

BAD PROPERTY: UNCLEAN HOUSES IN VICTORIAN CITY WRITING

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Abstract

This essay considers dirt as a source of horror in late nineteenth-century urban exploration writing, in which middle-class writers explore the homes of poor city dwellers. I argue that for these writers, dirt was the point where scientifically driven social activism and superstitious horror met. They imagined poor homes as “bad property”, both the location and the source of moral uncleanness. The by then disproved miasma theory of disease persists in these texts both as a fact and as a persuasive metaphor. It allowed urban exploration writers to articulate both the fear of the squalid dwellings where poverty, disease and moral decay arise, and the fear that this badness might spread through the wealthier parts of the city. In this way, the demolition of filthy homes functioned not only as a social project, but as a form of exorcism. But three other central works of late-Victorian city writing, Margaret Oliphant's *A Beleaguered City*, W.T. Stead's ‘The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon’ and R.L. Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, use the idea of the unclean house for new purposes, undermining the equivalence between cleaning up the city and eradicating its horror. The concept of “bad property” becomes, instead, a way of locating horror close to home, at the heart of respectable middle-class houses.

‘Houses are like the human beings who inhabit them. They become to their former selves what the corpse is to the living body. A superstitious belief among the people is sufficient to reduce them to this state of death. Then their aspect is terrible.’¹

‘The bourgeois interior of the 1860s to the 1890s...fittingly houses only the corpse. ‘On this sofa the aunt cannot but be murdered.’²

The ‘great dark region’ at home

W.T. Stead, social reformer, crusading reporter and spiritual investigator, once spent a sleepless night in a supposedly haunted Gothic castle. ‘I rejoiced that I was capable of superstition. I thought it was dried out of me by high pressure civilisation,’ he wrote – though he added that ‘I am afraid that some of my

¹ Victor Hugo, *Toilers of the Sea*, 1866, trans. by W. Moy Thomas, ed. by Ernest Rhys (London: Everyman, 1911), p. 4.

² Walter Benjamin, ‘Manorially Furnished Ten-Room Apartment’, *One Way Street and Other Writings*, trans. by Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter (London: Verso, 1985), pp. 48–9.

critics will be inclined to remark that my capacities in that direction stand in need of a great deal of drying up'.³

In fact, superstition was a common response, and not just in Stead's own work, to the high pressure civilisation of the Victorian city. In late-nineteenth-century urban exploration writing, invocations of a particular kind of near-supernatural horror became a way of trying to imagine – as well as a sign of the inability to comprehend – the misery and squalor of the 'great dark region' they investigated.⁴ Here, I use the term 'urban exploration writing' to denote the attempts of largely middle-class writers like Henry Mayhew, Charles Booth, Blanchard Jerrold and Flora Tristan to survey and describe the homes of working-class and poor residents of British cities. Other critics have used different phrases for what these writers were doing. For instance, Seth Koven, who focuses on the combination of sexual charge and reformist passion that drove middle- and upper-class activity in the slums, describes it simply as 'slumming', partly because the writers themselves would not have put it that way:

Because the desire to go slumming was bound up with the need to disavow it, my history of slumming includes the men and women who used any word except slumming – charity, sociological research, Christian rescue, social work, investigative journalism – to explain why *they* had entered the slums.⁵

Harold James Dyos takes the writers more on their own terms, describing them broadly as 'researcher[s]' and 'investigators',⁶ while Lee Jackson describes them as 'intrepid social reformers' and 'investigative journalists'.⁷ I like the term 'urban exploration writing' in part for the analogy it allows with present-day urban exploration, in which explorers investigate abandoned sites

³ W.T. Stead, *Borderland: A Casebook of True Supernatural Studies*, 1897 (Stuart: New York, 1970), p. 254, *The W.T. Stead Resource Site* <<http://www.attackingthedevil.co.uk/spiritualism/clairvoyant.php>> [accessed 21 July 2015]

⁴ Andrew Mearns, *The Bitter Cry of Outcast London: An Inquiry into the Condition of the Abject Poor*, 1883, excerpt in *The Fin de Siecle: A Reader in Cultural History, 1880–1900*, ed. by Sally Ledger and Roger Luckhurst (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 27. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

⁵ Seth Koven, *Slumming: Sexual and Social Politics in Victorian London* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), p. 9.

⁶ Harold James Dyos, *Exploring the Urban Past: Essays in Urban History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 133.

⁷ Lee Jackson, *Dirty Old London: The Victorian Fight against Filth* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), p. 181. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

and urban infrastructure like transit tunnels and storm drains. The analogy is an imperfect one, because current urban explorers are not primarily concerned with human or social issues, but it is suggestive of the nineteenth-century urban explorers' powerful sense of discovery and transgression. But the writers themselves also drew analogies between their work charting the homes of the poor and the exploration of unknown territory in England's imperial properties. Mayhew's work took place in what he called 'the undiscovered country of the poor',⁸ and both William Booth's *In Darkest England and the Way Out* (1890) and Margaret Harkness's slum novel *In Darkest London* (1889) took their names from Henry Morton Stanley's *In Darkest Africa* (1890).⁹ Booth's preface brings home the 'awful gloom' of the African rainforest to suggest the deep otherness of a territory close to his readers' own homes: 'that Darkest England of which I have to speak [...] its monotonous darkness, its malaria and its gloom, its dwarfish de-humanized inhabitants, the slavery to which they are subjected, their privations and their misery'.¹⁰

