

## NEO-VICTORIAN DIRT AND DECOMPOSITION

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### *Abstract:*

In neo-Victorian writing, which blurs boundaries between the past and present, dirt is extremely mobile. Through close analysis of dirt-evoking encounters in Michel Faber's works *The Crimson Petal and the White* (2002), and *The Apple* (2006); Adam Roberts's novel *Swiftly* (2004); and Iain Sinclair's *White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings* (1987), this article explores the link dirt provides between Victorian sensory experience and modern imaginings of the period. Unclean matter does more than simply add authenticating grime to literary recreations of the Victorian past. Commencing with bodily dirt, this article reveals unresolved ethical ambiguities raised in these four provocative works. These works humanise neo-Victorian characters but depict bodily processes in graphic, exposing detail. Non-bodily dirt, meanwhile, has remarkable freedom to move in these texts but becomes implicated in the universal movement of all material towards a state of entropy. Neo-Victorian fiction bridges past and present experience without downplaying material differences that distinguish Victorian life from our own. This article examines how neo-Victorian fiction self-consciously employ dirt as a means of articulating problems raised by creatively engaging with a past age, while also shedding light on how fictionalisation might help us understand Victorian dirt.

'Once upon a time bright and transparent, now overcast with filth'<sup>1</sup>

The 'Victorian' worlds imagined in neo-Victorian fiction are often saturated with dirt. Narratives move through effluent streets with miasma, muck, and defilement on every corner. Soot and grime pollute the air and the stench of human waste and decomposing bodies invades characters' nostrils; even the water is too vile to wash away the contamination. If scholars wish to investigate this filthy phenomenon, we have to engage closely with an unpleasant range of dirty, decomposing, and disgusting matter. This article examines four modern literary responses to the Victorian era, asking what functions dirt and filth perform in their aesthetics. Dirt and decomposition emerge as metaphors for the liminal mode of the neo-Victorian genre itself which, like dirt, is both

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<sup>1</sup> Michel Faber, *The Crimson Petal and the White* (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2010), p. 5. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

immediately apprehensible to modern readers, but historically specific and, at times, lacking in actual material presence.

Mary Douglas's definition of dirt as 'matter out of place' established a relatively stable sense of context in dirt criticism.<sup>2</sup> However, slipping between both "neo" and "Victorian" contexts, neo-Victorian fiction is always somewhat "out of place". Works in this genre have licence to draw on creative resources when assembling a Victorian world, including misconceptions about the period, nineteenth-century fiction, and more than a century of reinterpretation. The function of dirt might therefore metonymically help us understand the workings of the genre more broadly. As Anne Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn assert, neo-Victorian media is 'self-consciously engaged in the act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision concerning the Victorians.'<sup>3</sup> Dirt serves an authenticating role in meeting readers' expectations of a grimy Victorian world, but it also serves a distinctive aesthetic function. Through neo-Victorian fiction, we might think of the Victorian era as a body unevenly decomposing before our eyes as we struggle to apprehend its vanishing vitality.

Each of the neo-Victorian texts considered here exhibits different challenges associated with fictionalising the nineteenth century, and uses dirt to help articulate these problems. In its exhumation of the Jack the Ripper murders, Iain Sinclair's *White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings* is preoccupied with decaying bodies and decaying text. The narrative follows a group of used-book salesmen investigating the 1888 murders through a first-edition text of the Sherlock Holmes story 'A Study in Scarlet'. While plunging us into a world of decomposing flesh, Sinclair questions the reception of two famous nineteenth-century mysteries – one fictional and one real – whose original circumstances are almost obscured by pervasive twentieth-century reinterpretations. Adam Roberts's *Swiftly* (2004), meanwhile, focuses on excremental dirt, raising ethical questions about handling (literally and critically) the intimate waste of fictionalised Victorians. Set in the aftermath of Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, Roberts's satire includes a love story where excrement mediates and

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<sup>2</sup> Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 2013), p. 41.

<sup>3</sup> Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn, *Neo-Victorianism: The Victorians in the Twenty-First Century, 1999–2009* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 4 [original emphasis].

eventually exacerbates desire. In *The Crimson Petal and the White* (2002), Faber offers an immersive neo-experience of Victorian London. Readers are prompted to feel threatened by contact with ephemeral, odorous Victorian dirt, which the narrator constantly reminds us about through the refrain ‘watch your step’ (p. 5). The narrative carries dirt across social boundaries; filth permeates middle-class domestic space in a story that moves from inner-city brothels to bourgeois suburbia. *The Apple* (2006) – a short-story collection that elaborates on characters from his earlier novel – is an opportunity for Faber to reframe prior encounters with dirt through the lens of posterity. The genre may offer texts more extensively steeped in filth such as Clare Clark’s *The Great Stink* (2005). However, the texts explored here demonstrate specific ways in which dirt provides material links between the Victorian past and the present, and thus evoke the broader ambitions of neo-Victorian fiction as a whole.

