



VIEW OF A DUST YARD.

# *Victorian Network*

Volume 6, Number 2  
Winter 2015

Victorian Dirt



©Victorian Network  
Volume 6, Number 2  
Winter 2015

[www.victoriannetwork.org](http://www.victoriannetwork.org)

**Guest Editor**

William A. Cohen

**General Editor**

Sophie Duncan

**Founding Editor**

Katharina Boehm

**Editorial Board**

Megan Anderluh  
Sarah Crofton  
Rosalyn Gregory  
Tammy Ho Lai-Ming  
Sarah Hook  
Alison Moulds  
Heidi Weig

*Victorian Network* is funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council and supported by King's College London.



Arts & Humanities  
Research Council

**KING'S**  
*College*  
**LONDON**

*Victorian Network* Volume 6, Number 2 (Winter 2015)

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

1

Guest Editor's Introduction: Victorian Dirt

*William A. Cohen*

### ARTICLES

7

Dirty Work: Trollope and the Labour of the Artist

*Flora C. Armetta*

29

Dirt, Dust and Devilment: Uncovering Filth in the Workhouse and Casual Wards

*Laura Foster*

59

Eco-Conscious Synaesthesia: Dirt in Kennedy's *Yeast* and *Alton Locke*

*Margaret S. Kennedy*

86

Bad Property: Unclean Houses in Victorian City Writing

*Erika Kvistad*

109

Neo-Victorian Dirt and Decomposition

*Nicola Kirkeby*

## BOOK REVIEWS

132

*Dirty Old London: The Victorian Fight Against Filth*  
by Lee Jackson (Yale, 2014)  
Sarah Ross

137

*Women, Literature, and the Domesticated Landscape: England's Disciples of Flora, 1780–1870* by Judith W. Page & Elise L. Smith (Cambridge, 2011)  
Tara Puri

142

*Exploring Victorian Travel Literature: Disease, Race and Climate*  
by Jessica Howell (Edinburgh, 2014)  
Katie E. Wetzel

147

*Postal Pleasures: Sex, Scandal, and Victorian Letters*  
by Kate Thomas (Oxford, 2012)  
Karin Koehler

## VICTORIAN DIRT

William A. Cohen, Associate Provost and Professor of English  
(University of Maryland)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

## DIRTY WORK: TROLLOPE AND THE LABOUR OF THE ARTIST

Flora C. Armetta  
(City University of New York)

### *Abstract:*

This article considers Anthony Trollope's emphasis on art as a form of necessarily dirty work: mental, manual, and visual labour grounded in messy, everyday real-life experience. I focus on critically neglected artist characters in several of Trollope's novels in order to connect his ideas, especially on work and social order, to those of John Ruskin. The implications of Trollope's interest in work become clear when read in the context of Ruskin's argument – most fully articulated in *The Stones of Venice* – that artistic work such as the craftsmanship of the Gothic stone-carver, is more fully human than any apparently perfect 'high' art, and therefore more real. Both Trollope and Ruskin, I argue, explore this idea of 'reality', suggesting that artists must embrace it by engaging in a particular, art-informed process of perception that reveals to them things that seem "low" (literally and figuratively), especially things that are in fact of the earth—dusty, dirty, and stony. For each author, this radical departure from the Victorian credo, 'cleanliness is next to godliness', paradoxically demonstrates what is of real value in even the humblest of humanity, and allows the seer to recognise the higher spiritual truths that inform every element of creation, down to its very particles of dirt. Such an approach to images of dirt enables Trollope to demand that his characters, and more importantly his readers, recognise social ills (visually marked by their presence in dirty places, filled with dirty people), and, finally, desire to do something about them. In *Barchester Towers*, *Ayala's Angel*, and *The Last Chronicle of Barset*, Trollope's narrators insist that the visual labour that makes this recognition possible is part of a thoughtful approach to the world, and attempt to prod his readers into thinking, and perceiving, for themselves, even if it means that they question his story.

Far too little critical attention has been paid to Anthony Trollope's focus on art and artists. One biographer of his has suggested that 'few aspects of Trollope's life have been as neglected as his interest in art',<sup>1</sup> but even this point was made in order to stress Trollope's significant background in art,<sup>2</sup> rather than art's

---

<sup>1</sup> Richard Mullen and James Munson, *The Penguin Companion to Trollope* (New York: Penguin Books, 1996), p. 16.

<sup>2</sup> Trollope studied art as a boy. His maternal uncle Henry Milton was a professional writer on art, and his brother Thomas Anthony Trollope was a journalist, scholar, and historian who, as an expatriate in Florence, eventually became something of an expert on Italian art; the brothers apparently spent much of their time visiting museums together. One of Trollope's *Travelling Sketches*, 'The Art Tourist', is an amused account of the stereotypically obsessive English traveller who goes from museum to museum, memorising pictures and styles without necessarily loving art per se. In *The New Zealander*, Trollope praised the neglected art and architecture of England, especially its country houses and Gothic cathedrals (p. 187). He also knew and was friendly with a

presence in his novels. In this article I consider Trollope's artist characters in order to examine his idea of proper perception. I argue that Trollope uses artists to demonstrate what it means to see—to look at and perceive the things and people around one—in ways that are exemplary, and I show how good perception tends, within the novels, to raise the possibility of social progress.

Artistic perception for Trollope is above all a process that requires work, and his stress on this aligns him, to a surprising degree, with much of John Ruskin's thinking on artistic work and social order. For both Trollope and Ruskin, visual labour is the means of accessing the real, or what Ruskin calls truth, and for each, only such a commitment to finding that truth allows for real progress. Ruskin is more outspoken about the social ills that require the advent of progress, taking a longer, more historically informed view of England's need for change. Trollope, however, calls rather for a specific way of seeing that inspires small yet persistent moves toward the betterment of everyday life, suggesting that genuine progress may be accomplished within the realm of the everyday.

