

# Wounded Bodies and the Affective Politics of Disgust in Ellen La Motte's *The Backwash of War*

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**W**hen American nurse-writer Ellen La Motte first published *The Backwash of War* in 1916, critics immediately identified the book's embrace of the more disgusting aspects of war nursing. A September 1917 review in the *Wilmington Morning News* found this embrace unbecoming: "There are certain phases of life upon which it is best not to dwell and it is assumed that as she grows in experience Miss La Motte will learn that the reading public does not crave an exploitation of nastiness, but more of what is kindly and wholesome" (Wilmington 4). The subjects of La Motte's book, the reviewer argues, are discussed with "extreme unpleasantness," and the review ends with a hope that "Miss La Motte will take a more refreshing and healthful tone" in the future (Wilmington 4).

But this *Wilmington* reviewer was mistaken; readers did, in fact, find value in La Motte's "exploitation of nastiness." In December 1916, the *Maryland Suffrage News* called it "thirteen tales of agony and bloody sweat, of anguish, cruelty and despair beyond endurance" while also noting that it had been described as "one of the best books written in the last ten years in the English language" (*Maryland* 299). Later, in January 1917, a review in the *Los Angeles Times* called *Backwash* "gripping, shocking, hideous" but also argued that "if we were to compile an anthology of the ten best war stories about eight of them would be listed under the name of Ellen N. La Motte" (Young 14). Then, in May 1917, a review in the *Daily Missourian* claims that "probably no book gives a more realistic and truthful portrayal" of the war than *The Backwash of War*, adding that "the war [La Motte] writes of is not magnificent and glorious, but naked and

loathsome" (*Missourian* 2). To many of these reviewers, the disgusting reality with which La Motte portrayed the war was an asset rather than a shortcoming, making the *Wilmington* reviewer rather alone in his hope for more "kindly and wholesome" writing from La Motte.

Reviewers were not the only people to notice *The Backwash of War's* graphic nature. As Cynthia Wachtell writes in her introduction, *The Backwash of War* "was immediately suppressed in wartime England and France, but in America, the book circulated for nearly two years and was hailed as a stunning and unparalleled work of antiwar writing" (La Motte 4). However, "in late summer 1918, it was also suppressed in the United States because it was deemed damaging to morale" (La Motte 4). Layne Craig argues that "its suppression in the United States was justified by the Espionage Act of 1917 and the Sedition Act of 1918, which limited writing and speech that appeared to threaten military morale or impede recruitment" (Craig 40). While its shock factor may have helped it appeal to audiences and critics, *The Backwash of War* ran antithetical to the United States' war aims. It was a dangerous form of truth telling that resisted propaganda.

This paper examines how amplifying feelings of disgust through candid illustrations of wounded bodies is ultimately La Motte's challenge to the perpetuation of violence through propaganda and the subsequent sanitation of the war's portrayal. It is also the vessel through which she reveals that war relief work is as much a culprit in human suffering as the war itself. Consequently, she indicates the capacity of disgust to illuminate truth and thus disrupt militarism and state propaganda efforts, leaving us with an affective tool that can make systems of power, suffering, and domination more transparent.

Among women's nursing narratives from the First World War, *The Backwash of War* stands out for its stark, uncensored portrayals of violence and gore and for its anti-

propagandistic cynicism. Whereas other American women saw war service as an adventure and “appear[ed] to have relished the excitement of journeys ‘into the unknown,’” *Backwash* has neither the excitement nor the glamor of adventure (Hallett 130). Additionally, while many British women wrote about the war as a “purifying crusade,” a term Claire Tylee uses to designate the impulse to see the war as “part of the Imperial Christian Adventure by which Britain was civilising the world,” La Motte resisted propagandistic ideas of the war’s morality (Tylee 95). Indeed, La Motte’s decision to depict wounded male bodies in graphic detail and her insistence upon readers’ disgust distinguish *Backwash* as one of the most unpleasant and yet most effective pieces of First World War writing. La Motte not only destroys militaristic ideals of soldiers as heroes and nurses as angels, but she presents new ways of understanding how disgust functions to seek and illuminate truth.