Urban exploration writers were trying to describe an unsettling territory: one that was geographically close to the homes of their middle- and upper-class readers, and at the same time terribly foreign. Other critics have noted that exploring and describing domestic dirt was a central part of the work of urban social reformers. Lee Jackson's history of filth and sanitation in Victorian London links the work of early urban exploration writers to the sanitation efforts that followed, pointing out that descriptions of unclean homes 'would become a standard campaigning tool for social reformers' (p. 181). Writing became a precursor to cleaning. Here, though, I want to focus on a particular aspect of this process: the fact that in many of the central texts of late-Victorian urban exploration writing, the obvious social problems that beset the poor areas of British cities, like inadequate housing, crime, and the spread of disease, become linked with the idea of certain living spaces as intrinsically bad. I want to examine what, for Victorian writers on the city, it meant for a living space to be bad, and what uses the idea of the bad house could be put to.

⁸ Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor* (London, 1851), p. xv, *Electronic Text Center, University of Virginia Library*.

<<http://web.archive.org/web/20080923195808/http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/MayLond.html>> [accessed 21 July 2015] Further references are given after quotations in the text.

⁹ Harkness's novel was first published in 1889 under the title *Captain Lobe: A Story of the Salvation Army*, but the title was changed on its republication in 1891 to refer to both Booth's and Stanley's works.

¹⁰ William Booth, *In Darkest England and the Way Out* [1890] (BiblioBazaar, 2006), p. 25.

By the word “bad I mean to suggest a quality very close to the one Dr Montague reaches for in Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959): ‘the houses described in Leviticus as leprous, *tsaraas*, or Homer's phrase for the underworld, *aidao domos*, the house of Hades [...] the concept of certain houses as unclean or forbidden – perhaps sacred’.¹¹ Dr Montague's unclean (perhaps sacred) houses have something nearly, but not quite, supernatural about them. If they were in fact supernatural, they might be easier to understand, less offensive to the mind. Even so, Melissa Edmundson's work on hauntings in the stories of Charlotte Riddell and Margaret Oliphant offers a striking alternative phrase: she notes that ‘the term “uncomfortable houses” was used throughout the nineteenth century to describe houses and dwellings that were possessed by ghosts or other evil spirits’.¹² As Edmundson points out, the phrase has religious as well as supernatural associations, but most interestingly for my purposes, the obvious connotation is of simple physical discomfort. The phrase suggests that a house that is physically unpleasant to be in might be a house where something more is also wrong.

The idea of this kind of bad or unclean house appears in telling ways in urban exploration writing. At one point in Charles Booth's survey of the lives, homes and occupations of working-class Londoners, *Life and Labour of the People in London* (1892-97), Booth's normally level and factual tone – which stays quite neutral on, for instance, unmarried cohabitation – becomes animated on the subject of demolition:

in this neighbourhood there has been of late years a great change brought about by the demolition of bad property. If much remains to do, still much has been done in the clearing away of vile spots, which contained dwellings unfit for human use, and matched only by the people who inhabited them.¹³

This passage has a weirdly circular argument. These houses are unfit for human use (a common, though vague, way of defining a slum),¹⁴ but are matched by the humans who use them. This means that we have to imagine

¹¹ Shirley Jackson, *The Haunting of Hill House* (London: Penguin, 1987), p. 70.

¹² Melissa Edmundson, ‘The “Uncomfortable Houses” of Charlotte Riddell and Margaret Oliphant’, *Gothic Studies*, 12.1 (2010), pp. 51–67, p. 63. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

¹³ Charles Booth, *Life and Labour of the People in London*[1889] in *Charles Booth's London*, ed. by Albert Fried and Richard Elman (Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1971), p. 89. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

¹⁴ See Dyos, p. 132.

these humans as unfit to inhabit a space, even this particular space which is itself unfit (even as Booth seems to suggest that the inhabitants and their dwelling might after all, somehow, be fit for each other). The source of the badness is unclear, too: did the space make the inhabitants bad, did the inhabitants make the space bad, or did two matching kinds of badness happen to coincide? And for whose sake are these homes destroyed? What exactly is cleaned up when these 'vile spots' are cleared away?

I will argue that uncleanness is the point where, in Victorian writing on the city, scientifically driven social activism and superstitious horror meet. In the introduction to *The Architectural Uncanny* (1992), Anthony Vidler runs up against the problem of confronting 'the aesthetic theory of estrangement' with 'social and political practice': 'Faced with the intolerable state of real homelessness, any reflection on the "transcendental" or psychological unhomely risks trivializing or, worse, patronizing political or social action'.¹⁵ But 'transcendental' or 'psychological' reflections on uncleanness are an inherent part of contemporary responses to the intolerable state of homes in the Victorian city. These responses were often the necessary spur to political and social action, but also admitted to a kind of bewildered incomprehension. This pattern is particularly clear in the case of the miasma theory of the spread of disease, which became a model that urban exploration writers could use to try to describe and understand poor urban homes, but also a way for them to acknowledge that they could not fully understand it – perhaps even that it could not fully be understood. And it allowed them to imagine slum clearance – the 'demolition' and 'clearing away' that Booth writes about – as a way of exorcising the horror that these homes inspired.