Like the substances it features with zeal, the neo-Victorian genre itself is notoriously difficult to pin down. Marie-Luise Kohlke, founding editor of *Neo-Victorian Studies*, notes how neo-Victorian ‘temporal and generic boundaries remain fluid and relatively open to experimentation’.<sup>4</sup> Despite the abundance of dirt on offer, neo-Victorian scholarship has been slow to explore the research potentials of a body of nineteenth-century criticism on dirt. As Tom Crook noted in 2008, ‘[d]irt is now a well-established part of Victorian historiography and has elicited an impressive body of interdisciplinary research’.<sup>5</sup> Introducing a collection on nineteenth-century *Filth*, William A. Cohen positions dirt at ‘a theoretical crossroads’, where social, subjective, material, and medical interests intersect.<sup>6</sup> Neo-Victorian writing adds a contemporary strand to this convergence. To begin to unravel the consequences of that addition, it is necessary to work between two very categories of dirt: waste produced by the human body, and non-bodily, atmospheric filth.

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<sup>4</sup> Marie-Luise Kohlke, ‘Introduction: Speculations in and on the Neo-Victorian Encounter’, *Neo-Victorian Studies*, 1 (2008), pp. 1–18 (p. 1).

<sup>5</sup> Tom Crook, ‘Putting Matter in Its Right Place: Dirt, Time and Regeneration in Mid-Victorian Britain’, *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 13 (2008), pp. 200–22 (p. 200).

<sup>6</sup> William A. Cohen, ‘Introduction: Locating Filth’, in *Filth: Dirt, Disgust, And Modern Life*, ed. by Ryan Johnson and William A. Cohen (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), pp. vii–xxxvii (p. viii).

For Victorians, Pamela K. Gilbert notes, '[b]odily wastes were seen no longer simply as byproducts of the life process, but as animated and hostile filth that would, given the chance, attack the body itself.'<sup>7</sup> For neo-Victorians, bodily filth remains contaminating, but also forcefully reminds us of daily human functions that connect contemporary and historical experience. This becomes particularly provocative when the focus shifts from bodily waste to even more intimate Victorian bodily remains: the corpse. What are the ethical consequences of offering fictionalised access to what was once human matter? Non-bodily dirt, by contrast, evidences decomposition without invoking cultural taboos associated with human waste. Atmospheric dirt becomes extraordinarily mobile in *The Crimson Petal and the White*, particularly when imaginatively manipulated. This allows for massive shifts in focus beyond the immediate site of perception, re-situating dirt at a distance from any individual body. At its most diffuse, this dirt hints at the movement of all matter towards the thermodynamic state entropy – the consequence of universally ongoing disintegration. Sinclair's narrative adds textual fragments to these non-bodily remains. This reminds contemporary readers that the textual universe on offer in these texts is the fictional residue an era that has already irretrievably decayed. Neither welcome nor alien in either age, neo-Victorian dirt provides a flexible medium through which the relationship between past and present can be negotiated.

### Valuing Bodily Dirt

Neo-Victorian texts often address an overwhelming tendency in Victorian fiction to omit bodily functions from even realist narratives. *The Crimson Petal and the White's* protagonist, Sugar, complains that in fiction Victorian women in 'don't exist below the neck, they eat but never shit.'<sup>8</sup> By positioning themselves between contemporary attempts to convey readdress this omission, and Victorian fear of 'hostile filth', the texts investigated here tend to offer graphic descriptions of bodily dirt.

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<sup>7</sup> Gilbert, Pamela K., 'Medical Mapping: The Thames, the Body, and Our Mutual Friend', in *Filth: Dirt, Disgust, And Modern Life*, pp. 78–102 (p. 79).

<sup>8</sup> Michel Faber, *The Apple: Crimson Petal Stories* (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2006), p. 95.

*White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings* begins with an arresting scene of the second-hand bookseller, Nicholas Lane, vomiting at the roadside. Sinclair depicts this with almost surgical attention to detail:

the partly-fermented haddock, mixed with mucus, that poured from

his throat, that hooked itself, bracken coloured, over the tough spears of roadside grass. Lumps, that were almost skin, split and fell to the ground [...] Patches of steaming bouillabaisse spilled a shadow pool across the thin covering of snow.<sup>9</sup>

This repulsive description makes careful distinction between ingredients in the vomit that are bodily waste and those that recognisably originate from elsewhere. Sinclair separates ‘partly-fermented haddock’ from ‘mucus’ and ‘lumps, that were almost skin’, indicating each component’s recent history. Collectively, these become dirt on the roadside, defiling a pure ‘thin covering of snow’. Meticulous labelling here renders the scene almost excessively revolting. Sinclair provokes extreme disgust, particularly through reference to those ‘lumps that were almost skin’. In other contexts skin might invite connective touch, but here the term is associated with repulsive matter that encourages physical recoil. Vomit is the product of an unhealthy body and difficult to separate from fears of contamination. If this opening scene is emblematic of the formal wellbeing of the text itself, then *White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings* is potentially contaminated in its entirety.