My interest in Trollope's idea of progress is part of a much broader recent effort to recognize the liberal, sometimes even radical, sensibility that shaped so much of his prolific output. As Carolyn Dever and Lisa Niles note in their introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Anthony Trollope*, contemporary scholarship (including several of the essays that appear in that volume) has begun to undercut a widespread earlier conception of Trollope's essential conservatism – Deborah Denenholz Morse's masterly *Reforming Trollope* is a sweeping challenge to such a view. Because Trollope's uses of art still tend to be considered incidental to his work, I approach him from this angle with the aim of shedding new light the ways in which he works to change his readers' views.<sup>3</sup>

In the final pages of *The Last Chronicle of Barset*, Trollope's narrator compares himself to Rembrandt, explaining that, like that great painter, he represents 'such clergymen as I see around me,' whose 'social habits have been

---

number of respected English artists, including William Holman Hunt, Lord Leighton, and William Powell Frith, and worked closely with John Everett Millais, who illustrated several of his novels, including *Framley Parsonage*, *Orley Farm*, *The Small House at Allington*, *Rachel Ray*, and *Phineas Finn*. See Mullen, *Penguin Companion*, pp. 15, 165 and Pamela Neville-Sington, 'Trollope, Thomas Adolphus (1810–1892)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. by H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/27755>> [accessed 3 April 2009].

<sup>3</sup> See Carolyn Dever and Lisa Niles, *The Cambridge Companion to Anthony Trollope* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 1ff., and Deborah Denenholz Morse, *Reforming Trollope: Race, Gender, and Englishness in the Novels of Anthony Trollope* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2013).

worth the *labour* necessary for painting them.’<sup>4</sup> This is as opposed, says the narrator, to Raphael, who tends to paint unnatural images of Madonnas who clearly never existed. Trollope’s point here echoes almost exactly Ruskin’s own critique of Raphael in ‘The Nature of the Gothic’, a portion of *The Stones of Venice* written thirteen years before *The Last Chronicle*. Raphael, Ruskin says, paints ‘only the good’ and none of the ills of the world, and therefore is not in ‘The greatest class [of painters, who] render all that they see in nature unhesitatingly [...] sympathising with all the good, and yet confessing, permitting, and bringing good out of the evil also.’<sup>5</sup> Trollope’s insistence on the labour necessary to render his vision, and both writers’ stress on the importance of painting what is real whether or not it is beautiful, are key ideas in each author’s definition of artistic perception. For each, it is only by seeing ‘reality’ (a word Trollope uses repeatedly) in the right way that one can reach a higher truth—as Ruskin phrases it here, ‘bring good out of the evil also.’ Both Trollope and Ruskin connect reality particularly with things that are of the earth—stone and dirt.

To recognise this, we must first come to an understanding of what both art and labour meant in the larger context of Victorian culture. Connecting art to work is not, of course, unique to Ruskin and Trollope. *Barchester Towers* and ‘The Nature of the Gothic’ were both written within roughly a decade of the hugely influential opening of the Crystal Palace in 1851. Partly the pet project of Prince Albert, an aspiring art connoisseur, the Palace was dedicated to “The Workers of the World” and exhibited industrial creations, as well as those of the fine-arts. Still, definitions of both art and work were as vexed as they are now. Much has been made of the Victorian tendency to distinguish between intellectual labour and manual labour,<sup>6</sup> but this distinction was problematic even for Victorians themselves. Ruskin, for one, struggled to reconcile the class separation that such a division of labour implied, offering differing pronouncements on it at different times. On one hand, he acknowledged that it was impractical and unfair to pretend that there was no difference in the two kinds of labour, pointing out how much physical labour could ‘tak[e] the life out of us’ and concluding, ‘The man who has been heaving clay out of a ditch all day [...] is not the same man at the end of his day [...] as one who has been sitting in

---

<sup>4</sup> Anthony Trollope, *The Last Chronicle of Barset* (New York: Penguin Books, 2002), p. 860, emphases mine. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

<sup>5</sup> John Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice* (New York: Merrill and Baker, 1851), p. 187.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Gerard Curtis, ‘Ford Madox Brown’s “Work”: An Iconographic Analysis’, *The Art Bulletin*, 74 (1992), pp. 623–636 (623).

a quiet room, reading books, or classing butterflies, or painting pictures.’<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, Ruskin idealised the merging of physical and intellectual labour in ‘The Nature of the Gothic’, arguing that ‘we want one man to be always thinking, and another to be always working, and we call one a gentleman, and the other an operative; whereas the workman ought often to be thinking, and the thinker often to be working, and both should be gentlemen, in the best sense.’<sup>8</sup> Thus for Ruskin the best artist is more than a privileged “gentleman,” painting in a quiet room: he is a labourer like the Gothic stone-carver whose physical and mental exertion make him a great artist and a great man.<sup>9</sup>

For Trollope, too, true artistic vision arises from both intellectual and physical labour. Indeed, Trollope’s ideal of good artistic work arguably builds on and develops Ruskin’s. As T.J. Barringer has argued, Ruskin (along with Thomas Carlyle and certain Christian Socialist writers) articulated one of the two main Victorian theories of work, which Barringer calls ‘expressive’ work: for these writers, labour was seen as a redemptive act through which humanity could become better. Trollope, as we will see, depicts labour this way, but he also takes pains to show that it is often difficult. In this he aligns himself more with J.S. Mill and Adam Smith, who saw work as a negative necessity (for Barringer, ‘instrumental’ work).<sup>10</sup>

Though none of the characters who experience artistic vision in Trollope’s novels actually engage in hard physical labour, Trollope repeatedly invokes hard labour as the standard by which to judge any work. In Trollope, as in Ruskin, stone-workers demonstrate the model relationship between craftsmen and their work. Weak, pitiful Bishop Proudie, for example, thinks of such a worker when he imagines escaping from his wife to work in peace. ‘What a blessed thing it would be,’ he thinks, ‘if a bishop could go away from his home to his work every day like a clerk in a public office – as a stone-mason does!’ (pp. 151-52).

The value and use of stone-working appear surprisingly frequently in Trollope. Stone, and materials associated with it, especially dust, become symbols of a good, earthly, human existence that needs to be looked at and

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in T.J. Barringer, *Men at Work: Art and Labour in Victorian Britain* (Hartford, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), p. 70.