But, as I will go on to show, towards the late nineteenth century the idea of the unclean house became something more than just a way for middle-class writers to deal with the horror of urban poverty. I will explore three other central works of Victorian city writing, Margaret Oliphant's *A Beleaguered City* (1880), W.T. Stead's 'The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon' (1885) and R.L. Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), in all of which the unclean home is a central image. But here it inspires a very different kind of horror, and is used for ideological purposes that run counter to those of the urban exploration writers. In each of these texts, the concept of 'bad property' becomes not a way for middle-class writers to deal with urban poverty, but a

¹⁵ Anthony Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999), pp. 12–13.

way of locating horror close to home, at the heart of respectable middle-class houses.

‘Poisonous and malodorous gases’: Miasma in urban exploration

Charles Booth’s discussion of vile spots takes us into an intersection between science and superstition. There is a suggestion that streets can have moral and spiritual states that are not necessarily connected to the states of their inhabitants: ‘the streets settle down to respectability and rents rise: or a street may go wrong and get into such a position that no course short of entire destruction seems possible’ (p. 91). Houses in poor districts are like children who – under the influence of their tenants, but not entirely controlled by them – may grow up respectable or go wrong. So the term “bad property” is given a moral meaning, but it also has another, more nebulous sense: ‘Among the early troubles of these streets are fevers, resulting it is said from the foul rubbish with which the hollow land has become levelled’ (p. 91).

Disease lies in the foundations of the house. To present-day readers, it would be easy to link this to standard horror tropes, like the recurring idea of North American haunted houses being built over Indian burial grounds. But Booth’s contemporary readers would have read the idea of fever infesting a house because of the foulness of its foundations not as an obvious superstition, but as an application of miasma theory. This theory held that illnesses like cholera were spread by air that had become infected with decaying organic matter, meaning that foul-smelling air led directly to illness.¹⁶ ‘All smell is, if it be intense, immediate acute disease; and eventually we may say that, by depressing the system and rendering it susceptible to the action of other causes, all smell is disease’, said the social reformer Edwin Chadwick in a 1846 report to the Metropolitan Sewage Committee.¹⁷ This was an extraordinarily persistent idea across the nineteenth century. Stephen Halliday, discussing the way it affected the public health officials responsible for combating the 1831-1866 London cholera epidemics, calls it ‘an obstinate belief’.¹⁸ Miasma theory was never a completely accepted orthodoxy: in 1853, the editor of the *Lancet* described attempts at tracing the origins of cholera as ‘darkness and confusion,

¹⁶ George Davey Smith, ‘Behind the Broad Street pump: aetiology, epidemiology and prevention of cholera in mid-nineteenth century Britain’, *International Journal of Epidemiology*, 31 (2002), pp. 920–932, p. 921.

¹⁷ Metropolitan Sewage Committee proceedings, *Parliamentary Papers*, 10.651 (1846).

¹⁸ Stephen Halliday, ‘Death and miasma in Victorian London: an obstinate belief’, *BMJ*, 323 (2001), p. 1469.

vague theory, and a vain speculation [...] We know nothing, we are at sea in a whirlpool of conjecture'.¹⁹ But Halliday emphasises that John Snow's alternative hypothesis that cholera was spread through polluted water, arrived at in his study of the Broad Street water pump during the 1854 cholera epidemic, took a long time to gain acceptance in the medical community. It was only when the progress of the final cholera epidemic in 1866 confirmed his ideas that they started to gain traction.

Reading urban exploration writing, though, suggests that it took even longer for miasma theory to filter out of non-medical discourse. Even in the late nineteenth century, miasma continued to hang over urban exploration texts. It appeared occasionally as an actual fact, as in Booth's mention of foundations filled with rubbish, or Andrew Mearns's description of 'courts reeking with poisonous and malodorous gases arising from accumulations of sewage and refuse' (pp. 4–5). But more often, it appeared as a persuasive image – for the conceptual fogginess that made it hard to put the horror of these homes into words, and, not least, for the fear that like illness, the squalor of squalid homes might somehow drift and spread. The persistence of the miasmatic in writing on the city, long after miasma theory had been disproved, suggests that it fulfilled a purpose other than strictly factual accuracy: that, in terms of trying to imagine what made a home a bad place, it *felt* right.

Marina Warner devotes a chapter of *Phantasmagoria* (2006) to clouds and fogs as a way of linking the worldly and the otherworldly, the known and the unknown, the human and the divine. 'Clouds are interfused with supernatural meaning', she writes. 'Clouds and cloudiness offer a magical passkey to the labyrinth of unknowable mysteries, outer and inner; they convey the condition of ineffability that the unknown and the divine inhabit'.²⁰ The importance of miasma theory in urban exploration writing is paradoxical; it marks – or rather, it blurs and distorts – the border between what can and what cannot be known, between revelation and obfuscation. It is a scientific idea that acts as a superstition, and it suggests a fundamental ambiguity within the genre of urban exploration writing itself.

The most often expressed motivation for urban exploration writing is to discover, expose and disseminate the truth about urban poverty. Flora Tristan's complaint that the English conspire 'to conceal the country's ills' is typical: 'A strange sort of patriotism which dissimulates evils that can only be cured by exposure, by drawing the attention of every man with a voice to

¹⁹ Thomas Wakley, 'Editorial', *The Lancet*, 2 (1853), p. 393.

²⁰ Marina Warner, *Phantasmagoria: Spirit Visions, Metaphor and Media into the Twenty-first Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 84.