La Motte’s practice of illustrating male soldiers’ wounds in graphic and disgusting detail demonstrates the function of disgust in identifying, challenging, and disrupting social and cultural identifications of good and bad, normal and abnormal. As a reflective analytic, disgust allows La Motte to demonstrate the failure of wartime censorship and beautification practices, and as a reflexive one, it forces her to question the proximal nature of disgust. Depicting soldiers’ wounds was at best taboo and at worst illegal during the First World War. According to Layne Craig, there were “cultural anxieties regarding the representation of wounded male bodies” (Craig 51). Pearl James adds that, in Britain, “photographs of soldiers’ corpses were forbidden by law, and access to the front by newsmen and photographers was restricted” (James 23). Indeed, the “portrayal of an abject male body—a corpse or a body with an open, bleeding wound—[went] against ingrained cultural norms,” even though “suppurating, bleeding, oozing, and filthy male bodies were a kind of open secret” (James 23). More simply, the civilian public

knew—or could assume—that the war was producing wounded male bodies but could not (or would not) easily witness them.

It is therefore not surprising that *The Backwash of War* was censored, given its numerous disgusting illustrations of bleeding, stinking wounds. Craig argues that La Motte “portrays the ‘ugliness’ to a degree and in a mode that could rightly be described as obscene, a term that has been liberally applied to the work of male modernists writing in the years after the war” (Craig 40). However, he continues, La Motte was denied the “cultural power” afforded to her male contemporaries who also engaged with the obscene for two reasons: “First, she was a woman, so her representation of the obscene was both more shocking and less culturally legible than theirs--the designation ‘man of genius’ was not available to mitigate her indecency. Second, her work lays out for the readers’ consumption the bodies not of women but of men” (Craig 45). Thus, La Motte’s portrayal of war wounds is subversive not only for its critique of cultural attempts to assign morality to different aspects of the war but also for its insistence upon crossing gendered lines.

I argue that La Motte’s employment of disgust in depicting such wounds transcends realism; rather, she critiques censorship and beautification as pro-war practices that allow for the continued cycle of wounding, healing, and dying, and that promote the proliferation of falsehoods. More simply, use of the disgusting illuminates the system of violence that creates more wounded bodies. Giorgio Mariani asserts that the wounded soldiers “whom La Motte’s stories place in front of us in all their ugliness and misery (both social and moral), are synecdoche of the more general horror of war” (Mariani 135). While this is true, La Motte’s employment of the disgusting does more, denoting war’s capacity to make good men bad and identifying the ethical harm in allowing men to go to war in the first place. So these bodies are

not just synecdoche of a more general horror, they are an indication of the moral rot of a society that wages and sustains war and attempts to shroud the ugly nature of war in order to portray wounded bodies as heroic rather than disgusting.

Additionally, disgust allows for reflexive critique of war work. Sara Ahmed argues that disgust has implications on morality: "Disgust reads the objects that are felt to be disgusting: it is not just about the bad objects that we are afraid to incorporate, but the very designation of 'badness' as a quality we assume is inherent in those objects" (Ahmed 82). However, while almost all La Motte's patients have been in contact with the war--the source of disgust--only some of them are considered bad. Therefore, as La Motte demonstrates, disgust cannot identify morality or immorality; it can only critique the practice of naming clean things "moral" and disgusting things "immoral."

La Motte evokes disgust by depicting men's wounded bodies in a variety of sensory modes: sight, smell, and the more tactile sensations of touch and taste. Presenting wounds visually, she relies on excruciating medical detail. La Motte's graphic illustration of a self-inflicted gunshot wound to the head in "Heroes" subverts notions of morality, as the man who has been made disgusting through his injury is not just a bad patient but is a symptom of, rather than a contributor to, the war's badness. Ahmed argues that "to be disgusted is to be affected by what one has rejected" (Ahmed 86). However, La Motte complicates this notion, as she is disgusted by both that which is rejected (cowardice) and that which is celebrated (heroism). To force readers to understand the violent nature of the self-inflicted wound and its ugly aftermath, La Motte chooses visual, active verbs to display the extent of the mess: the ball "tore" out his eye, implying a rapid, violent rending of one part of the body from the next, and the bullet "lodged" under his skull, invading the body painfully (La Motte 96). To write about an attempted suicide is

taboo in its own right, but to identify the specific, violent details of the injury is even more subversive, setting up the war itself, not the soldier or the injury or even the attempted suicide, as the true root of disgust.