Regurgitating matter from this character’s recent past onto the roadside resonates with the temporal composition of this book. Its narrative jolts between the 1980s and Victorian Britain can leave the reader feeling disorientated. Cultural leftovers – morally contaminated documents, arcane plots, the blood and scabs of infamous crimes, which we will examine more closely later – are violently spewed through whatever barrier separates past and present. From the opening scene, Sinclair attempts to condition his readers to associate such movement with the same bodily recoil provoked by this opening

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<sup>9</sup> Iain Sinclair, *White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings* (London: Penguin, 2004), p. 9.

description of vomit. This invites readers to connect with the past, but also exposes some potentially unpleasant side-effects of consuming such partially regurgitated matter by reading this narrative. On the one hand, this may be a deliberate attempt to encourage resonance between present-day readers and the past exhibited here. As William Ian Miller asserts, '[t]o feel disgust is human and humanizing'.<sup>10</sup> This episode might therefore help bridge a gap between neo- and Victorian experience. Yet as tastes and fashions vary from culture to culture, so do distaste and disgust, and the object of these reactions. David S. Barnes fine-tunes Miller's definition, arguing that disgust is 'strangely rich in cultural significance [because] it is experienced as automatic, deeply physical, and unmediated by conscious thought, while [showing] variation historically, cross-culturally, and even within an individual's lifetime'.<sup>11</sup> Context matters when defining disgust, much as it does with dirt. Shared disgust may therefore simulate sensory proximity between contemporary readers and a 'Victorian' other, but in neo-Victorian writing, emphasis must be placed on the fictionality of such resonance. Powerfully disgust-provoking moments like Sinclair's might help contribute to a sense of connection between past and present, but this is an illusory bridge forged from temporally unstable matter.

Adam Roberts's narrative, *Swiftly*, demonstrates how rapidly cultural and bodily responses to human waste can shift in response to a single encounter. The nineteenth-century protagonist, Mr Bates, attempts to clean diarrhoea from his travelling companion's clothes and body while she is unconscious from her illness. Roberts tortuously draws out this process out across several pages of narrative, throughout which Mr Bates oscillates between responding with disgust and desire:

The thing to do was to *not think* of the beauteous smooth curve of the female body, but only to think of the filth he was cleaning from its surface. To think no deeper than the surface [...] To think [...] of the filth, not the woman, not her skin. Satin. [...] It was necessary

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<sup>10</sup> William Ian Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 11.

<sup>11</sup> Barnes, David S., 'Confronting Sensory Crisis in the Great Stinks of London and Paris', in *Filth: Dirt, Disgust, And Modern Life*, pp. 103–29 (p. 112).

to clean the point where Mrs Burton's two naked thighs, pressed close together by her posture, tucked into the crease at the base of her posterior. It was dirty here. This must be cleaned. And, pressing the kerchief home and wiping straight down in a firm motion, Bates felt the twist of his own trowser [sic] unable to prevent himself [...] as a half-strangled emission burst, a sweet-painful leakage from his loins, a hot and loose phlegm inside his clothes.<sup>12</sup>

Bates struggles to isolate the faeces from the body that has produced it in this episode, both physically and mentally. Roberts conveys the mental effort involved through laboured, brief sentences. Peter Stallybrass and Allon White note that 'disgust always bears the imprint of desire'<sup>13</sup> and here the secondary response prevails over the immediate recoil. Difficulty in this uncomfortable scene stems from Bates's inability to reconcile this 'automatic, deeply physical, and unmediated' sexual response (to echo Barnes) with a cultural imperative to feel disgust. Meanwhile, Eleanor Burton's inability to consent to Bates's interference further confuses the protagonist's response. Roberts stresses the intensely and intentionally abject composition of this scene. It corresponds almost directly with Julia Kristeva's introduction to abjection, which she defines as a moment when 'desire turns aside; sickened, it rejects [...] But simultaneously, just the same, that impetus, that spasm, that leap is drawn toward an elsewhere as tempting as it is condemned.'<sup>14</sup> Simultaneous appeal and revulsion disorientate Bates and his sense of self-control, in an abject moment mediated by dirt. According to Kristeva's model, on a subconscious level, this causes Bates briefly to recognise himself as the rejected matter of another being, though it is unclear whether that matter corresponds more closely with excrement or semen here. The episode concludes with Bates's self-

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<sup>12</sup> Adam Roberts, *Swiftly: A Novel* (London: Orion, 2010), pp. 184–6.

<sup>13</sup> Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986), p. 191.

<sup>14</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, trans. by Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 1.

chastisement, 'deplorable, hateful', as he ejaculates, producing more matter to add to the plethora of bodily filth in this already saturated scene.<sup>15</sup>

Through Bates's actions, Roberts highlights an ethically contentious aspect of the unbalanced relationship between fictionalised Victorians and contemporary readers that neo-Victorian narratives simulate. Roberts self-consciously stages an abject moment; through contact with the waste of an unconscious other Bates is jolted 'toward an elsewhere, as tempting as it is condemned'. This jolt parallels the imaginative one encouraged by contemporary texts that assemble a nineteenth-century world as an immersive sensorium. Neither author nor reader of neo-Victorian fiction can obtain consent from individuals in the nineteenth-century society that they imaginatively (re)invoke. This genre frequently reimagines the nineteenth century's filthy undercarriage in twenty-first-century high-definition detail. How then does this self-reflexive genre reconcile such intrusiveness with ethical concern about the lack of Victorian stake in a fiction that costumes itself in their intimate remains?