‘speak, a pen to write’.²¹ Some writers, like Henry Mayhew, emphasised that the extent of London's poverty was unknown to those who did not suffer from it (‘a large body of persons, of whom the public had less knowledge than of the most distant tribes of the earth – the government population returns not even numbering them among the inhabitants of the kingdom’ (p. xv)), while others, like Stead, argued that indifference rather than ignorance was the root problem (‘so far from this great city being convulsed with woe, London cares for none of these things’)²². But they all saw it as the mission of their work to undo a country-wide repression of the squalor and suffering of the poorest inhabitants of the city.

But in urban exploration writing, this drive towards light, clarity and exposure coexists with an almost equal drive towards obscurity – a drive to emphasise the horror of what the author has witnessed by describing it as literally indescribable. This kind of writing wants to know and to reveal, often to categorise (as in Charles Booth's maps of London, colour-coded according to categories of poverty and employment) and sometimes to demystify, but it is rarely satisfied until it reaches the point where language breaks down, where the situation can no longer be described or imaginatively shared. Almost every non-slum dweller's description of forays into the slum reaches this point of linguistic collapse. Flora Tristan says of a street in St Giles that ‘the ravings of a demented imagination could not equal the dreadful reality of such horrors’, and that ‘unless one has seen it with his own eyes, it is impossible to imagine such squalid indigence, such utter debasement, nor a more total degradation of the human creature’ (p. 135), while Andrew Mearns speaks of sights that ‘can never be set forth either by pen or artist's pencil’, and notes (*italics his*) that ‘*we have been compelled to tone down everything, and wholly to omit what most needs to be known, or the ears and eyes of our readers would have been insufferably outraged*’ (p. 30). Even Booth, whose work is based on precisely shading and differentiating the territory of poor London, leaves some parts of it in darkness: ‘The other districts have each some charm or [...] but there is nothing of this in St George's, which appears to stagnate with a squalor peculiar to itself’ (p. 86).

Fog obscures and darkens, but it also drifts. Both miasma theory and urban exploration works articulate a dual fear: fear of the bad property, the

²¹ Flora Tristan, *London Journal*, 1840, trans. by Dennis Palmer and Giselle Pincetl (London: George Prior, 1980), p. 134. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

²² W.T. Stead, ‘The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon’, *Pall Mall Gazette*, 4-10 July 1885. *The W.T. Stead Resource Site*. <<http://www.attackingthediabol.co.uk/pmg/tribute/mt1.php>> [accessed 21 July 2015] Further references are given after quotations in the text.

squalid dwellings and cholera houses where poverty, disease and moral decay arise, and the fear that these things will spread uncontrollably through the city – that, as Andrew Mearns put it, ‘THIS TERRIBLE FLOOD OF SIN AND MISERY IS GAINING UPON US’ (p. 27). Judith Walkowitz quotes an MP who, after the Trafalgar Square demonstrations of 1886, remarked that ‘[it is] in bad taste [for] people to parade their insolent starvation in the face of the rich and trading portions of the town. They should have starved in their garrets’.²³ This seems almost too much of a cliché of the vicious Victorian upper classes not to be intended satirically, but it also sounds a little like an attempt to make light of the guilt and fear resulting from the intimate proximity of the very poor to the comfortably off. The literal and metaphorical space poverty inhabits, its uncanny conceptual distance from and physical closeness to the homes of the middle-class readership, is a constant presence in writing on urban poverty. The urban exploration writers’ tendency to see their work in terms of forays into foreign and uncongenial countries clearly suggests this. But even earlier in the century, in a *Times* editorial from 1843 quoted by Friedrich Engels in *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (1845), poverty is imagined as something that could spread, like a cloud of disease, and infect even wealthy homes:

Poor there must be everywhere. Indigence will find its way and set up its hideous state in the heart of a great and luxurious city [...] But that [...] in a district where the cautious refinement of modern design has refrained from creating one single tenement for poverty; which seems, as it were, dedicated to the exclusive enjoyment of wealth, that there want, and famine, and disease, and vice should stalk in all their kindred horrors, consuming body by body, soul by soul!²⁴

Though the tone of the article vacillates, its sense of horror that ‘want, and famine, and disease, and vice’ exists at all is finally swamped by the horror that it exists ‘close on the palatial splendour of Bayswater’ (p. 4).

‘To save us from nocturnal terrors’: House-cleaning as exorcism

²³ Judith R. Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London* (London: Virago, 1992), p. 29. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

²⁴ ‘Editorial’, *The Times*, 12 Oct. 1843, p. 4. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

With poverty and its 'kindred horrors' personified as a predatory evil, both associated with and detached from the agency of actual poor people, and determined to extend its territory and consume its prey, the attempt of 'the cautious refinement of modern design' to avoid creating 'one single tenement for poverty' comes to sound more like a ritual to ward off evil than like intelligent urban planning. Such rituals are delineated in Georges Bataille's 1929 account of the pervasive and ghostly qualities of dust:

sad blankets of dust endlessly invade earthly dwellings and soil them uniformly: as if attics and old rooms were being arranged for the imminent entrance of obsessions, of ghosts, of larvae fed and inebriated by the worm-eaten smell of old dust. When the big servant girls arm themselves, each morning, with big feather dusters, or even with vacuum cleaners, they are perhaps not entirely unaware that they are contributing as much as the most positive scientists to keeping off the evil ghosts who are sickened by cleanliness and logic. One day or another, it is true, dust, if it persists, will probably begin to gain ground over the servants, overrunning with vast quantities of rubble abandoned buildings, deserted docks: and in this distant epoch there will be nothing more to save us from nocturnal terrors.²⁵