La Motte does not allow her readers a sanitized or censored glimpse into her treatment of the wounded man; she forces them to see his injury as she sees it. She writes that the previously torn out left eye “rolled about loosely upon his cheek,” a blunt statement made horrifying by the utter wrongness of it--eyes are supposed to be in sockets, not dangling outside the face (La Motte 96). There is also a casualness to La Motte’s descriptions that heightens the unease created when something outlandish and terrible is regarded as a regular part of war relief. The eye rolls about loosely, as if it were a marble or a coin rolling across the floor. While his eye rolls about, he “[shoots] great clots of stagnant blood” from his bleeding mouth (La Motte 96). Rather than writing that these blood clots “fell” passively, La Motte is sure to note that patient “shot” them, with “shot” recalling the very machines of war--cannon, rifles, pistols--that made him decide that suicide was better than dying in the trenches. In transposing the war’s violence onto the man’s wound, La Motte argues that war is cyclical; the man is shot at, then shoots himself, then shoots clots of blood onto the *Directrice*, staining her “from breast to shoes” (La Motte 97). Disgust serves to illuminate that cycle rather than shroud it behind heroism or compassion. “Truly it was disgusting,” La Motte writes of both the ugliness of the wound and its transference onto the *Directrice* (La Motte 97). “Truly” does not only function here to emphasize the horror of the wound but also to solidify its truthfulness and avoid having it falsely sanitized, as war propaganda often does.

La Motte will censor neither the man’s wound nor his behavior, leaving him doubly disgusting and unheroic and entirely different from “acceptable” portrayals of wounded soldiers.

By spitting blood upon the *Directrice*, he does not succeed in making her disgusting but rather makes her—and the narrator—disgusted. His wound is a source of immorality, not pity. He has been made bad through his contact with the war, and even after his wounds are healed, he will become disgusting again when he is shot for cowardice. The violence of the war is the source of disgust, but military discipline and relief work are its patrons, allowing for more eyes to roll about on cheeks and more men to become objects of disgust. Therefore, while La Motte herself does not become disgusting through her contact with the war—just as the *Directrice* does not become disgusting—she becomes complicit, fixing up wounded men to become disgusting again and again. The gunshot wound therefore functions as a reflective and reflexive critique, implicating herself in the structure of violence that produces disgusting bodies yet refuses to look at or circulate depictions of them.

Where “Heroes” appeals to our sense of sight, evoking disgust visually, “Alone” appeals to touch and taste, asking readers to imagine how wounds feel: the textures and softness of flesh, how skin peels and dissolves when prodded with medical instruments. With horrifying clinical observation, La Motte presents one of the most disgusting passages of the novel: “The wound stank. It was foul. The *Medecin Chef* took a curette, a little scoop, and scooped away the dead flesh, the dead muscles, the dead nerves, the dead blood-vessels” (La Motte 115). Here, La Motte’s disgust is explicit both linguistically—she writes “it was foul,” leaving no room for interpretation—and viscerally. The verb “scoop,” as opposed to cut or scrape, implies ease of movement and thus the body’s state of decay. We are disgusted because the body is not supposed to come apart so easily.

We are also disgusted because “scoop” is a verb associated with food and eating, and when applied to a description of dead flesh and nerves, we recoil from the idea of tasting the

wound. There is horror in the association. Our horror is reinforced by “dead” modifying each part of the body that is supposed to remain intact, not scooped out: flesh, muscles, nerves, blood-vessels. Flesh is normal in war narratives, but the rest are internal, not meant to be seen outside the body. It is perverse to see them so casually removed, as easily as one might scoop food. Thus, La Motte combines sensory appeals to touch and the equally tactile sense of taste to amplify readers’ disgust.