Roberts attempts to sidestep this issue through parody in *Swiftly*. Eleanor Burton acknowledges and permits Mr Bates's continued association between her excrement and sexual desire by presenting him with a gift.

Bates lifts the lid and holds the box before his face, angling the light right to be able to look inside. Inside is a perfectly tapered, delicate turd. He can smell its dizzying smell. He lowers the lid with that absolutely intoxicating sensation of foreknowledge that this small portion of his lover is now *his*, and his forever (p. 356).

Eleanor asserts some control over her own excrement; this wilfully expelled and carefully packaged gift contrasts with the unconsciously-produced mess of the previous scene. In this instance, dirt associated with the body can no longer be categorised as 'matter out of place'; it is deliberately packaged with a ceremonial reverence usually reserved for precious jewellery. The gift symbolises Eleanor's physicality more intimately and forcefully than, for

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<sup>15</sup> Roberts, p. 186.

example, a lock of hair. Bodily waste is therefore recast in this satirised scene as a substance with significant lasting value, yet Roberts only offers insight into Bates's response as recipient. Bates's appreciation for her excrement is described in terms of eagerness not only to possess this 'small portion of his lover', but also to consume it, through sight and smell – 'portion' even connotes taste. Mrs Burton's desired outcome from this material investment remains unclear.

In his *History of Shit*, Dominique Laporte describes the transformation of excrement from defiling mess to cherished artefact in terms of a physical journey:

If that which is expelled inevitably returns, we must trace its circuitous path: Shit comes back and takes the place of that which is engendered by its return, but in a transfigured, incorruptible form. Once eliminated, waste is reinscribed in the cycle of production as gold.<sup>16</sup>

Laporte invokes the fantasised notion of a 'transfigured, incorruptible form' and upends conventional value systems by concluding with shit in the highest position. While this may be part of an on-going historical narrative, it is worth stressing the alchemical rather than chemical terms in use here, and their association with fictional rather than scientific discourse. Understanding a substance through its alchemical properties was an out-dated methodology in the nineteenth century, much as it is today. Laporte and Roberts both consider literal shit, but Laporte's argument could apply to other forms of dirt wherever unwanted matter re-emerges into cultural significance as a valued product. Faber and Sinclair similarly convey at least one instance of alchemical 'transfiguration'. Sinclair describes Nicholas Lane's prowess at second-hand book trading as that of 'an alchemist, turning shit into gold, and gold back into shit again' (p. 41). Faber, in *The Crimson Petal*, notes how 'rays of sunlight flicker through the nursery window, turning the pool of vomit silver and gold' (p. 150). Unlike Roberts, both of these writers stress the transience of gold as

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<sup>16</sup> Dominique Laporte, *History of Shit*, trans. by Nadia Benabid and Rodolphe el Khoury (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), pp. 15–16.

much as dirt, supporting the 'circuitous', shifting nature of contemporary value systems. Neo-Victorian writers produce valuable cultural commodities, transforming imaginative leftovers of a past age into fiction that will be consumed and discarded. Any connective bridge neo-Victorian dirt provides between present-day and Victorian sensory experience is one that prioritises contemporary appetites over nineteenth-century privacy. Neo-Victorian fiction's role in imaginatively transforming Victorian dirty matter into gold distracts from rather than excuses ambivalence regarding how nineteenth-century individuals might have felt about this process.

### Intimate Human Remains

Distracting transformations may be possible with excremental dirt, but ethically suspect intrusion into 'nineteenth-century' waste becomes more complex when neo-Victorian fiction turns to the body itself. The texts considered here offer a rather cynical response to this concern, particularly in relation to the most contentious residue of human life: the corpse. In *The Crimson Petal and the White*, Faber assures potentially concerned readers that the Victorian characters he depicts are already in a state of physical decomposition. The narrator notes how another prostitute, Caroline, is safe from future assault by assuring us that '[o]f Jack the Ripper she need have no fear, it's almost fourteen years too early, and she'll have died from more or less natural causes by the time he comes along' (p. 7). This anachronistic remark offers Caroline's early death as protection from anticipated imaginary molestation and dismemberment by the Ripper. This jars with her fictional liveliness on the page in front of us. It is her transition into unusable, dead matter rather than temporal distance that reassures us that she is beyond danger here. More directly than Roberts, Faber reminds us that nineteenth-century individuals cannot wake from death to confront or condemn neo-Victorian tampering with their intimate remains. Faber's incorporation of the real-life murderer Jack the Ripper in this remark is a non-fictional intrusion on the imaginative fabric of this narrative. Such a manoeuvre conflates future interlopers into this mid-nineteenth-century world with a notoriously violent historical figure. Faber's cynical reassurance puts the one Victorian body beyond physical reach, yet alerts us to the potentially harmful and disfiguring impact of neo-investment in embodiment of the Victorian past.