<sup>8</sup> Ruskin, *Stones of Venice*, p. 169.

<sup>9</sup> Certainly, one thing that the Pre-Raphaelites prided themselves on, and that Ruskin particularly commended them for, was their willingness and ability to endure physical hardship in order to create truthful, natural images; they were known for, say, staying up all night outdoors to catch a desired light effect at the right moment at dawn, or enduring miserable weather to achieve a sense of seasonality. See Elizabeth Prettejohn, *Art of the Pre-Raphaelites* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 152.

<sup>10</sup> See Barringer pp. 27–28.

valued. Finally, however, stone, dust, and dirt become more than mere symbols: they are depicted as valuable in their literal essences, as matter that is of the earth. A brief look at three Trollopian artists will demonstrate how this works.

In the first case is *Barchester Towers*'s Bertie Stanhope, who loves art but is too lazy to practise it, always 'at a loss how to kill his time without much labour.'<sup>11</sup> Instead, Bertie creates caricatures—poor in mimetic quality (and thus not “real”-looking) but still able to successfully conjure up their targets. Though Trollope presents him somewhat affectionately, Bertie is doubly condemned as an artist because he will not work and he is not interested in ‘reality’. His condescending remark that ‘no real artist could descend to the ornamentation of a cathedral’ (p. 165) directly opposes Ruskin’s Gothic stone-carvers and reveals his ignorance. For Trollope, the cathedral is Barchester’s centre of life and human activity and is an example of real art and the reality *in* art.

Frank Houston, the charming but feckless young painter in *Ayala's Angel*, at first mirrors Bertie’s failures, but in the end brings his artistic vision to life by choosing to work. Frank adds to the idea of stone-work as a moral touchstone in Trollope by twice invoking stone-breaking as just as likely a profession for him as painting.<sup>12</sup> However, Frank revises his cavalier tone toward labour when, seeking a way to marry his penniless love, he decides at last to earn a living painting portraits. In the passages that follow, Trollope suggests that this choice is at least more akin to stone-breaking than it is to collecting butterflies in that it will take trouble—time, thought, and energy—to pursue, and will depend on participation in the everyday world. As one character remarks to Frank, what she refers to as ‘That head of yours of old Mrs Jones’ is in her estimation ‘a great deal better than dozens of things one sees every year in the Academy’ (p. 497). Trollope deliberately refers to the portrait by its subject’s utterly commonplace, everyday name, demonstrating that Frank’s decision to be a portrait painter represents both physical and intellectual labour; is, in Barringer’s terms, both instrumental and expressive.

Perhaps Trollope’s most important good artist is Isadore Hamel (also from *Ayala's Angel*), who, in order to make feasible a marriage to Ayala’s sister Lucy, sets aside his monumental allegorical carvings for life-sized portrait busts.

<sup>11</sup> Anthony Trollope, *Barchester Towers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 138. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

<sup>12</sup> Anthony Trollope, *Ayala's Angel* (London: Trollope Society, 1989), p. 493. Further references are given after quotations in the text. The somewhat callous joke is that they are equally unlikely. Stone-breaking, the task of breaking up large rocks into smaller ones with a hammer for the purpose of paving roads, was a notoriously difficult and painful Victorian occupation, usually given to paupers from the workhouse or to convicts. See Philip Priestly, *Victorian Prison Lives: English Prison Biography, 1830–1914* (New York: Routledge, 1985), pp. 133–34.

Trollope suggests here not that these literal and metaphorical “high-art” carvings are bad, but that the sculptor’s work has more worth when he carves things that relate to the real world. A ‘likeness of Mr Jones’ that will fit on top of the bookshelves brings the artist into the human realm, the second use of the commonplace ‘Jones’ serving as a sign of approval of portraiture of everyday life (p. 525). Twice, Isadore tells his friends that since his old sculptures no longer serve their purpose, he will ‘break them up and have them carted away in the dust cart’ (p. 525), suggesting they will be more valuable as earthy matter, even as waste, than as overly exalted images. Here, ‘earth’ becomes not merely a symbol of everyday life but a tangible substance, the stony material that both comes from the ground and returns to it, through the work of those who uncover and shape it, and those who transform stone into dust or dirt. In other words, reality is not only ‘earthy’, it is actually dirty, and recognisable as reality by virtue of its dirtiness.

Ruskin also admits that reality is dirty. In *The Elements of Drawing*, published in 1857, Ruskin recommends painters grind their own paint pigments. This is a jab at his contemporaries’ reliance on the easy availability of pre-ground paint pigment from professional “colourmen”, who had been grinding, mixing, putting in tubes, and selling coloured pigments for years before this point.<sup>13</sup> Ruskin preferred grinding pigments himself, because he saw just-ground colours as more ‘good and pure’.<sup>14</sup> The grinding process generally required the painter to hold a chunk of pigment over a piece of porphyry (extremely hard, non-porous crystal) and use a stone tool called a muller to reduce the pigment to dust.<sup>15</sup> Given that there is a whole category of colours called “earth pigments”—mixtures of clay, silica, and colouring matter, such as various forms of iron dioxide and manganese dioxide<sup>16</sup>—this practice meant in some cases that the painter would literally be grinding up earthy matter, getting his or her hands dirty, as it were, to put that “dirt” into the painting.

Even more significant, however, is Ruskin’s entirely unorthodox suggestion that painters forgo the common practice of removing a naturally occurring chalky residue from paint pigments—or, if it had already been

<sup>13</sup> See Joyce H. Townsend, Jacqueline Ridge, and Stephen Hackney, *Pre-Raphaelite Painting Techniques, 1848–56* (London: Tate Publishing, 2004), p. 39.

<sup>14</sup> John Ruskin, *Elements of Drawing* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1857), p. 86. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

<sup>15</sup> Anthea Callen, *The Art of Impressionism: Painting Technique and the Making Of Modernity* (Hartford, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 98.