La Motte continues: “And so many blood-vessels being scooped away by that sharp curette, how could the blood circulate in the top half of that flaccid thigh? It couldn’t” (La Motte 115). Again, the dead blood-vessels and the scooping, but this time, La Motte denotes the body itself as disgusting, as thighs are not meant to be flaccid but alive and filled with blood. After the surgery, she writes, “into the deep, yawning wound, they put many compresses of gauze, soaked in carbolic acid, which acid burned deep into the germs of the gas gangrene, and killed them, and killed much good tissue besides” (La Motte 115). Rather than an act of mercy or morality, the surgery reads as a violation; the surgeons are reaching into the “deep, yawning wound” and touching the human body where it is not meant to be touched or accessed, through a painful and unnatural opening. They place foreign objects inside this gaping wound, and these foreign objects are acidic, painful, destroying not only the infected parts of the body but the healthy parts, too. The surgeons become subversive figures here, helping but also hurting their patient, violating his body in a way that asks us to question this line of “merciful” work.

“Heroes” ends with a return to eating and drinking and thus a return to the sensory experience of taste. After the surgery described above and a night of caring for the dying patient, the female nurse goes to lunch “reluctantly, but it is necessary to eat” (La Motte 118). Two orderlies sit at the other end of the ward, “drinking wine” (La Motte 118). Again, we are



reminded of the surgery, of the scooping out of the dead flesh and muscle, and again, we are disgusted. But the nurse and the orderlies are not so disgusted that they cannot eat. Disgust has become so normalized that it is hardly a concern, and if “the feeling of being disgusted may also be an element in a politics that seeks to challenge ‘what is,’” the hospital workers’ ability to eat and drink after witnessing such revulsion demonstrates the extent to which they have become complicit in the war’s cycle of violence (Ahmed 99). Unlike in “Heroes,” La Motte does not say explicitly that this experience was disgusting. She, too, has become complicit. But we as the readers have not, and it is through our disgust that La Motte hopes to highlight the irony of “merciful” war relief work and illuminate the pervasive cycle of war.

La Motte also appeals to a more tactile sense of touch and feeling when describing how wounded men bleed in “The Interval.” In this case, she presents a tangible contrast between dirty and clean; dirty patients bleed and ooze, clean patients do not. Of her patients, “these filthy, bearded, dying men upon the beds, who are holding back the Germans,” La Motte notes that “more like them, in the trenches, are holding back the Germans. By tomorrow these others, too, will be with us, bleeding, dying. But there will be others like them in the trenches, to hold back the Germans” (La Motte 127). War is cyclical, futile, and exhausting. Indeed, the repeated parallel structure emphasizing the act of “holding back the Germans” reflects the futility of war relief. La Motte cannot ever be rid of the source of her disgust, as more filthy, bleeding, ugly men will come in to replace the ones who have died, and more clean, healthy men will head to the front to become filthy, bleeding, and ugly.

La Motte illustrates the apathy which the war’s cyclical nature has caused by contrasting the horrific physical condition of her patients with the mundanity of her daily tasks. The old men, “grey and bearded,” do not just die, they die in La Motte’s “clean beds, wetting our clean sheets

with the blood that oozes from their dressings" (La Motte 127). By insisting that the men "wet" the hospital's clean sheets, La Motte forces us to associate the soldiers with children who wet the bed, not heroes. We are disgusted not only by the implication but by the notion that men who are supposed to be strong and heroic are actually weak and childlike. Urine is less admirable than blood.

But the men do bleed, and their blood "oozes from their dressings," forcing its way past the clean bandages designed to stop it. "Ooze" is viscous, sticky, recalling mud or slime. This is not the heroic blood that is "spilled" on the battlefield, but the foul-smelling waste that seeps into the clean sheets. This blood is not a badge of honor but a stain. It goes where it is not supposed to go: outside of the body and outside of the bandages applied to stop it. As Ahmed argues, "disgust reads the objects that are felt to be disgusting: it is not just about bad objects that we are afraid to incorporate, but the very designation of 'badness' as a quality we assume is inherent in those objects" (Ahmed 82). Blood itself is not inherently bad, but it becomes bad when it oozes, stains, and smells. In marking the bleeding men as disgusting, La Motte is effectively stripping them of their claims to heroism and goodness, a testament to disgust's power to disrupt and to reassign badness to that which is perceived as good.