In *White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings* Sinclair depicts the dubiousness of contemporary interference with Victorian bodies, and a body of evidence, when reframing the Ripper murders. They become part of a centuries-old criminal narrative encoded in various literary fragments. One of the used-book salesmen speculates on the motivation behind constant investigative scrutiny of the past:

There's something inherently seedy and salacious in continually picking the scabs off crimes, peering at the mutilated bodies, listing the undergarments, trekking over the tainted ground in the quest of some long-delayed occult frisson. I abhor these hacks with their carrier bags of old cuttings (p. 57)

'[P]icking the scabs off crimes' personifies the Whitechapel murders as an organic body that can be damaged through historical investigation; as fragments become separated from the whole, they become manoeuvrable bodily dirt dissociated from human feeling. Sinclair's metaphor moves between body and text as though the two are materially synonymous. 'Cuttings' for instance, can be read as scabby fragments of a body of evidence, amputated from the contextual whole, and poorly repackaged in newly-historicised 'carrier bags'. This critique condemns poor historical practice for its capacity to lay waste to its object. The past is haphazardly dissected, then placed in non-biodegradable containment indefinitely, in a form difficult to reunite with a contextual whole. Voyeuristic and tactile seediness here echoes Roberts's description of Bates within the carriage: while the pseudo-historian detective's perspective may not be sexually driven, desire for 'occult frisson' on 'tainted ground' betrays an expectation of sensual and sensationalised contact with the past. The historian's motives might not be acknowledged or realised, but this language indicates a salacious attraction to the Victorian other that centres on the body. Sinclair's passage puts strain on Armstrong and Mason's assertion that we should feel as often as judge in order to gain well-rounded critical insight into the past. He offers inappropriate arousal as the consequence of eroding affective boundaries between nineteenth-century and present-day

experience. Meanwhile, the victim here is once again unconscious: troublingly so, given that Sinclair's text references documented crimes with real victims.

One reason such historical practices avoid taboo is the prolific cultural dissemination of Jack the Ripper in debate and speculation throughout the last century. Fictional responses to the Ripper story overlap with historical evidence, and the Ripper's status as a cultural metaphor allows others to re-enact the crimes without acknowledging that they are doing so from a "real" murderer's perspective. Pseudo-historians role-play as murderer-investigators here through their abject engagement with Victorian remains when rewriting past narratives. Christine Ferguson notes that 'divorced from its original, the Ripper victim simulacrum acts as an empty vessel to be manipulated and articulated by artists drawn to the case's sensational appeal'.<sup>17</sup> Ferguson's remarks are recognisable in the 'hack' historian's treatment of Ripper victims. Describing the victim as an 'empty vessel', Ferguson asserts how our ability to recognise these Victorian women as real-life figures is eroded by repeated and various retellings, reducing them to 'carrier bags of old cuttings'. We are at risk of forgetting to connect these women meaningfully with human subjectivity. Yet the narratives explored in this article depict nineteenth-century individuals as functioning bodies with appetites, desires, and excretions, rather than 'empty vessels'. For Mark Llewellyn a provocative relationship with the past is an integral aspect of neo-Victorian metafictionality:

the neo-Victorian is about underlining the historical relativity of the Victorians to our own period even as it simultaneously exploits the possibilities that chronological distance provides; in authorally claiming authenticity, such textual games at the same moment underline their own ethical ambiguity.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Christine Ferguson, 'Victoria-Arcana and the Misogynistic Poetics of Resistance in Iain Sinclair's *White Chappell Scarlet Tracings* and Alan Moore's *From Hell*', *Lit: Literature Interpretation Theory*, 20 (2009), 45–64 (pp. 49–50).

<sup>18</sup> Mark Llewellyn, 'Neo-Victorianism: On the Ethics and Aesthetics of Appropriation', *Lit: Literature Interpretation Theory*, 20 (2009), 27–44 (p. 40).

Characteristically, these texts draw attention to this ethically contentious aspect of the Victorian world they create without offering any clear resolution. However, Ferguson's criticism of such creative behaviour reminds us that fictional tampering with Victorian remains is not necessarily victimless. Temporal and physical detachment emboldens the neo-treatment of the Victorian other, but also leads to unscrupulous fictional handling of imagined remains. If Llewellyn's genre-defining observations are accepted then they cast a layer of unresolved ethical grime over neo-Victorian fiction as a whole. They suggest that an attempt like Sinclair's to bridge a sensory gap between Victorian and present-day life by salaciously invoking contentious matter is the product of a wider movement in neo-Victorian literature.

### Neo-Victorian Dirt on the Move

To understand how material movement in neo-Victorian fiction contributes to bridging Victorian past and our present, we have to look beyond bodily waste, to forms of dirt with greater physical and temporal reach than human remains. Faber and Sinclair saturate their neo-Victorian worlds with suitable material for this inquiry. Indistinguishable smells, dusty spaces, and reams of waste paper drift unrestrictedly alongside more distinctly formed bodies.

Silvana Colella has already discussed smell at length in an important essay on neo-Victorian 'Olfactory Ghosts', in which she explores the sensory shift that odours contribute to a 'Victorian experience' in *The Crimson Petal and the White*.<sup>19</sup> Colella argues that '[a]ccess to the past – however illusory – depends on perception rather than cognition. The senses define a liminal area between past and present where connections become possible'.<sup>20</sup> Olfaction offers greater proximity to a simulated 'Victorian reality', but it does so imprecisely. Like disgust there is a struggle between old and new to claims to sensory authority. Odours within text are challenging not only as 'matter out of place', but also as matter out of medium. This problem can be readdressed by thinking more carefully about the often-dirty substance that causes a smell.