<sup>16</sup> Frederic Taubes, *The Painter’s Question and Answer Book, with Contributions by Thomas Hart Benton, Jacob Getlar Smith, Aaron Bohrod, and Henry Varnum Poor* (New York: Watson-Guptil Publication, Inc., 1948), p. 79.



removed by a colourman, that the painter mix some chalky white paint back into whatever colour was to be used.<sup>17</sup> Having the chalky substance in the pigment would, Ruskin argued, give the painting 'dead' colour that would look 'infinitely liker Nature' than would purified, un-chalky pigment, which was too shiny and translucent to seem natural. '[W]hich of us would wish to polish a rose?' Ruskin asks his readers. Ruskin considered his advice on chalkiness especially appropriate for painting 'ground, rocks, and buildings', because 'the earthy and solid surface is, of course, always truer than the most finished and carefully wrought work in transparent tints can ever be' (pp. 196-202). It is difficult to imagine anyone describing a more literal way to value dirt as a substance in and of itself.<sup>18</sup>

Trollope's interest in dirt is important not only for its relationship to studio practices (real and theoretical), but also because, historically speaking, Victorian literature continually covered up dust, dirt, and anyone associated with them. The work of critics as diverse as Christopher Herbert, Anne McClintock, Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, and Natalka Freeland highlights a chain of Victorian associations connecting poverty, dirt, and moral impurity as social problems that could be identified visually. As Herbert argues convincingly in his discussion of an inextricable relationship between idols (such as money) and taboos (such as excrement), a general Victorian sense of reverence for the painful state of poverty meant that 'the holiness and purity of the poor would render them frightening and untouchable, and could only be felt [...] as a repugnant and dangerous form of dirt'. Thus the middle class could claim to honour the poor's sufferings, and wish to ameliorate them, while also keeping them out of sight. Herbert quotes Engels's horror over city areas 'so dirty that the inhabitants of the court can only leave [...] if they are prepared to wade through puddles of stale urine' to show how 'the strict isolation of slum neighbourhoods [...] shielded [them] very effectively from middle-class viewing'.<sup>19</sup>

The desire to shut this dirtiness out of sight was also motivated Victorian

---

<sup>17</sup> *Methods and Materials of Painting of the Great Schools and Masters*, pp. 422-23.

<sup>18</sup> Ironically, Ruskin's advice on this point was almost certainly not taken, at least not by any painter whose paintings have survived into the present (except, we must suppose, himself). Even the Pre-Raphaelites could only bear so much 'nature' in this sense, and were in fact famous for, among other things, their fanatical attention to purified, saturated colour painted on top of a dry white ground, which meant that the surface would remain glossy (the very 'polishing' Ruskin deplors) rather than becoming 'dead'. Thus Ruskin's plea for the practical logistics of achieving visual 'truth' remained firmly theoretical.

<sup>19</sup> Christopher Herbert, 'Filthy Lucre: Victorian Ideas of Money', *Victorian Studies*, Winter 2002, pp. 195-96.

interest in the idea that 'cleanliness is next to godliness.'<sup>20</sup> Writing about Elizabeth Gaskell's rejection of this equation between dirt and immorality, Natalka Freeland excellently summarizes its many manifestation. She cites medical opinions, police reports, and Victorian reformers such as Edwin Chadwick and George Sims to show its widespread influence, typified by Chadwick's claim that 'the fever nests and seats of physical depravity are also the seats of moral depravity, disorder and crime.'<sup>21</sup>

The need to shield the middle-class from dirt and its assumed attendant ills was paralleled by a similar attitude toward the visibility of work: as Davidoff and Hall have shown, the same middle class that required the world to look clean required that physical work, and poor physical workers, be kept out of sight. Because of this, middle-class households maintained their status as such partly through the 'appearance of a non-working lifestyle'. For example, families who could not afford servants often attempted to conceal housework from the sight of outsiders performed an elaborate 'character role', hiding whatever elements of their lives that might detract from a sense of leisure and repose.<sup>22</sup>

These important studies identify a pattern whereby various social problems were made more manageable by being hidden: hide the dirt of lower-class poverty, hide the dirt that attends immorality, hide the poor work of cleaning up middle- and upper-class dirt. What is missing here, however, is a direct connection between work and dirt: it is not simply that work needed to be hidden like dirt, but more specifically that *dirty work*, and the immorality it gave rise to or revealed needed to be hidden. I would argue that Victorian images of instrumental work is often depicted as dirty, while expressive, redemptive work is shown to be clean. One useful example is the painter Ford Madox Brown's celebrated painting, 'Work'.

<sup>20</sup> The association between cleanliness and godliness dates as far back as a rabbinical statement from the second century A.D. One example of its widespread Victorian use was a successful series of soap advertisements that appeared in the 1880s. See Nigel Rees, *Brewer's Famous Quotations* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2006)

<[http://books.google.com/books?id=uIRi0BOvTi4C&pg=PA489&lpg=PA489&dq=John+Wesley+sermons+cleanliness+godliness&source=web&ots=WwGVgG7zkX&sig=sn9x6d7cpHpDxYtg0IB1Z6Iv-N0&hl=en&sa=X&oi=book\\_result&resnum=3&ct=result#PPA489,M1](http://books.google.com/books?id=uIRi0BOvTi4C&pg=PA489&lpg=PA489&dq=John+Wesley+sermons+cleanliness+godliness&source=web&ots=WwGVgG7zkX&sig=sn9x6d7cpHpDxYtg0IB1Z6Iv-N0&hl=en&sa=X&oi=book_result&resnum=3&ct=result#PPA489,M1)> [accessed 3 November 2008].

<sup>21</sup> Natalka Freeland, 'The Politics of Dirt in *Mary Barton* and *Ruth*', *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, v. 42, no. 4, *The Nineteenth Century*, Autumn, 2002, pp. 799-818.

<<http://www.jstor.org.monstera.cc.columbia.edu:2048/stable/1556297>> [accessed 8 October 2008].

<sup>22</sup> Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 161. On the magnitude of the task of Victorian housekeeping, see the Reverend G.R. Gleig, *Domestic Economy* (London: Longman, Brown, Green, Longmans, & Roberts, 1856), p. 39.