Altogether, the men themselves appear antagonistic, as they dirty the hospital which is meant to be clean, and they do so in a way that is pathetic rather than hardened. Moreover, while the men suffer, La Motte keeps working: "when they die, we will pull off the bloody sheets, and replace them with fresh, clean ones, and turn them back neatly, waiting for the next agonizing men" (La Motte 127). La Motte's work is clean, efficient, impartial, differing greatly from the men she serves. Additionally, such work is domestic in nature, the same kind of daily tasks one might perform in the home during peace time. She is not--or does not appear--

horrified, only disgusted. Instead, she goes about her day so that more injured patients can continue to dirty the hospital space and more beds can be remade after the injured die.

The intervals between life and death when men wet clean sheets and ooze blood are, to La Motte, the worst part of war work. "Death is dignified and life is dignified," she says, but such intervals are "ludicrous, repulsive" (La Motte 129). Disgusting and ridiculous with no room for heroism; this is the reality of what war does to men. Trapped in the cycle of holding back the Germans, wounding, healing, and suffering, soldiers cannot have the dignity of serving their country. Instead, they are reduced to children with no control over their bodily functions. La Motte is not disgusted by "what she has rejected," as Ahmed suggests (Ahmed 86). Indeed, she acknowledges that "we should be swept out of existence...were it not for these old wrecks upon the beds" (La Motte 127). Rather, she accepts and admires the old men until they come in with their bleeding, stinking wounds, upon which they become disgusting and therefore rejected. She asserts that disgust creates rejection, not the other way around.

La Motte also invokes smell to convey the disgusting nature of wounded bodies. She takes a comparative approach to illustrating men's wounds in "La Patrie Reconnaissante," forcing readers to smell the hospital. Sianne Ngai argues that disgust is the "single exception to representational art's otherwise unlimited power to beautify things which are ugly or displeasing in real life" (Ngai 334). Rather than being *unable* to beautify the hospital, however, La Motte is *unwilling* to do so, as an unfiltered glimpse into the hospital provides an opportunity to dismantle notions of war as heroic. She writes of the main patient, Marius, that "the stench of his wounds filled their air, his curses filled the ward," not only forbidding his wounds to carry any dignity but also emphasizing that his disgustingness spreads, sticks, fills up the hospital space so much it cannot be ignored (La Motte 103). Moreover, his behavior mirrors his wounds, so overtly

unpleasant that they cannot be ignored. He is thus doubly degraded, not a model of heroic stoicism but smelly and delirious.

As demonstrated above, smell is the primary sense through which disgust is conveyed in this chapter: "On one side of [Marius] lay a man with a faecal fistula, which smelled atrociously. The man with the fistula, however, had got used to himself, so he complained mightily of Marius" (La Motte 104). Clearly, La Motte is not interested in beautifying the ugly or making the hospital less disgusting, as she insists her readers recall the smell of feces. Moreover, she indicates that this smell, undoubtedly unpleasant for her readers to think about, is on par with that coming from Marius. If we recoil when thinking about the fistula, we see (or smell) the hospital as doubly disgusting when Marius is brought in.

La Motte continues to build layers of disgust, writing, "on the other side lay a man who had been shot through the bladder, and the smell of urine was heavy in the air round about. Yet this man had also got used to himself, and he too complained of Marius, and the awful smell of Marius" (La Motte 104). Rather than writing that the second man smelled bad, she is careful to specify that he smells heavily of urine, a distinction which inspires a greater affective reaction due to its familiarity; not all readers will be able to imagine what gas gangrene smells like, for examples, but all readers can recall the scent of urine. It is a scent easily associated with disgust. These two examples serve to highlight the overwhelming disgust that nurses experience: they are exposed to men like Marius, who everyone can smell, and they are exposed to the other patients, who can no longer smell themselves. As a result, they are doubly subjected to the disgusting, as there is no indication that La Motte has grown accustomed to these odors. If she was, she would not be so sure to call them "awful" and "atrocious."