Even though, or possibly precisely because, this passage deals with the prosaic dirt that accumulates even in the homes of the middle classes – the dirt that, in fact, comes from them, being composed in part of human skin flakes – rather than with, say, the 'heaps of garbage and ashes' and 'foul liquids' that Engels found in a home in St Giles,²⁶ it reads like an urban exploration writer's nightmare. The work of the servant girls is only a small-scale version of the work of the urban planners, reformers and writers who worked to expose, limit and clean up the filth of the city. In both cases – as in the case of the 'positive scientists' who in the late nineteenth century conducted experiments to either make the spirit-world part of the natural order or disprove its existence – it is a work of exorcism. The urban exploration writers' conflation of the categories of moral, physical and spiritual uncleanness creates a paradox: cleaning, as an

²⁵ Georges Bataille, 'Poussière', *Documents*, 1, no. 5, 1929, p. 278, quoted and translated in Anthony Vidler, 'Fantasy, the Uncanny, and Surrealist Theories of Architecture', in *Papers of Surrealism*, issue 1, (2003), p. 4.

²⁶ Friedrich Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, 1844, ed. by David McLellan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 40.

attempt to eradicate dirt, necessarily presupposes that dirt exists; in the same way, exorcism as an attempt to eradicate ghosts necessarily presupposes that ghosts exist. When obsessions, ghosts and larvae merge into one – as they do in Bataille's text, in Booth's 'bad property' and in the *Times* article's image of stalking, devouring poverty – and cleanliness and logic become the same thing, the inference is that if dirt exists, then so must irrationality. So the *Times* article begins in straightforward disgust at and sympathy for the plight of '50 human beings of all ages, who huddle together in the parks every night', but veers into a superstitious dread that what 'lurks unseen' in the city's 'narrow lanes and by-streets' will come to light too close to home (p. 4).

The work of exorcising the city's dwellings took the literal form of slum clearance programs, which were instituted in the 1870s but picked up pace with the formation of the London County Council in 1889.²⁷ Booth's description again reveals an uncertainty as to whether the clearances are intended to save the inhabitants from their homes or the homes from their inhabitants:

by herding together, they – both the quarters they occupy, and their denizens – tend to get worse. When this comes about destruction is the only cure [...] the inhabitants of the slums have been scattered, and though they must carry contamination with them wherever they go, it seems certain that such hotbeds of vice, misery, and disease as those from which they have been ousted are not again created (p. 90).

The same process took place on an even larger scale in Paris, which underwent a complete renovation at the hands of 'demolition artist' Georges-Eugène Haussmann in the mid-nineteenth century.²⁸ Haussmann's Paris was an attempt at creating a healthier, safer, cleaner city that was nonetheless shaped by an intense suspicion of its inhabitants; the boulevards were purposely made too wide to be barricaded by potential rebels. The result, according to Walter Benjamin's analysis in the *Arcades Project*, was a city in which 'the inhabitants [...] no longer feel at home [...] they start to become conscious of the inhuman character of the metropolis' (p. 23). Other exorcisms were imaginative rather

²⁷J.A Yelling, 'L. C. C. Slum Clearance Policies, 1889-1907', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 7.3 (1982), pp. 292–303(p. 292).

²⁸ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann, trans. by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (New York: Belknap Press, 2002), p. 23. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

than physical, though intended to inspire tangible changes. William Morris's *News from Nowhere* (1890) describes an alternate London that is both of the past and of the future, a medieval-looking utopia with 'quaint and fanciful little buildings' untainted by 'the grimy sootiness which I was used to on every London building more than a year old', and 'alive and sympathetic with the life of the dwellers in them'.²⁹ These are the reverse of Dr Montague's leprous, forbidden or unclean houses. The homes of *Nowhere*, ingeniously constructed and beautifully decorated, human-scaled and surrounded by nature, make up a fantasy of a city that is home, and homelike, to everyone.

'A room where you can be perfectly secure': Stead, Stevenson and the horror of the clean house

To Morris beauty and morality were intimately correlated, and the beautiful homes of *News from Nowhere* are a reflection of and a prerequisite for the good and useful lives of their inhabitants. Even for less aesthetically-minded urban reformers, it was tempting to imagine that destroying a physically filthy and decaying house would also destroy any moral decay that dwelled in it. But some late-Victorian city writing complicated this simple equivalence, creating a less easily exorcised sense of horror.

Here, I examine three late Victorian works that approach horror, uncleanness and domestic space in ways that overturn the assumptions of many urban exploration texts. Margaret Oliphant's *A Beleaguered City* imagines a domestic exorcism more likely to disturb than to reassure a middle-class reader. W.T. Stead's 'The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon' and R. L. Stevenson's *Strange Tale of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* continually exploit the trope of the bad, diseased, unclean house, but compared to the work of the urban exploration writers, they draw out a new set of moral implications by presenting this house as scrupulously neat and solidly middle-class.

A Beleaguered City, one of Oliphant's many stories of the supernatural, is set not in a British metropolis, but in the fictional walled town of Semur in the Haute-Bourgogne.³⁰ In this 'story of the seen and the unseen', as Oliphant titles it, the city is invaded first by the seen – a cloud or fog that leaves the city

²⁹ William Morris, *News from Nowhere* [1890] (London: Penguin, 1993), p. 48.