In this image, Ford daringly celebrates the English navigator, or “navvy” – a person who dug trenches and built roads – as a central figure of the greatness of English industry (see Figure 1).<sup>23</sup> Though navvies were often morally suspect in the popular mind – generally seen as “reckless” and known for “fighting and rowdiness”<sup>24</sup> – Ford vindicates their image by representing his working navvy without a speck of dust or dirt on him, in spite of the fact that he is in a hole in the middle of a dirt road, shovelling up earth. Instead, the navvy’s spotless white shirt sparkles in the sunlight, and his ruddy skin glows as though he has just taken a bath. These details signal the goodness of the man and his labour, and allow him to be the central focal point (though not literal centre) of this enormous composition. In his diaries, Brown implicitly compared his own research, and his elaborate physical exertions in preparing for and executing the painting, to the labour of the navvies.

A similar painting is John Brett’s ‘The Stonebreaker’, from 1858-59 (two years after the publication of *Barchester Towers*), in which a young boy hammers away at the difficult occupation that Trollope’s Frank Houston so lightly invokes (see Figure 2). Here the boy is fairly well dressed, pink-cheeked, and eminently spotless, splashed by sunlight. This painting, oddly enough, was well loved by Ruskin, though its cleanliness would surely seem unnatural to anyone actually involved in this exercise. Though critics, including Barringer, have worked to show that this painting, too, constitutes a critique of the society that requires such labour from this worker,<sup>25</sup> it nevertheless speaks to the value and moral goodness of the poor labourer it depicts precisely by presenting him as clean.

The only salient English image of a genuinely dirty stone-breaker from this period is Henry Wallis’s 1857 painting, also called ‘The Stonebreaker’, in which an exhausted labourer rests at the foot of a tree (see Figure 3). The man’s face, hands, boots, and clothing are all darkened with dirt. It is difficult to determine whether Wallis’s subject is merely asleep or in fact dead. A stoat or ermine, nearly invisible in the shadows, sits unnoticed on the man’s right foot, and the bent of the man’s head and sprawled legs look so painful that it is hard to imagine that he could sit this way if alive. Wallis resisted clarification when questioned on this subject, and the ambiguity of his painting adds to its disturbing effect. The painting’s muted browns make its own surface appear somewhat dirty. English painters did not regularly begin to depict labour as

---

<sup>23</sup> Sullivan, Dick. ‘The Victorian Navvy,’ <<http://www.victorianweb.org/history/work/navvy.html>> [accessed 12 November 2008].

<sup>24</sup> Sally Mitchell, *Daily Life in Victorian England* (Westport, CT, and London: Greenwood Press, 1996), p. 60.

<sup>25</sup> Barringer, *Men at Work*, p. 98.

difficult, degrading, and dirty until the very end of the nineteenth century, under the influence of the French Naturalists.<sup>26</sup> Wallis's 'Stonebreaker' painting was critically acclaimed for its mimetic skill, but apparently made the general public uncomfortable. The *Athenaeum*, for example, referred to it incorrectly as the 'Dead Stonebreaker', and dismissed it as overwrought: '[It] may be a protest against the Poor-law, but it is still somewhat repulsive and unaccounted for [...] an attempt to excite and to startle by the poetically horrible'.<sup>27</sup>

That it was dirty work, rather than simply dirt or work, that needed hiding from general view is further evident in a number of extracts from nineteenth-century journals and periodicals. The housemaid Hannah Cullwick, for example, recorded in her diary in July of 1860 an exhaustive day's work in terms of where she could and couldn't go, given her dirtiness: 'Got tea at 9 for the master & Mrs Warwick in my dirt, but Ann carried it up. [...] Put the supper ready for Ann to take up, for I was too dirty & tired to go upstairs.'<sup>28</sup> Cullwick's vocabulary identifies the way dirt (created by the work of cleaning) needs to stay where it belongs, at or below ground level (where she prepares tea and supper, in the kitchen), rather than being allowed to taint the atmosphere of the master and his wife on the upper floors by appearing there on her person. There is evidently no problem with the fact that dirty hands are involved with the food—Cullwick is not too dirty to do any particular thing, she is just too dirty to be seen.

A reform-minded *Westminster Review* article, from 1843, on the working classes of Sheffield, similarly focuses on the visibility of dirt. Written by a doctor, the article aims to arouse sympathy for conditions among Sheffield's knife-grinders:

The moral condition of the people appears to be frightfully bad, and their habits and minds utterly sensual. We have seldom met with a more striking and painful picture than that presented by the grinders at Sheffield. As many of our readers are aware, the dust which necessarily attends this operation is vitally pernicious, and

---

<sup>26</sup> Gabriel P. Weisberg, *Beyond Impressionism: The Naturalist Impulse* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1992), pp. 9–23.

<sup>27</sup> *Pre-Raphaelite Critic: Periodical Criticism of the Pre-Raphaelite Movement, 1846-1900* <[http://www.engl.duq.edu/servus/PR\\_Critic/index.html](http://www.engl.duq.edu/servus/PR_Critic/index.html)> [accessed 5 April 2009].

<sup>28</sup> Mitchell, *Daily Life*, p. 52. Cullwick is now of course best known for her relationship with her documenter/employer/husband, Arthur Munby, which was based in part on their mutual erotic interest in the way various kinds of hard work made her appear. This extract, however, shows that in an 'everyday' situation, which, though it may have been written about for Munby, clearly does not describe work done for him.

finally coats the lungs in stone. Sir Arnold Knight, M.D., thus describes this horrid disease [...] “They stoop forward, and appear to breathe most comfortably in that posture [...]. Their complexion assumes a dirty, muddy appearance. Their countenance indicates anxiety.”<sup>29</sup>

Here the writer’s anxious attention to tracing the dirt the grinders create and ingest seems to help explain their unavoidable moral descent, which, just like their dustiness, ‘appears’—is visible to the eye—in the ‘picture’ that they present. The men’s work requires that they stoop forward, getting closer and closer to the ground as their health worsens, and eventually makes their pitiable condition evident in their very faces, as years’ worth of ground stone in the lungs colours their complexions, making them ‘dirty, muddy’. Both the author, a doctor himself, and the doctor he quotes concentrate their attention on dust and dirt here in a way that makes those elements of the situation the principal horror of the grinders’ lives, and the passage works to elicit pity from readers by suggesting that a viewer of these men, forced to recognise their figurative and literal lowness, will also inevitably experience personal pain on sight of this painful picture. This work, and these workers, are bad because they are dirty.