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<sup>19</sup> Silvana Colella, 'Olfactory Ghosts: Michel Faber's *The Crimson Petal and the White*', in *Haunting and Spectrality in Neo-Victorian Fiction*, ed. by Arias Rosario and Patricia Pulham (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 85–110.

<sup>20</sup> Colella, p. 88.

Colella argues that scents contribute to ‘spectrality’ in neo-Victorian fiction where there is a lack of common referent between nineteenth-century and contemporary reality.<sup>21</sup> By shifting emphasis onto the manoeuvrability of the substance emitting the smell, we can reframe Colella’s conclusion in terms of physical properties familiar to both nineteenth-century and present-day contexts.

Faber demonstrates such versatile manoeuvrability through a scent emanating from dog’s dirt, carried into a bedroom a shoe belonging to the prudish factory owner, William Rackham.

He’s embarrassed to find that the stink emanates from the soles of his own shoes, lying where he kicked them off the night before.

“I must have stepped in dog’s mess on the way here,” he frowns, disproportionately shamed by the stiff sludge he can neither clean nor endure.

[...]

“The city is a filthy place,” Sugar affirms, unobtrusively wrapping her body in a milk-white dressing-gown. “There’s muck on the ground, muck in the water, muck in the air. I find, even on the short walk between here and The Fireside – *used* to find, I should say, shouldn’t I? – a layer of black grime settles on one’s skin [...] a little of your Rackham’s Bath Sweetener wouldn’t go amiss, I suppose. And do you have anything to purify drinking water? You don’t want to see me carried off by cholera!” (pp. 246-7)

Before it is identified as non-human in origin, this smell is particularly concerning for Sugar’s middle-class client, William Rackham. Disgust becomes shame when he realises he is responsible for carrying the odour into the room, threatening his social status as a result. As Janice Carlisle notes of Victorian olfaction in *Common Scents*: ‘the only category of persons allowed always to smell others and never to be smelled consists of men of the middle classes and

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<sup>21</sup> Colella, p. 103.

gentry'.<sup>22</sup> William's conservative habits exacerbate his awkwardness around the smell; unwillingness to engage with dirt at the smell's source prevents him from asserting authority over its meaning. However, neo-Victorian texts can subvert Victorian class-dependent odour rules, as outlined by Carlisle, offering a more socially flexible model. Sugar has an almost authorial awareness of semiotics; she imaginatively resituates the smell to her personal advantage in order to reconfigure herself as the object of Rackham's concern for hygiene. This smell becomes a site of struggle between the materiality of odour, which depends on contextual proximity; and the metaphorical signification of odour, which incorporates taint from outside this domestic space. The prostitute manipulates the conversation to her own financial advantage, making the most of the mobility that smells grant a dirty substance. To become airborne, material carrying a scent must be atomised – diffused within a space larger than that occupied by the dirt it references.

The potency of this situation therefore depends as much on the fact that smells articulate dirt on the move as on Sugar's imaginative aptitude. Since determining the origin of a smell depends on an unstable form of perception, it becomes possible to relocate this source, initially through its association with the generic 'muck' of the 'filthy' city. Although the atmosphere remains filthy due to the lingering smell, its perceived source is replaced with a more serious threat of physical contamination from elsewhere. What follows is a series of further relocations. Filth quickly regains proximity, from 'muck in the air' to the street outside, until it 'settles on one's skin', culminating in the threat of cholera, or defilement within the body. More than any other evidence of dirt, odours assert a state of diffusion indicative of the disintegration of matter as it moves towards a state of entropy. This phenomenon was first outlined in the nineteenth-century discovery of thermodynamic laws, which Barri J. Gold explains for a literary readership in *ThermoPoetics*,

Since the laws of thermodynamics obtain always and only within a closed system (including, we presume for these purposes, the universe itself), it doesn't actually leave. It doesn't go away. It can't

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<sup>22</sup> Janice Carlisle, *Common Scents: Comparative Encounters in High-Victorian Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 48.

disappear. Rather it changes, 'goes to' as we sometimes say, other forms.<sup>23</sup>

The unpleasant smell that permeates the room in *The Crimson Petal and the White* is an example of matter's diffusion into 'other forms'. Yet even in a state of near-formlessness this matter cannot escape the 'closed system'. Dirt can be located somewhere, or everywhere, but certainly not nowhere. An odour's saturation of the city reflects a universal movement of matter towards a decayed, entropic state that Gold explores in *ThermoPoetics*. 'Other forms' are either less threatening as dirt safely contained elsewhere, or more threatening, as deadly bacteria that permeate the city undetected. Thermodynamic entropy is both far-reaching and fertile when considered in relation to neo-Victorian fiction and its relation with the Victorian world. This phenomenon allows massive shifts in scope, focus and temporality, scaling down the imaginative leap between past and present in this neo-Victorian text. Paradoxically, it contributes to the illusion of direct communication between the two, through shared movement towards a state of entropy. By shifting the differential boundary between the present and the Victorian age onto materiality, slow erosion of matter itself underpins the swift transition from one historical context to the next. Neo-Victorian fiction thrives on continued tension between these two radically different rates of material decline. Epochal and bodily decay convince us that the span between nineteenth-century and present-day experience is one worth bridging, while the massive temporal scale associated with thermodynamics puts this objective within comparative reach.

