

VICTORIAN DIRT

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Every idea about our Victorian forebears is in some sense an idea about ourselves. Knowledge of the past is inevitably refracted through the present. The phrase “Victorian dirt” invites consideration in part because it strikes us as an oxymoron: even with all we know about the range and variety of human experience in the nineteenth century, it is hard not to cling to the caricature of the Victorians as stuffy prudes who found the very idea of dirt alarming, not to say unthinkable. The phrase promises disenchantment, titillation, and defamiliarisation. With the presumed superiority of our own acuity and worldliness, and the privileges of hindsight, we harbour the fantasy that we may know the Victorians better than they knew themselves. What we learn from such investigations, however, is just how attached we are to values of cleanliness and sanitation, which makes the discovery of nineteenth-century dirt a perpetual experience of joyful disgust and self-affirming discomfort. Even more, perhaps, we learn how attracted we are to the experience of revelation itself: the unveiling of the hidden, the secret, the unknown—even when the constituents of that knowledge can hardly continue to surprise us.

So why, we might ask, are we so interested in Victorian dirt—what’s in it for us? One answer has to do with what we might term the materiality of material or, in other words, the objects and processes it groups together and allows us to think about collectively and concretely. Victorian dirt encompasses facts and feelings about sanitation, disease, poverty, the physical environment (including air and water pollution), personal hygiene, sexuality, and pornography. These are topics of manifest concern as much to the twenty-first century as to the nineteenth, and they point to a second answer to the question of what’s in it for us. This answer has to do with the ways of thinking that a focus on dirt enables: namely, by lending form to potentially abstract ideas, dirt yokes together all-too-tangible things and the most metaphorical and ethereal ones. This I might hazard to call the material of materiality. Reflections on dirt extend rapidly, for instance, to considerations of consumer capitalism, with its reliance on waste and replenishment; of distinctions among races, genders, classes, and nationalities, whereby different populations are marked as polluted; and of

psychological and phenomenological being, such that sharp divisions between self and not-self align with distinctions between cleanliness and dirt. Reflecting on dirt, that is to say, encourages us not only to move among different kinds of literal objects but also to shift between registers of literalness and figurality. Dirt-thinking has a way of contaminating all it encounters, producing a conceptual flow across time and space.

Knowledge about lived environments—especially crowded and filthy ones—is undeniably urgent today. Ecological concepts, whose origins lie in Victorian paradigms of urban blight, are more pertinent than ever. The rage, fear, despair, and anxiety that attaches to environmental and human contaminants is in the news daily. Understanding the historical sources of such feelings helps us to see our own world more clearly. Appreciating as well the abundant cultural artefacts—literary, artistic, more generally aesthetic and intellectual—generated from such responses allows us to see the generative potential of dirt too.

Because dirt—as a concept about materiality—covers such a variety of ideas, ranging from the intra- and inter-personal to the mass and the collective, it also has consequences for thinking about how we understand our own lives and identities in relation to those of a group, a class, a society, a nation, and a species. We all have individual experiences of dirtiness, in both its immediately tangible, aversive forms and in its psychological components. Our common experience of this individual phenomenon binds us to one another, even as we recognize how such experiences are culturally constrained and delimited. Dirt might thus be thought of as that which we share. It may also, as Dominique Laporte proposes in *History of Shit*, stand at the origins of private property. As both profoundly individual and importantly collective, dirt enables us to think about aggregation itself, in ways that bridge the personal and corporate. Marxist analysis supplies a related bridge, for it shows how concepts of value, labour, profit, and productivity bind together the sensible experiences of individuals and large-scale social movements through historical time and across national and global spaces. Like thinking in economic terms, thinking in terms of dirt and cleanliness offers structures for analyses that work across different kinds of scales. Dirt-thinking is not just analogical or metaphorical, however; as I have suggested, it is also metonymic, in enabling the seepage and flow between conceptual structures and objects.