One more useful article, also from 1843, published in the *Edinburgh Review*, is particularly interesting for its stress on the troubling aesthetic presence of dirt. The article’s author invokes a vision of a landscape as though he were describing a painting, and then laments the way recent innovations in working life have spoiled the landscape, and the people associated with it:

In the same valley the green turf may now be disfigured by banks of coal or black shale [...] The change in the appearance of the inhabitants is equally great. The begrimed and sooty collier, the artisan, the colour of whose skin can scarcely be seen through stains of ochre or indigo, seem but sorry representatives of the shepherd or the ploughman.<sup>30</sup>

The particular problem, for this writer, is that the grime and soot of the collier and artisan have obscured their humanity—there is in fact an undeniable racial

---

<sup>29</sup> ‘Working Sheffield’, in *Working Classes in the Victorian Age: Debates on the Issue from 19<sup>th</sup> Century Critical Journals*, with an Introduction by J.M. Goldstrom, Vols. I and II (Hants, England: Gregg International Publishers Limited, 1973), II, p. 464.

<sup>30</sup> ‘Distress of the Manufacturing Districts’, in *Working Classes in the Victorian Age*, p. 195.

element in the critique here, since their filthiness makes ‘colour of [their] skin’ indeterminate. This seems to mark the character of these workers as dubious. The degrading work of “disfiguring” the land by revealing the dark and dirty underside of the once bucolic green turf has thus literally and figuratively “stained” them.

In the context of these extracts’ attitudes toward dirtiness, Trollope’s insistence that dirt be noticed and valued for its relationship to reality is especially significant. A few examples of the way dirtiness, especially working dirtiness, is seen by his characters and narrator will help draw out the full extent of its meaning in the novels. Taken together, these moments suggest not only that the ability and willingness to see dirtiness is a kind of work itself, but that seeing dirt does a kind of work, in that it reveals things that would otherwise remain invisible. The process of looking at things that are dirty can have far-reaching social effects, and can paradoxically uplift both viewer and viewed. Ultimately, Trollope shows that higher things can only be attained and understood through the medium of everyday reality, and suggests that it is the work of the artist that makes this possible.

*The Last Chronicle of Barset* traces the trials of the Reverend Josiah Crawley, a poverty-stricken cleric who, for much of the narrative, is believed to have stolen a cheque and cashed it for himself, and who is so addled by his destitution and by accusations against him that he cannot remember what happened, and is not absolutely certain of his own innocence. Summoned to the Bishop’s Palace and unable to afford a carriage for the thirty-mile round trip, Crawley obstinately decides to walk there, partly because he genuinely believes he should obey the Bishop, and partly to demonstrate the ‘misfortunes which had been unworthily heaped upon his head’ (p. 173). Trollope gives Crawley’s march to the palace a full four pages, in which his muddy state is of central importance: ‘He took great glory from the thought that he would go before the bishop with dirty boots –with boots necessarily dirty [...] he would be hot and mud-stained from his walk’. (p. 174). On meeting a fellow-clergyman, Mr Robarts, Crawley refuses to be persuaded to abandon his walk, though Robarts, concerned with ‘what would be becoming for a clergyman’, points out that the Proudies will certainly notice ‘how dirty your shoes were when you came to the palace’. As Crawley ‘walk[s] on through the thick mud, by no means picking his way’ (p. 176), he is slightly ridiculous, yet on firm ground, morally speaking. In the course of the novel, such glorious muddiness takes on more and more weight as a state of being, calling attention to realities that need to be recognised and understood.

Crawley’s muddy march has social implications that directly contradict

the commonplace Victorian idea of hiding dirty work. In a remarkable passage, Trollope's narrator explains that the brick-makers of Hoggstock, a group Crawley has been especially attentive to within the parish, have taken on their particular line of work because 'the nature of the earth in those parts combin[ed] with the canal to make brickmaking a suitable trade' (p. 117). Like Ruskin's artist-workers, the work of these men is in the most fundamental sense natural, dependent on the nature of the very ground as a means of earning an everyday living. Unfortunately, however, the narrator points out that the workers have 'a bad name in the country', because they often get drunk and fight with their wives. That the brick-makers should be rough and degenerate, comparable to those of the widely condemned knife-grinders and navvies in reform literature, is perhaps unsurprising, but the narrator goes on to explain how their degeneracy should be viewed:

It should be remembered that among the poor, especially when they live in clusters, such misfortunes cannot be hidden as they may be amidst the decent belongings of more wealthy people. That they worked very hard was certain [...] What became of the old brickmakers no one knew. Who ever sees a worn-out aged navvy? (p. 118)

Here, unlike in so much nineteenth-century literature, it becomes clear that hiding the dirtiness and attendant ill behaviour of hard work does nothing to solve or change misfortune. These lines, rather than endorsing, expose the trouble and misfortune of the middle- and higher-class counterparts of the brickmakers by insisting on an abiding similarity between the two groups. The worn-out navvy – a degraded version of Ford Madox Brown's clean, youthful, virtuous labourer – is invoked to suggest that someone should know what becomes of him, that he needs to be seen. Only genuine recognition of these figures in their dirt can bring about needed change.

This point is made clear when, much later in the novel, Crawley, still suffering under accusations of theft, is seated outside in the pouring rain, lost in thought and 'quite unobservant of anything around him'. At this point he is approached by one of brickmakers, an elderly worker named Hoggett who, unsurprisingly, is 'soaked with mire, and from whom there seemed to come a steam of muddy mist'. The man points out that Crawley, too, is soaked, at which point Crawley is 'recalled suddenly back to the realities of life'. He looks at the brickmaker, sees him in his dirt, and recognises that the two of them are in the same pitiable state (p. 645).