In *White Chappell*, *Scarlet Tracings*, Sinclair describes material contributing to mass-movement as creatively fertile, in contrast with the relative sterility of individual artefacts. Invoking literary fragments that he has associated with bodily dirt elsewhere in this narrative, Sinclair describes how:

All the floating street literature has been trawled-in and priced out of the range of any remaining students who might like to sample it.

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<sup>23</sup> Barri J. Gold, *ThermoPoetics: Energy in Victorian Literature and Science* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012), p. 8.

A cultural condom has been neatly slipped over the active, the errant and beautiful tide of rubbish (p. 40).

Sinclair depicts these displaced cultural fragments as essential elements in an ecosystem, adopting imagery of slow decay as the 'tide of rubbish' textual meaning from each individual work. 'Floating' literary leftovers are likely to be located near the surface of cultural consciousness, contributing to an affective atmosphere, without articulating their individual significance. Each work becomes increasingly anonymous as part of a wider movement of matter, ebbing in and out of social currency. Yet slow erosion enhances how this matter can be re-imagined in a twentieth- and twenty-first century context. The second-hand book trade's gathering, identifying, and quantifying processes are narrated with similar condemnation to the Ripper historian's dissection of the Whitechapel murders. Isolating fragmentary works from their complex historical, literary, and social backdrops – even for preservation purposes – risks inflicting permanent damage on the atmospheric value of these leftovers as a whole. Mass movement of matter can more meaningfully connect past and present than interrogation of a single fragment.

When exploring Sinclair's narrative methods, Robert Bond notes that 'Sinclair's concern with the transmission of textual "heat" underpins his notion of textual production. Textual "heat", when transmitted, gives birth to new texts'.<sup>24</sup> On the chaotic, unmediated second-hand market of cultural inheritance, however, creative energy is barely contained within an 'errant and beautiful tide of rubbish', rather than a subterranean store of arcane energy in the terminal state of 'heat'. These somewhat eroded textual fragments have not yet reached this final state of decay; they become active in their potential to communicate matter between terminal energy as 'heat', and present-day consciousness. 'Heat' may direct this narrative, but its conspiratorial influence can only be accessed through contact with literary fragments. Decoding *White Chappell*, *Scarlet Tracings* depends on alertness to the importance of peripheral dirty fragments that no longer carry much individual creative value. Sinclair's contraceptive image, the 'cultural condom', suggests that imaginative sanitation prevents fertile contact with 'the active, the errant and beautiful'

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<sup>24</sup> Robert Bond, *Iain Sinclair* (Cambridge: Salt, 2005), p. 128.

‘rubbish’ of the past. Formless cultural waste is therefore considered in terms of its capacity to inspire new forms, while asserting the continuing potency of dead cultural matter. Yet the ‘cultural condom’ also prevents present-day production from infections transmitted by the past other – an important dynamic of this image given the author’s preoccupation with sickness in this text. For Sinclair, present-day encounters with second-hand Victorian literature become most potent when they demonstrate self-awareness of their participation in wider cultural decay. Sinclair encourages readers to recognise themselves as living within an already contaminated era, where formless energy or ‘heat’ directs us towards the same inevitable physical disintegration as the Victorians.

Yet once this dirt-affirming position is assumed, literary waste is treated mercilessly in *White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings*. Antique texts no longer signify a Victorian narrative. Once divorced from this context, they are instilled with ahistorical and materially subversive energy. Old text becomes dangerously influential, compelling characters to commit murder. Like the tide of rubbish, this esoteric potency is channelled through, rather than contained within, literary fragments. ‘Errant’ and ‘active’ textual matter disrupts contemporary narratives without warning, but this matter is subjected to highly selective reading practices. It is difficult to reconcile such unscrupulous hacking away at literary remains in this text with its previous championing of cultural residue as a fertile whole. Nevertheless, the arcane plot underpinning this narrative is accessed through a compulsive dissection of ‘A Study in Scarlet’ that leaves a first-edition copy almost unrecognisable. This heavy-handed pruning goes beyond the natural erosion of text into fragments, or a student’s ‘sampling’ of past literary matter. Indeed, the manipulation involved reveals the used-booksellers’ hypocrisy; they grant themselves licence to dissect and rearrange historical matter according to a self-declared ‘prophetic’ design in contrast with the ‘hacks’ investigating the Ripper murders. Little thought is given to how this disfigures the Victorian narrative. Such treatment of the ‘errant and beautiful tide of rubbish’ cannot be reconciled with the natural disintegration of ‘fertile and fecund’ literary sources.<sup>25</sup> Once decoded, literary scraps that do not support *White Chappell, Scarlet Tracing’s* conspiratorial plot become, to use Ferguson’s term, ‘empty vessels’.

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<sup>25</sup> Cohen, p. x.