If dirt is contagious and threatens to mar all it touches, it may be especially so in the nineteenth century, when the prevailing miasma model of infection gives vivid, visceral form to the idea of dirt, even while representing infectious agents as ethereal. Even in its materiality, that is to say, dirt is mobile

and evanescent, in both objective and metaphorical terms. If it is the epitome of materiality, dirt is so precisely in its mutability and transmissibility—which is to say that it does not sit still, nor remain solely material. Dirt is also always a moral category, which helps to explain its bearing on (and utility for) distinctions in terms of class, gender, race, and nationality, on politics, and on health (itself inevitably a value-laden topic). The moral charge of dirt is coextensive with its affective power, which means that distinctions made on the basis of hygiene are rarely neutral in value or tone. For all its experiential ephemerality, moreover, dirt also has a quality of persistence or permanence. As a residual marker of prior taint, it evinces the influence of the past on (and in) the present, the wear and rub of time. In this way too, dirt corresponds to capital, which Marx likens to the grip of the dead upon the living.

The articles in this issue of *Victorian Network* take up many of the ideas I have outlined, demonstrating the productivity and transitivity of both the fact and the idea of dirt. They richly explore the unexpected connections enabled by a focus on dirt, showing the metaphoric and metonymic correspondences it evokes across a range of genres. They consider both the historical variability and the historical continuities it establishes. An attention to dirt, as they exemplify, helps give form to ideas at the same time that it treats matter as a concept.

In the first article, “Dirty Work: Trollope and the Labour of the Artist,” Flora C. Armetta explains the pertinence of dirt to labour, realism, and visual art in Anthony Trollope’s fiction as well as in John Ruskin’s philosophical aesthetics. Ruskin emphasizes imperfection in artistic creation as the sign of treasured human creativity and the expenditure of mental and manual labour. Similarly, Armetta argues, Trollope focuses on the everyday and the experiential—as opposed to the ideal and the extraordinary—as sources of humanistic values. Ideas about nature (in the sense of an unvarnished truth) underlie both Ruskin’s and Trollope’s visions for art and the values it can imbue. The earthiness of such nature demonstrates the utility of dirt, connecting that which is ordinarily dismissed and derogated to aesthetic achievement. Certainly a theory of art that does not list beauty and goodness among its chief merits has some work to do; but in discovering an unusually positive valuation of dirt, as a sign of virtue and honesty, the article shows how aesthetics was changing in the historical moment when realism was the prevailing literary and artistic mode. Ruskin and Trollope both emphasise pigment as a product of the earth, for example, connecting the materiality of the painter’s tools to the aesthetic subjects on the canvas, whether or not those representations are themselves “earthy.” While such a transvaluation stands in contrast to the usual Victorian assumption that dirt signifies poverty and immorality, Armetta helps us to see how the

attractions of realism and the Victorian interest in the visibility of dirt mutually encouraged each other.

If dirt serves some surprising aesthetic ends for Trollope and Ruskin, it is put to a variety of socially and culturally productive uses in the understanding of the workhouse, that quintessential Victorian institution, according to Laura Foster in the second article, “Dirt, Dust and Devilment: Uncovering Filth in the Workhouse and Casual Wards.” Workhouses were a topic of intense popular interest among Victorian commentators and readers, who inevitably associated them with questions about dirt, as both the sign and the source of moral corruption. Foster brings us through a range of popular primary sources that establish a series of different relationships between poverty and dirtiness, in a host of physical, mental, moral, medical, and sexual senses. Some boosters of the system insist on the cleanliness and cheerfulness of the workhouse, but this approach risks making it seem too attractive. So as to appeal to only the most desperate paupers, advocates insist on the moral rigor of the workhouse, as a stern, disciplinary space, however well scrubbed it may be. Others envision the relationship between dirt and the workhouse in different ways. Some critics regard the insistence on cleanliness as a cruel and excessive coercion of the poor. Some see it as merely a façade, which covers over a fundamental and ineradicable filth. Still others relish lurid and sensational details of sexual indulgence and moral corruption, exploiting supposed contradictions between the ideal and the reality of the workhouse. Across a range of historically and generically evolving accounts, Foster traces the fate of dirt as it shifts from a physical attribute of the space to a moral quality of the inhabitants (and sometimes of the managers). Regarded as corrupt, infectious, and ontologically dirty, the poor of the workhouse are understood in proximity to filth, whether such representations are used to elicit sympathy or to condemn them.