Thus a moment of visual recognition brings muddy “reality” into focus. We must wonder, however, what kind of work it would take to respond to this reality properly. Describing the damp- and mud-related rheumatism he suffers, Hoggett’s answer is to be “dogged” in the face of adversity: ‘It’s dogged as does it. It ain’t thinking about it.’ Doggedness, Crawley realizes, is in effect a call for ‘self-abnegation’ (p. 646), and he dejectedly tries to follow suit by at last submitting to his critics’ demands and giving up his parish, stopping his own work altogether. However, Trollope makes it clear that, just as poor Hoggett should not be forced to bear his rheumatism without recourse, Crawley should not be cowed into giving up his clerical position without a fight. As one character puts it, ‘I do not suppose that any person wishes him to throw up his work’ (p. 647).

When at last Crawley’s friends, zealously working on his behalf, resolve the mystery of the cheque and prove his innocence, his good name is restored and he is offered a better-paying position as a clergyman, along with a new coat and an upper-class son-in-law. This raises an important question. In general, the choice to look at dirty reality and to work through it has, in Trollope’s fiction, a restorative domestic effect between individuals: Frank can marry Imogen, Ayala can marry Stubbs, the Crawleys can be restored to domestic harmony, their daughter can marry. These are standard novelistic resolutions, at which Trollope himself pokes fun through Signora Negroni’s comment in *Barchester Towers* that ‘There is no happiness in love, except at the end of an English novel.’<sup>31</sup> What, however, happens to a Hoggett, who is not heard from again in the *Last Chronicle*, but whose rheumatism is a far more pernicious and widespread kind of phenomenon than Crawley’s individual case of poverty?

Though we get no particular answer to this, Trollope’s *Autobiography* picks up on the image of dirt so resonant in his artist novels and broadens its implications, using it to address more far-reaching social questions. In it, Trollope hints that individuals are not enough to help ameliorate troubling realities, and begins to imagine working through larger networks and groups of people. Discussing *The Vicar of Bullhampton*, Trollope writes he envisions prostitutes ‘chiefly with the object of exciting not only pity but sympathy for fallen women,’ as individuals suffering in their “gaudy dirt” and banished from “honest labour”. Here the whole social institution of prostitution is summed up as, essentially, dirty work. Trollope continues,

to me the mistake which we too often make seems to be this,—that the girl who has gone astray is put out of sight [...] as though she had

---

<sup>31</sup> Trollope, *Barchester Towers*, p. 274.



never existed, and that this ferocity comes [...] from a dread of the taint which the sin brings with it [...] mothers and sisters [...] should remember this, and not fear contamination so strongly.<sup>32</sup>

In the midst of urging that the gaudy dirt of these women not be ‘put out of sight’ and not be turned away from, Trollope includes himself in the ‘we’ who wrongly pretend that they ‘had never existed’. At the same time, he fashions himself as the figure who, through his writing, brings them back into view by describing them visually.

Caroline Levine has brilliantly argued that Ruskin’s own efforts toward ‘visual labour’ connect his devotion to painterly realism and his socialist tendencies. In ‘The Nature of the Gothic’ Ruskin’s thorough critique of slavery argues that good, thoughtful work ‘fosters a resistance to the repetitions of the machine’. Levine sees Ruskin’s realism and socialism both promoting labour to bring about a desired result: thoughtful appreciation of individual details and particularities, rather than a mindless acceptance of preconceived ideas that tend to reinforce stereotyped generalities. Thus, for Levine, Ruskin’s ‘radical realism’ anticipates today’s critical attempts to ‘produce a responsible picture of the Other, [making possible] ethical, dynamic, thoughtful representations’.<sup>33</sup> In this same vein, Amanda Claybaugh offers an account of Anglo-American realism in which realist novelists borrowed from nineteenth-century reform, conceiving of themselves as reformers who could act upon the world via readers.<sup>34</sup> I would suggest that in the end Trollope goes one step further than Ruskin. As I have tried to show here, Trollope directly and openly connects a visual recognition of ‘the real’ to those that, socially speaking, might at first seem ‘Other,’ all the while demonstrating, like Ruskin, that this kind of recognition is an ongoing process rather than a fixed end goal. That is, since Trollope shows that work continues to be needed, and needs to be continued, in order to bring about change and progress, we cannot simply say that he adds a new category—the dirty—to a list of static things-to-be-looked-at. Rather, Trollope demonstrates that dirt, dust, stone, and mud have potential as mediating elements; that they may be worth seeing *through*, as it were, for what they cover, if one is doing the right kind of looking.

---

<sup>32</sup> Anthony Trollope, *An Autobiography*, ed. by David Skilton (London: Penguin Books, 1996), p. 207.

<sup>33</sup> Caroline Levine, ‘Visual Labor: Ruskin’s Radical Realism’, in *Victorian Literature and Culture* (2000), pp. 80–81.

<sup>34</sup> See Amanda Claybaugh, *The Novel of Purpose: Literature and Social Reform in the Anglo-American World* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007).

For Trollope, the right kind of looking involves the reading of novels. Trollope's famous narrative voice repeatedly calls attention to two facts: first, that he is depicting for us a world that is like reality but is not real, and second, that the construction of that world is an artistic undertaking that requires enormous labour. In *Barchester Towers*; Trollope's narrator interrupts the story with this comment:

These leave-takings in novels are as disagreeable as they are in real life; not so sad, indeed, for they want the reality of sadness; but quite as perplexing [...] What novelist [...] can apportion out and dovetail his incidents, dialogues, characters, and descriptive morsels, so as to fit them all exactly into 439 pages, without either compressing them unnaturally, or extending them artificially at the end of his labour? (pp. 251-2)

Maintaining this distinction between reality and fiction – reminding readers of the reality outside of the confines of the novel by evoking our reality *within* the pages of the novel – is for Trollope a great artistic labour, the 'art of telling tales'. Ever mindful of the value of work, Trollope compares the labour of writing to that of a cobbler throughout his *Autobiography*.<sup>35</sup> Referring to himself as he has to his many of his artist characters, Trollope casts artistic creation as inseparable from the daily drudgery of simple, necessary work, both instrumental and expressive.