Catherine Alexander and Joshua Reno suggest that redundancy is the terminal state of all projects that heavily depend on old matter. They argue that '[e]ffective recycling is not infinite. Irreversible processes of degradation resist any attempt to model the simple substitution of one form of matter or energy for another'.<sup>26</sup> Although Sinclair asserts the creative potency still contained in Victorian texts and contexts that we might dismiss as disintegrated dirt, accessing this is risky. His depiction of the tenuous pruning of 'A Study in Scarlet' speaks to the long-term unfeasibility of a literary model that frequently reuses old texts.

Dirt contributes substantially to what 'Victorian', and what 'contemporary' mean for neo-Victoriana by providing a contested material middle-ground. However, as Alexander and Reno note, 'recycling cannot be reduced to limited environmental or material consequences; we also need to consider how remaking remakes us all.'<sup>27</sup> The transformative impact of recycling extends beyond the matter that it reintegrates: the Victorian has little capacity to reshape the neo- in this genre. Faber offers a poignant example of such remaking in *The Apple*. William Rackham's now adult daughter, Sophie, recounts a mucky episode of her childhood past to her son. She recalls a scene in *The Crimson Petal and the White* when an 'urchin child, finding herself the object of unwanted attention' (p. 775), throws dog excrement into the Rackham carriage. In *The Apple*, Sophie reflects:

I thought she looked exactly like me: a mirror image [...] But I was gripped by a powerful sense that this grubby urchin was someone I might have been, had I been born in the street. Then she picked up a piece of... of dog foul, and flung it at me [...] I think I was destined to be a socialist from that moment on. (p. 156)

Dirt is the catalyst in this exchange, allowing Sophie to perceive her arbitrary position in the world; as it moves through the class boundary of the carriage, it disrupts the illusion of material stability. Sophie's Edwardian perspective is

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<sup>26</sup> Catherine Alexander and Joshua Reno, *Economies of Recycling: Global Transformations of Materials, Values and Social Relations* (London: Zed Books, 2012), p. 13.

<sup>27</sup> Alexander and Reno, p. 1.

delivered with imaginative alertness to the unstable relationship between experience and memory. By describing the urchin child as a 'mirror image', Faber inflects this recollection with a 'powerful sense' of simultaneity. Sophie can imagine herself inhabiting two materially differentiated existences at once. Through recollection, Sophie identifies this moment as permanently altering her political outlook. As a child in *The Crimson Petal*, Sophie's reaction to the incident is only described as 'bewilderment' (p. 775). This experience's impact is modified in hindsight; as an 'active' memory, it is morphed by temporal linearity. Through distant engagement with this filthy encounter, Sophie recognises the lack of temporal and material difference between herself and decay. Yet this re-imagining neither empties her experiences of meaning, nor leaves her with a debilitating unease about the inevitability of deterioration. Sophie's interpretation of this moment allows her to reconfigure herself as a stable but flexible post-neo-Victorian. Not all Victorian ideas are subject to the unsympathetic pruning exhibited in *White Chappell*, *Scarlet Tracings*; Sophie uses retrospection to contest the notion that Victorian experience is radically materially different from contemporary life. Neo-Victorian characters in these texts can only imaginatively shift between historically linear and ahistorically self-reflexive perspectives, when they creatively engage with transient dirt.

Dirt and neo-Victorian fiction both operate in resistance to temporal and physical containment. Neo-Victorian engagement with dirt enables into a range of material, ethical, and temporal problems that this genre is compelled to navigate as a consequence of being temporally out of place. Engagement with bodily waste raises ethical questions around a neo-treatment of a Victorian other through imaginary resurrection. It reminds us that, in reality, the Victorians are already deceased. This cannot dissipate ethical tension associated with abject handling of Victorian remains, but does make it easier to delineate the imagined neo-Victorian from once animate individuals. An appreciation of the fertile capacity of abstract waste, particularly in its ability to scale down the temporal difference between contemporary and Victorian eras, is profitable in a neo-Victorian context. By shifting differential emphasis onto material degradation, and the gradual movement towards universal entropy, it is possible to read filth in these texts as a belated encounter with what was once Victorian. Reiterating Cohen, dirt may be situated at a 'theoretical crossroads', but through its conflation of nineteenth-century and contemporary approaches to unclean matter, neo-Victorian dirt might as well

sit at a theoretical spaghetti junction, presenting a significant challenge for interpretation. Neo-Victorian dirt does not depict clear-cut temporal strata that provide a chronology for understanding the material disjuncture between the neo- and the Victorian. The sample investigated here offers a provocative encounters with neo-Victorian dirt, contributing to a world characterised as ‘once upon a time bright and transparent, now overcast with filth’ (*CP*, p. 5). Looking more closely, it becomes clear that much of such dirt is as much the by-product of neo- interference and transference, as natural decay. Through its dirt, neo-Victorian fiction self-consciously challenges clear categorisation of what qualifies as ‘Victorian’, ‘contemporary’, and ‘clean’. As David Trotter comments in *Cooking with Mud*, ‘transitional objects tend to be messy’.<sup>28</sup> As a genre in a constant state of transition between already unfixed categories of contemporary and nineteenth-century contexts, neo-Victorian fiction is excessively dirty.

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<sup>28</sup> David Trotter, *Cooking with Mud: The Idea of Mess in Nineteenth-Century Art and Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 5.

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