³⁰ At just under 50 000 words, *A Beleaguered City* could be described as a novel, but most sources describe it as a long story, or simply as a ghost story – possibly because it was initially intended as a much shorter Christmas ghost story for *Blackwood's Magazine* (Robert Colby and Vineta Colby, 'A Beleaguered City: A Fable for the Victorian Age', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 16.4 (1962), pp. 283–301 (p. 284).

dark in the middle of a summer day – and then by the unseen, as the spirits of the city's dead rise from their graves and literally, physically force the living out of their homes and out of the city gates.³¹ The story seems to pick up on the miasmatic imagery of urban exploration literature. Here, too, a city is threatened by something drifting and spreading that walls cannot keep out, and that seems somewhere between the supernatural and the scientific:

It was a blight some people said; and many were of opinion that it was caused by clouds of animalculæ coming, as is described in ancient writings, to destroy the crops, and even to affect the health of the population. The doctors scoffed at this; but they talked about malaria, which, as far as I could understand, was likely to produce exactly the same effect. (p. 9)

Here, too, we are dealing with the fear of not being safe - from poverty, from death, from badness - in one's own home. But Oliphant shifts the emphasis of this fear in a striking way. As Edmundson points out, Oliphant's supernatural fiction tends to use domestic spaces as sites where boundaries, especially boundaries between the living and the dead, can become permeable (p. 52). In her story 'The Open Door' (1882), for instance, a door set into a ruin, open and leading to nothing, is the place where a ghost tries to communicate with the living by asking to be let in.³² Edmundson emphasises that Oliphant's ghosts are usually not simply frightening; they are beings with feelings, and can be communicated with (pp.51-52). This is the case, too, in *A Beleaguered City*. Here the returning dead are frighteningly powerful, but also the ghosts of beloved people, and assumed to be on God's "side" (p. 42). In this way, the horror in *A Beleaguered City* is not primarily located in its supernatural elements. As one character says, 'Why should it be a matter of wonder that the dead should come back? the wonder is that they do not' (p. 52).

Instead, Oliphant finds horror in the idea of being expelled from one's home. The returning dead refer to themselves as '*nous autres morts*', we other dead, implying that the citizens of Semur are themselves in some sense dead. According to the messages the 'other dead' send them, they are driven out because they are not fit to be in their homes: 'Go! leave this place to us who

³¹ Margaret Oliphant, *A Beleaguered City* (1880), in *A Beleaguered City And Other Tales Of The Seen And The Unseen*, ed. by Jenny Calder (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2000). Further references are given after quotations in the text.

³² Margaret Oliphant, 'The Open Door' (1882), in *A Beleaguered City And Other Tales Of The Seen And The Unseen*, ed. by Jenny Calder (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2000).

know the true signification of life' (p. 22). In this way, *A Beleaguered City* could be said to bridge the gap between the unclean houses of urban exploration writing and those of Stevenson and Stead. As in urban exploration writing, readers are invited to identify with the *haute-bourgeoise* main characters (most of them determinedly lay claim to this class status) whose homes and city are at risk of invasion by unseen forces. But unlike the urban exploration texts, which associate exorcism with the driving out of both filth and actual poor citizens, *A Beleaguered City* exorcises the city by filling it with the dead and throwing out its well-off occupants. The bourgeoisie's houses are cleansed, apparently by God's hand, by removing the bourgeoisie from them.

'The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon', W.T. Stead's 1885 exposé of child prostitution in London, takes this idea further by making bourgeois homes sources of horror in themselves. The series of articles that made up the 'Maiden Tribute' were a sensation, causing riots at the *Pall Mall Gazette* offices as mobs of people, not put off by the editorial warning that 'all those who prefer to live in a fool's paradise of imaginary innocence and purity, selfishly oblivious to the horrible realities [...] will do well not to read the Pall Mall Gazette of Monday' (Stead, 'Tribute', 'Notice to Our Readers') tried to obtain copies of the paper (see Walkowitz, p. 81). But one of the subtler effects of Stead's 'story of an actual pilgrimage into a real hell' (Stead, 'Tribute', 'Notice to Our Readers') is its delineation of a space for urban horror that is qualitatively different from Booth's 'vile spots', or even Mearns's moral outrage at the 'pestilential human rookeries' which neither virtue nor 'a drop of cleansing water' can penetrate (p. 28).

Stead's vision of hell is, like Dante's, architectural; the organising image of the text is the labyrinth of Daedalus, where tributes of youths and maidens were periodically devoured by 'the foul product of an unnatural lust' in the form of the Minotaur: 'The labyrinth was cunningly wrought like a house [...] with many rooms and winding passages, that so the shameful creature of lust whose abode it was to be should be far removed from sight' (Stead, 'Tribute', Part 1). The child prostitution trade is both the Minotaur itself and the labyrinth that 'not seven maidens only, but many times seven' enter 'in the service of vice', but Stead's analogy is purposely vague enough to make a labyrinth, wrought like a house to contain and conceal horror, of the whole city: 'London's lust annually uses up many thousands of women' (Part 1). Minotaur and labyrinth are conflated, and the "bad house" or house of ill fame becomes as much an agent of the girls' violation as the procurers and the rapists themselves, both making the crime possible and justifying it in retrospect. A police officer tells Stead that 'once a girl gets into such a house

she is almost helpless, and may be ravished with comparative safety [...] The fact of her being in a house of ill fame would possibly be held to be evidence of her consent' (Part 1).