The third article, “Eco-Conscious Synaesthesia: Dirt in Kingsley’s *Yeast* and *Alton Locke*,” again takes up literary materials, linking them both to contemporary concerns with ecological destruction and to phenomenological accounts of sensory experience. By focusing on the threat of miasma, Margaret S. Kennedy explores dirt in perhaps its most diffuse, pervasive, and insidious form. Miasma is the bad air that—in the era before the germ theory of microbial infection prevailed—was understood to carry disease; it saturates both the lived exterior environment and the interior one of the human body. In this article’s account, Charles Kingsley and other Victorian writers chart a shift in the idea of dirt from naturally occurring to human-produced, from infection to pollution. By writing miasma into their prose—in genres from the realist and sensation novel to treatises on public health—these writers make manifest and

comprehensible the otherwise invisible menace of corrupted environments. The result, Kennedy argues, is to provoke an “eco-consciousness” in readers, newly awakened to the perils of the toxic world without and their own culpability in its degeneration. In this awareness lie the origins of the contemporary framework of environmental justice, which offers a model of collective action in response to individual perceptual experience. Kingsley’s novels amply illustrate the inadequacy of the liberal-individualist, charity-based approach to the ills of modern life. Like the permeating miasma itself, the only plausible solution—in Kingsley’s case, Christian socialism—is reticulated across networks of linked populations.

Both the infiltrating insidiousness and the productivity of miasmatic thinking becomes clear in this issue’s fourth article, “Bad Property: Unclean Houses in Victorian City Writing.” In tracing a genre of what she calls urban exploration writing, Erika Kvistad shows how the generic conventions of sensation and gothicism extend across both fiction and popular journalism in the mid- and late-nineteenth century, bringing the lurid sensations of horror from a terrifying figure such as Mr. Hyde or Jack the Ripper into the middle-class domestic enclave. For bourgeois readers, a variety of terrors—poverty and infectious disease, alien otherness and rebellion in Britain’s imperial adventures, crime and the urban unknown—are imaginatively collapsed in a gripping *mélange* that links journalism, public health reports, and narrative fiction. By recirculating the language and imagery of dirt and disease, experts and common readers alike conceptually collapse figures as disparate as cholera, miasma, foreignness, poverty, criminality, sexual deviance, and monstrosity. Both to horrify and to titillate audiences, writers show these figures of terrifying allure not as distant and exotic but as close to—sometimes rising up within—the middle-class home. The lived physical space of domesticity is the terrain on which such struggles are enacted, reinforcing the centrality of dirt concepts themselves as ideas about the horrors of modern life.

The final article, “‘Once upon a time bright and transparent, now overcast with filth’: Neo-Victorian Dirt,” extends the reach of this issue to contemporary texts that reinvent Victorian ones while, at the same time, demonstrating the conceptual mobility of dirt as an idea, which shifts across and links different realms of thought. In discussing recent works that revisit and recast Victorian stories and settings, Nicola Kirkby invites us to consider dirt in relation to temporal difference, delay, and anachronism itself. Dirt materially links the Victorian period and the present while also supplying imaginative tools for recognizing the persistence of the past—its trace and its taint—in the contemporary world. Using the sense of smell as a model for the mobility of

ideas through time, the article argues that the subjective and ethereal materiality of such concepts allows them (like an evanescent odor) to shift and dart spatially, and not only in one temporal direction. In reimagining the past through the present, as neo-Victorian texts encourage us to do, we come to see ourselves reflected. Such works allow us to understand what we share with the past and how we differ from it. In its simultaneous elusiveness and persistence, olfactory sensation provides a surprisingly temporal perspective on historical change.

One of the paradoxes inherent in addressing social, economic, and environmental injustices through aesthetic forms is that, in making collective problems comprehensible, pictorial representation and narration (whether reporting, fiction, or jeremiad) can also have the effect of diminishing their impact; the liberal solution is to fix the problems of individuals rather than to address large-scale structures. A claim on behalf of charity and a retreat to domesticity is frequently the dual recourse of the frustrated reformer: in the face of massive social problems, the nineteenth-century realist novel, in particular, as a genre has little to propose other than happy, reproductive marriage as the solution. This is in part a constraint of the genre, which falls back on convention in the face of modernity's intractable horrors and difficulties. While this paradox might apply to any social problem—be it poverty, inequality, or a public health crisis—the particular emphasis on dirt, in both its material and its metaphoric dimensions, helps to keep the individual and the collective dimensions equally in play. By appealing to their audience's experiential, sensory, and emotional apprehension, accounts of dirt in even the widest contexts connect such experience to the lives and worlds of others—whether or not readers or viewers want to imagine themselves sharing those others' existences.