglesworth's most widely read poem, published five years after the date of the diary's final entry, the diarist's penitential voice yields to the minister's chastizing one, public meditation replaces private introspection. This vision of the Last Judgement, often dismissed as mere rhyming theology, reassuringly slams shut the stable door, (re)contains the sinful excesses of the damned. With the righteous assembled at his right hand and the unregenerate at his left, Christ functions in this poem as the impermeable boundary separating puritan society from the abject that threatens it. The figure of the Redeemer, in other words, enforces the absolute limits of the proper. Thus the social order becomes transcendent: the danger of dissolution that in the diary emanated from outside the puritan order, from the autonomous realm beyond its embattled boundaries, is now contained and neutralized within an all-encompassing system. Secure in this vision of doomsday, Wigglesworth adopts the objectifying perspective of the uncompromised subject in and for whom the abject never appears. He addresses the stricken multitude of sinners in a voice no longer distinguishable from that of the wronged and vengeful Father: "Ye sons of men that durst contemn the Threatnings of Gods Word./How cheer you now?"¹⁸

Nevertheless, in the poem's retrospective moments, Wigglesworth tends to represent the sinfulness of the unregenerate as what Bataille succinctly terms "a baseness that would not be reducible," a baseness, in other words, that is not the opposite term of the ideal and ultimately constitutive of it, but a genuine excess originating from without the order.¹⁹ When, for instance, Christ decries the hypocrite's vainglorious pursuit of worldly honors, he imagines it as a closed circuit of self-gratification:

"Thus from yourselves unto yourselves,
your duties all do tend;
And as self-love the wheels doth move,
so in self-love they end." ("Day of Doom" 47)

The hypocrite has not simply averted his eyes from God, yielded to the sinful impulses of self, but succeeded in erasing God from a consciousness turned wholly inward. His offense, like that of the intractable sinner Wigglesworth describes elsewhere in the poem, is excessive:

Such aggravations, where no evasions,
 nor false pretenses hold
 Exaggerate and cumulate
 guilt more than can be told. ("Day of Doom" 39)

In their 'exaggerated' form, then, the sins of the damned render them incalculably and unspeakably guilty. As Christ suggests in his reply to the complaining sinners who protest the exclusionary system of predestination, the hell-bound have sealed their own fates by their conscious cultivation of evil:

"You argue then: 'But abject men,
 whom God resolves to spill,
 Cannot repent, nor their hearts rent;
 nor can they change their will.'
 Nor for his *Can* is any man
 adjudged unto Hell,
 But for his *Will* to do what's ill
 and nilling to do well. ("Day of Doom" 65)

God has not barred these sinners by fiat, but they instead have excluded themselves from the redemptive economy of grace, deliberately alienating Christ and falling into abjection. The sinners in this poem have sacrificed their place in the established order to live as "creeping moles" below the surface ("Day of Doom" 27), unseeing and unseen beasts whose sinfulness erupts into the world and defaces it. But if the "Day of Doom" imagines the irreducible baseness of the sinner who knows no bounds, it does so in the context of (re)appropriating him, of reencircling his excesses. Conscience triumphs in the poem, as the transcendent order that masters the sinner compels him to master himself:

There's no excuse for their abuse,
 since their own Consciences
 More proof give in of each Man's sin
 than thousand Witnesses.

It so stingeth and tortureth,
 it worketh such distress,
 That each Man's self against himself,
 is forced to confess. ("Day of Doom" 36-37)

Thus the base sinner who revels in his dissolution is forcibly reconstituted as puritan subject and made to signify and repudiate the forces of dissolution within him. The underground mole must be driven from the dark womb of the earth and exposed to the radiance and the justice of God.

In the very act of containing the excess it evokes, however, the "Day of Doom" produces a new excess. Since merely to eradicate baseness is not to control it, Wigglesworth continually rehearses the divine scheme whereby the damned are sustained in the consuming fire of hell:

There must they lie and never die,
 though dying every day;
 There must they dying ever lie,
 and not consume away.