These houses are specifically not the sties and rookeries of most urban exploration writing. Stead wonders at a house where girls are taken to be 'patched up' and 'repaired' after being raped, describing it as 'imperturbably respectable in its outward appearance, apparently an indispensable adjunct of modern civilization' (Part 1); of course, it is indispensable to the modern civilisation he describes. In a still more chilling passage, he tries to answer the question of how child prostitution can take place all over the city without being detected, and quotes 'the keeper of a fashionable villa' detailing her house's safety features:

Here is a room where you can be perfectly secure. The house stands in its own grounds. The walls are thick, there is a double carpet on the floor. The only window which fronts upon the back garden is doubly secured, first with shutters and then with heavy curtains. You lock the door and then you can do as you please. The girl may scream blue murder, but not a sound will be heard [...] I only will be about seeing that all is snug. (Part 1)

This house is horrific not in its filth and decay, but in its careful order, its neat, solid construction, its snugness.

Stead is sensitive to the frightening possibilities inherent in stolid normality; he does not let his sensationalist style get in the way of letting the casual, businesslike attitude of the procurers speak for itself, or of carefully rendering the 'palace of despair' as a tidy villa in a respectable part of town (Part 1). Horror is intrinsic in this construction of the city, not a threat from outside – an evil entity or a tide that can be foiled by slum clearances and careful urban planning. Stead speaks of his investigation of the brothels as a descent into

a strange, inverted world [...] the same, yet not the same, as the world of business and the world of politics. I heard of much the same people in the house of ill-fame as those of whom you hear in caucuses, in law courts, and on Change. But all were judged by a different standard, and their relative importance was altogether changed (Part 1).

The brothels and the streets are the inversion, the shadow twin, of wealthy London. But where many urban exploration texts imagine the two worlds as essentially separate – though the wealthy spaces are imagined as constantly threatened, haunted, and miasmatically invaded by the spaces of poverty – in Stead's text the connection is more intimate: the 'dissolute rich' are the Minotaurs of the London labyrinth.

The 'Maiden Tribute' spurred Parliament to finally pass age-of-consent legislation (see Walkowitz, p. 104); it may also have inspired another central work of city writing, *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. R.L. Stevenson wrote the story in the autumn of 1885 after a friend had forwarded the 'Maiden Tribute' to him. Judith Walkowitz analyses the *Strange Case* as a development of earlier explorations of the urban "dark world", noting that 'this "dark world" respected no geographical or class boundary, because the predatory Other made its home in the inner recesses of the Self' (p. 131). But I think space and geography is fundamental to Stevenson's story, and that it connects the divided and self-deluding life of a human being to the divided and self-deluding life of the city. The way Stevenson represents horror and uncleanness in urban dwellings is very similar to how the 'Maiden Tribute' does so, and the two works draw similar unsettling conclusions about what constitutes the bad or unclean urban dwelling.

Alex Clunas analyses Stevenson's interest in what Clunas calls the 'moralization' of buildings, and quotes an 1874 letter where Stevenson draws a (possibly playful, but still vividly imagined) contrast between the "spirit" of two different kinds of houses:

This *other* is bedevilled and furtive; it seems to stoop; I am afraid of trap-doors and could not go pleasantly into such houses [...] I do not know if I have yet explained to you the sort of loyalty, of urbanity, that there is about one to my mind; the spirit of a country orderly and prosperous, a flavour of the presence of magistrates [...] [S]omething certain and civic and domestic, is all about these quiet, staid, shapely houses [...] Now the others are [...] sly and grotesque; they combine their sort of feverish grandeur with their sort of secretive baseness [...] They are peopled for me with persons of the same fashion. Dwarfs and sinister people in cloaks are about them.³³

³³ Robert Louis Stevenson, letter to Fanny Sitwell, August 8, 1874, quoted in Alex Clunas, 'Comely External Utterance: Reading Space in *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*', *The Journal of Narrative Technique*, 3.24 (1994), pp. 173–189(p. 175).

The first strange thing we encounter in the *Strange Case* is a home, an incongruously neglected and run-down building in the midst of a thriving by-street, and Stevenson's description of it seems to echo the terms of the letter he wrote years earlier. The little by-street is not just 'domestic' but 'civic', city-minded as well as house-proud; the inhabitants are 'all doing well [...] and all emulously hoping to do better still'.³⁴ They practise their trades keenly and keep their houses clean, with 'freshly painted shutters, well-polished brasses, and general cleanliness and gaiety of note' (p. 6). By contrast, the building that Enfield calls Black-Mail House, and that later turns out to be Hyde's hiding-place, is 'sinister', 'sordid', 'distained', 'blistered', with a 'blind forehead of discoloured wall' (p. 6).

These descriptions are obviously not just moralising but anthropomorphic, and at first glance, the ways these dwellings are represented seem to offer clues that their inhabitants might be 'persons of the same fashion'. Clunas, though, goes on to make the point that in the *Strange Case*, the significance of external signs is not as obvious as it seems to Utterson:

At the root of Utterson's misreading lies his inclination to discover good and evil in separate places/bodies, as though good and evil were stably fixed in the essence of any individual character and then expressed as perceptible signs of the essence. That good and evil are nested unstably inside each other is the dialectical insight he is not vouchsafed (p. 181).