For La Motte to depict men's wounds in such detail is unexpected from a female writer of the First World War, and for her to portray these wounds--and thus the men--as disgusting is even more unusual, as it undermines war aims as well as expectations of compassion and empathy. Mariani argues that "La Motte created a style capable of representing without compromises a content that is not simply shocking but often—even by today's standards—outright nauseating," adding that her uncensored illustrations of the horrific and the disgusting "allow her to come as close as possible to the wounds of the Great War" (Mariani 129). In other words, her portrayal of wounds functions not only to capture the physical and sensory reality of the hospital for her audience but to subvert expectations placed upon female writers at the time. Craig reminds us that "propaganda famously papers over the ethical complexities of war, but also and more significantly, it hides the physicality of the human body by representing the idealized bodies of the soldier, nurse, and home-front woman in mass-produced posters" (Craig 48). By illustrating wounded male bodies in disgusting detail, La Motte forbids her readers from imagining these bodies as whole, beautiful, or heroic and therefore seeks to undermine the false respectability conveyed in wartime propaganda.

For La Motte, disgust is an element of anti-imperial, anti-military, and anti-propaganda politics. It is a reflective and reflexive challenge to nationalistic and patriotic ideologies. As Margaret Higonnet tells us, La Motte "encourage[d] readers to resist propaganda and to question complacent fantasies about the healing professions in wartime" (Higonnet xxii). Disgust does not only identify that which is undesirable—wounds that stink, for example—and the source of the undesirable—the war itself—but it holds the subject that is disgusted as complicit. It illuminates not only the disgusting but the disgusted, implicating the latter in the social and political processes that make things disgusting in the first place. While writers such as Wilfred

Owen and Helen Zenna Smith hold that war is a de-personalizing force that destroys the subjectivities of its participants, La Motte argues that war work is just as de-personalizing, destroying not only patients but nurses, surgeons, and orderlies. Unlike pity, horror, or even apathy, which humanize the nurse, disgust destroys any propagandistic argument about the humanity of war relief.

Scholars are torn on how to define *The Backwash of War* in the context of anti-war literature. Hallett calls it "a deliberate piece of anti-war propaganda" (Hallett 8), while David Rennie claims that it "avoids reading like anti-war propaganda" (Rennie 67). Moreover, Mariani notes how "reviewers were quick to insert *The Backwash of War* into a newly established tradition of 'anti-war' literature" (Mariani 127). But as Cynthia Wachtell points out, as much as La Motte hated war and wanted her readers to hate it, too, she thought it "inescapable" (La Motte 9). Quoting a 1918 newspaper interview, Wachtell tells us that La Motte stated, "to me [war] is horrible; it is not beautiful, it is not necessarily ennobling. But I know that it has to be...I am not a pacifist" (La Motte 8-9). Still, if war is an unavoidable part of the human experience, La Motte says, "I do not see why we should not tell the truth about war, just as we would tell it when describing the action of an earthquake or a typhoon" (La Motte 9). It is a curious rhetorical act, likening war to a natural disaster, and at first glance, this claim seems antithetical to the argument against militarism and propaganda that La Motte has built up.

So if *The Backwash of War* is not expressly anti-war (even if it may be used to anti-war ends), what is it against? Militarism, imperialism, and patriotism, certainly. Propaganda most assuredly. But at its core, disgust reveals truth, making *Backwash* a written campaign against deceit and falsehood. It is not pro-peace but pro-truth, raging against the soldier poets and nurse writers who sought to portray the war as anything but what it really was: disgusting.

And where does this leave disgust? A minor affect and ugly feeling, it emerges from *The Backwash of War* as one of the most powerful diagnostics of truth and falsehood. According to Michael Hardt, affects “illuminate...both our power to affect the world around us and our power to be affected by it, along with the relationship between these two powers” (Hardt ix). Disgust demonstrates how, in both affecting and being affected, subjects have not only the capacity for but a responsibility to truth. As a nurse, La Motte was positioned to witness and sustain disgust and was therefore able to discern a degree of truth, however pessimistic, about the permanence of war. Where others were reserved, La Motte was uncensored. Truth is the essential missing element in what Ahmed calls “a politics that seeks to challenge ‘what is’” (Ahmed 99). La Motte does not employ disgust to challenge war. She employs disgust to challenge war’s sanitation, to destroy the ideas that war can simply be overcome through humanity and that there are clear cut good sides and bad sides in every war. Lies, fabrications, and fetishizations are the “what is” that La Motte seeks to challenge. Disgust cannot stop the tide of war, but it can stop the perpetuation of lies that hide what war really is.

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