 But God's great pow'r from hour to hour
 upholds them in the fire,
 That they shall not consume a jot
 nor by its force expire. ("Day of Doom" 81-82)

God preserves the sinner, then, in order to ruin him, replenishes life so that death may feed on it. He regulates the in-excess, the abject that had evaded regulation not by excluding, but by continually recreating it, if only to endure his sentence. The method of containment God devises, however, ultimately perpetuates what it would neutralize. To govern a force that respects no limits, God envisions a destruction that knows no term. The fires of hell eternally ravage the damned whom he eternally revives, until one can no longer discern whether the sinners burn in hell or the infinite energy of hell burns in the sinners. As the "Day of Doom" imagines them, the unconsumable damned consume the limitless power that maintains them and become, like the fire itself, everlasting and unquenchable.

The poem itself, moreover, participates in the interminable action of containment it describes. As Perry Miller notes, Wigglesworth's choice of ordinary ballad meter was intended to facilitate memorization.²⁰ If the poem's "trotting verse" fails aesthetically,²¹ the simple and the young could more easily retain these "plain Truths, dressed up in a plain Meter."²² According to Moses Coit Tyler, children were eventually made to memorize the poem along with the catechism and as late

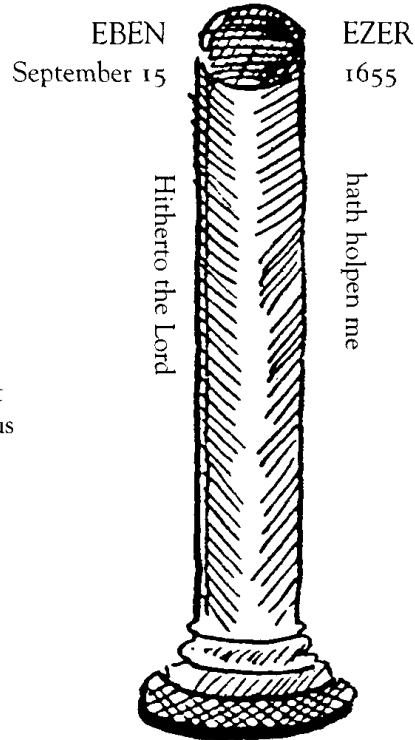
as the nineteenth century, he claims, one could find among the older generation of New Englanders many who still knew the verses by heart.²³ The “Day of Doom,” then, was clearly meant to be recited, so that the horror of eternal damnation (and the bliss of the regenerate) might be continually re-imagined. Like Edward Taylor’s wife Elizabeth, endlessly meditating on these verses that “much perfum’d her breath,” Wigglesworth’s reader would know to repeat the poem whenever the lure of the material world had dulled his awareness of the sinner’s fate.²⁴ Just as God relentlessly punishes the sinner, in other words, the sinner who commits the poem to memory relentlessly anticipates his punishment. Each time he recites its verses, he assumes the voice of the poet and declares against himself, rehearses the crimes of unmindful sinners bent on self-destruction and pronounces their unfathomable doom. Thus the speaker of these verses is encouraged to control his sinful excesses, but only through his continual invocation of the sinner’s terrifying end, through a gesture of projection and repetition no less excessive than his sins.

Though less consistently and less emphatically than in the “Day of Doom,” Wigglesworth attempts in the diary as well to secure his psychic boundaries (to close the door) and repossess his masculine subjectivity. In the diary, however, the pull of the abject intensifies (the door opens) and undermines Wigglesworth’s effort to (re)affirm the limits. His ambivalence becomes most apparent in the final pages of the diary, at a moment when Wigglesworth suddenly and uncharacteristically begins to trust in his physical and spiritual recovery. In this rare mood of optimism, he celebrates God’s grace with a bit of Latin verse, partly plagiarized from Virgil, and a sketch of Ebenezer, Samuel’s biblical monument commemorating the Lord’s help in the defeat of the Philistines.²⁵

Wigglesworth in these verses rejoices in affliction, which fortifies man by trying his faith and so enables him to triumph over adversity in the end. From this perspective, his phallic pillar is an appropriate memorial. As the mark of (sexual) difference, the phallus delineates gender and thus, in the puritan imagination, traces the boundary between integrity and corruption. To “erect” this monument, in other words, is to reassert the system of differentiation on which the puritan social and symbolic order is founded. This very assertion is placed in doubt, however, by the context of the unattributed citation: when Aeneas reassures his men that “haec olim meminisse juvabit” he speaks

God will guide and provide.
 He hath done so in troubles as great as these and therefore he can do it and will do it.
 In Memoriall of his former mercys received in answer to prayer and off all his goodnes hitherto I wil erect

A pillar to the prayse of
 his grace
 O Dulcis memoria
 difficultatis praeteritae!
 Olim haec (quae nunc incumbunt
 mala, haec inquam)
 Meminisse juvabit.
 Quae mala nunc affligunt, postea in
 Laudem dei, nostramque voluptatem cedent
 Quis triumphum caneret, quis spoliis onustus
 rederet victor, si numquam dimicaret?