In this way, Clunas makes a similar point to Walkowitz: in the *Strange Case*, good and evil are not spatially bounded, but rather 'nested unstably inside' each other. In my reading, however, the *Strange Case* actually does use dwellings and domestic spaces as fairly reliable signifiers of evil and horror. But it uses these signifiers in a way that is very different from how they are used in urban exploration writing, or indeed in Stevenson's own 1874 letter.

When Stead came to write *Real Ghost Stories*, his work on the evidence for psychic phenomena, he had read his Stevenson. He refers to the *Strange Case* on the subject of man's dual nature, and like Stevenson he figures the conscious and subconscious mind as dwellers in a house – as a tabernacle,³⁵

³⁴ Robert Louis Stevenson, *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* [1886], in *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde and Other Tales of Terror*, ed. by Robert Mighall (London: Penguin, 2002), p. 6. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

³⁵ W.T. Stead, *Real Ghost Stories*, 1897, ed. by Estelle W. Stead (New York: Doran, 1921), p. 18.

and, more prosaically, as a tenement. 'It is evident, if the hypnotists are right', he writes, 'that the human body is more like a tenement house than a single cell, and that the inmates love each other no more than the ordinary occupants of tenemented property' (pp. 46-47). Henry Jekyll sees nothing unusual in his own inner self-division, suggesting that 'man will be ultimately known for a mere polity of multifarious, incongruous and independent denizens' (p. 56); what is strange about his case is that the inner multiplicity normally concealed in a single form is physically expressed in two.

Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde is probably better known as a concept than as a text, and reading it tends to upset preconceptions; as in *A Beleaguered City*, the source of its horror is not quite what one expects it to be. Jekyll is not frightened by the sight of his 'immaterial tabernacle' transmuted into the form of Hyde; rather, it is as if the disquieting 'mist-like transience' of his previous form has boiled off to reveal something reduced, but reassuringly definite:

Evil besides [...] had left on that body an imprint of deformity and decay. And yet when I looked upon that ugly idol in the glass, I was conscious of no repugnance, rather of a leap of welcome. This, too, was myself. It seemed natural and human. In my eye it bore a livelier image of the spirit, it seemed more express and single, than the imperfect and divided countenance, I had been hitherto accustomed to call mine (p. 58).

We know how to encounter Hyde, or rather how not to; every character in the novel instinctively shies away from him. The real knowledge problem is the shifting, mist-like form of Jekyll.

A similar effect is found in the scene where Utterson and Poole break into the room where Jekyll/Hyde has been holed up to find Hyde's dead and still twitching body, and this:

the fireside, where the easy chair was drawn cosily up, and the tea things stood ready to the sitter's elbow, the very sugar in the cup. There were several books on a shelf; one lay beside the tea things open, and Utterson was amazed to find it a copy of a pious work, for which Jekyll had several times expressed a great esteem, annotated, in his own hand, with startling blasphemies (p. 46).

Further references are given after quotations in the text.

This is a kind of reverse uncanniness that relies for its effect not on the invasion of the cozy fireside scene by ‘startling blasphemies’, but on the invasion of a death scene – a scene that like Hyde himself is purely and simply horrible – by the irrelevant domesticity of the tea things. With this in mind, we might look back to the text’s opening and find a hint of this sort of uncanniness even in the peaceful by-street, which is itself incongruous and inexplicably threatening in its dingy surroundings, ‘like a fire in a forest’ (p. 6). The *Strange Case* is as alive to the horrific potential of the home as Stevenson was when, in the 1874 letter, he imaginatively populated a grotesque-looking house with ‘sinister people in cloaks’. But where the letter describes a sense of delight in ‘quiet, staid, shapely houses’, the novella chooses the cosiest spot in such a house – Jekyll’s home, with its ‘great air of wealth and comfort’ (p. 18) – for its climactic scene of horror. Stead, of course, does the same thing in the ‘Maiden Tribute’, where the house of horror is the house where ‘you can be completely secure’. It seems at least possible to me that the two manifestations of urban horror might be linked. After the ‘Maiden Tribute’, with its revelations about who exactly dwells in the ‘house of ill fame’, it might have been more difficult for Stevenson to imagine that no evil could dwell in the kinds of homes that held the ‘flavour of the presence of magistrates’.

In this way, Oliphant’s ghost story, the ‘Maiden Tribute’, and the *Strange Case* all invert the tropes that urban exploration writers used to express domestic horror. By locating urban horror in clean and respectable rather than in filthy domestic spaces, these texts also work to disturb their readers’ sense that the source of horror lies outside (although still unsettlingly close to) their own homes. Urban exploration writing is mostly written by, and mostly addresses itself to, members of the middle classes, and the same is the case for Oliphant’s, Stead’s and Stevenson’s texts: in the majority of these cases, the people who actually live in slum tenements are not the people the text is addressed to. Explicitly or implicitly, in these texts the self is middle-class, and the home is a middle-class home. But in urban exploration writing, the primary source of horror is that whatever there is to fear in the homes of the poor will not stay within doors, but spread uncontrollably throughout the city. In Oliphant’s, Stead’s and Stevenson’s work it is something else: not that (in Walkowitz’s phrase) a predatory “Other” might make its way inside one’s home or even inside one’s self, but that – when the reader sits alone at the fireside in a clean and tidy parlour – the thing that is to be feared is already in the room.

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