[Oh sweet memory
 of past troubles!

One day we will remember with pleasure
 these trials (these trials, I say,
 which now tend to an evil outcome)

The ills which now afflict us will later
 yield to the praise of God and to our pleasure

Who would sing the triumph, who would return a victor
 charged with spoils, if he never fought?]

empty words of encouragement that he himself does not believe.²⁶ Moreover, Wigglesworth's faith that spiritual affliction ends in restoration and the recognition of God's grace is further called into question by the strained association of *laudem dei* (the praise of God) to *voluptas*, which primarily signifies sensual pleasure. Inasmuch as this phallic pillar also commemorates the transformation of affliction into *voluptas*, then, it celebrates self-indulgence, impotence in the obsolete sense of the term, the dissolution of identity which endangers the social order. Wigglesworth's pillar to the praise of God, in other words, betrays his profound resistance to God's mercies.

If, in producing this diary, Wigglesworth strives to be overcome by sin at least as much to overcome it, the rhetoric of confession serves him in either project. But the duality of confession inheres in the ambiguous nature of sin itself. As Julia Kristeva has argued, in the New Testament sin becomes at once a founding term of the binary opposition sinfulness/saintliness and, insofar as it continues to be identified with abomination and defilement, the feminine is also that which threatens to overwhelm this order of signification.²⁷ In Kristeva's view, however, confession is the richest form of communication which effectively purges the sinner of sin. It is only in and through art, she argues, that the ecstatic sinner can rejoice in the representation of his excess. Yet precisely in the commonplaces of confession, in the formulaic recitation of sin, Wigglesworth learns to delight in that which he repudiates, to constitute himself in sin while purifying himself of it. In repenting his "ould fearful quenchings of gods spirit" (39), Wigglesworth both gratifies and extinguishes his own.

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NOTES

1. *The Diary of Michael Wigglesworth 1653–1657* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965) 69–70, hereafter cited as *Diary*.
2. Kenneth Murdock, *Literature and Theology in Colonial New England* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963) 105, 106.
3. Robert Daly, *God's Altar: The World and the Flesh in Puritan Poetry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978) 129.
4. Austin Warren, *The New England Conscience* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1966) 67.

5. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982). See especially 14–15.
6. Lyle Koehler, *A Search for Power* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980). See especially Koehler's discussion of rape laws in chapter 3, "Sex and Sexism" and of the hysterical fit 167; see also 181–82.
7. John Winthrop, "Speech to the General Court, July 3, 1645" in *The Puritans*, ed. Perry Miller (New York: Harper and Row, 1963) 207.
8. Samuel Danforth, quoted in *A Search for Power* 82.
9. *A Search for Power* 45, 73.
10. Michael Wigglesworth, "The Prayse of Eloquence" in *The Puritans* 675.
11. Norman Fiering, *Moral Philosophy at Seventeenth-Century Harvard* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1981) 169.
12. Fiering 164, 173.
13. Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987) 232.
14. Kristeva 2.
15. Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975) 18.
16. It is worth noting in the context that puritan physicians, together with their European counterparts, believing female anatomy to be simply an inverted, internalized version of the male's, thought virgins capable of experiencing wet dreams as well. For further discussion see *A Search for Power* 86.
17. See "Impotent," OED 3.
18. "The Day of Doom" (New York: 1867) 23.
19. Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985) 48.
20. Perry Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, rpt. 1981) 218.
21. *Literature and Theology in Colonial New England* 145.
22. Cotton Mather, "A Character of the Reverend Author, Mr. Michael Wigglesworth," in the edition of the poem cited above.
23. Moses Coit Tyler, *A History of American Literature* (New York: G. P. Putnam, 1879) 35.
24. Edward Taylor quoted in *God's Altar* 169.
25. 1 Samuel 7:12. Eben-ezer signifies literally 'stone of help.'
26. These are his words; though sick with heavy cares, He counterfeits hope in his face; his pain is held within, hidden. (*Aeneid*, Book I 290–92). Trans. Allen Mandelbaum (New York: Bantam, 1971).
27. Kristeva 126–27.