It is noteworthy that some of Trollope's most oft-quoted critics, whether praising or condemning his work, invoke earthliness or groundedness to describe it. Henry James conceded approvingly that Trollope's characters 'stand on their feet'.<sup>36</sup> (The cobbler has done his work.) Nathaniel Hawthorne, whom Trollope quoted delightedly in his *Autobiography*, referred to Trollope's novels as

<sup>35</sup> Surely shoemaking is the most appropriate of all possible occupations for the creator of the righteously muddy shoes of Josiah Crawley. According to Kate Thomas, Trollope compares writing to shoemaking at least five times in his *Autobiography*; perhaps the most famous of these comments is 'I was once told that the surest aid to the writing of a book was a piece of cobbler's wax on my chair. I certainly believe in the cobbler's wax more than the inspiration' (1:162–63); see Thomas's *Postal Pleasures: Sex, Scandal, and Victorian Letters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 77.

<sup>36</sup> Quoted in Henry N. Roger, 'The Fixed Period: Trollope's "Modest Proposal"', *Utopian Studies*, 10 (1999), p. 651. Significantly, one of the few Trollope characters who does not 'stand on her feet' – the mysterious lameness of Signora Negroni – is frequently described as though she were a work of art. Mrs. Proudie calls her 'an object' (1.104); she is 'perfect' (1.76), 'so beautiful and yet so motionless' (1.92), 'a vision'. She is in this sense 'high art,' which does not do any work in Trollope's world, and so is set apart from the rest of the 'reality' that the novel delineates.

being ‘just as real as if some giant had hewn a great lump out of the earth and put it under a glass case, with all its inhabitants going about their daily business.’<sup>37</sup> Aside from Hawthorne’s implicit connection between earthy ground and ‘daily business’ here, it is significant that he describes himself as though he were watching the characters ‘under a glass case’: this is a visual experience.

What, then, is the reader’s work? Partly, surely, it is to think. Hoggett’s ‘it ain’t thinking about it’ is untenable for Trollope, and his narrators consistently urge readers to think for themselves, as when *Barchester Tower’s* narrator imagines a reader who will ‘lay down the book with disgust, feeling that, after all, the heroine is unworthy of sympathy’ (p. 2.145). Here, Trollope imagines the novel itself “at work”, affecting its readers; permission to judge a character bespeaks a certain thought process on the part of the reader, a requirement that he or she consider engaging with the story by opposing the narrator’s thoughts.

For Trollope, the novel’s work is to take part in the everyday; in the same way that Trollope’s imagined reader can lay down her book, she is expected to use the novel, to think and realize with the book as the mediating element, and to work. ‘My only doubt as to finding a heaven for myself at last’, Trollope once wrote, ‘arises from the fear that the disembodied and beatified spirits will not want novels.’<sup>38</sup> Perhaps this is because the embodied, unbeatified bodies and going about their daily business on this great lump of earth do want them very much.

---

<sup>37</sup> Trollope, *Autobiography*, c. 8.

<sup>38</sup> N. John Hall, ‘Trollope and Carlyle’, *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 27 (1972), p. 205.



Figure I—*Work*, Ford Madox Brown, 1852 –1865.



Figure 2—John Brett, *The Stonebreaker*, 1857–58.





Figure 3—Henry Wallis, *The Stonebreaker*, 1857–58.

## Bibliography

Barringer, T.J., *Men at Work: Art and Labour in Victorian Britain* (Hartford, CT: Yale University Press, 2005).

Callen, Anthea, *The Art of Impressionism: Painting Technique and the Making of Modernity* (Hartford, CT: Yale University Press, 2000).

Claybaugh, Amanda, *The Novel of Purpose: Literature and Social Reform in the Anglo-American World* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007).

Curtis, Gerard, 'Ford Madox Brown's "Work": An Iconographic Analysis', *The Art Bulletin*, 74 (1992), pp. 623–636.

Davidoff, Leonore, and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780-1850* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

Dever, Carolyn, and Lisa Niles, *The Cambridge Companion to Anthony Trollope* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

'Distress of the Manufacturing Districts', *Working Classes in the Victorian Age: Debates on the Issue from 19<sup>th</sup> Century Critical Journals*, with an Introduction by J.M. Goldstrom, Vols. I and II (Hants, England: Gregg International Publishers Limited, 1973), I, p. 195.

Eastlake, Sir Charles Lock, *Methods and Materials of Painting of the Great Schools and Masters*, v. 1 (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1960).

Freeland, Natalka, 'The Politics of Dirt in *Mary Barton* and *Ruth*', *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, v. 42, no. 4, *The Nineteenth Century*, Autumn, 2002, pp. 799-818.

Gleig, The Reverend G.R., *Domestic Economy* (London: Longman, Brown, Green, Longmans, & Roberts, 1856).

Hall, N. John, 'Trollope and Carlyle', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 27 (1972), pp. 197-205.

Herbert, Christopher, 'Filthy Lucre: Victorian Ideas of Money', *Victorian Studies* (2002), pp. 185-213.

Levine, Caroline, 'Visual Labor: Ruskin's Radical Realism', in *Victorian Literature and Culture* (2000), pp. 73-86.

McClintock, Anne, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

Mitchell, Sally, *Daily Life in Victorian England* (Westport, CT, and London: Greenwood Press, 1996).

Morse, Deborah Denenholz, *Reforming Trollope: Race, Gender, and Englishness in the Novels of Anthony Trollope* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate

Publishing Company, 2013).

Mullen, Richard, with James Munson, *The Penguin Companion to Trollope* (New York: Penguin Books, 1996).

Neville-Sington, Pamela, 'Trollope, Thomas Adolphus (1810–1892)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. by H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

<<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/27755>>

*Pre-Raphaelite Critic: Periodical Criticism of the Pre-Raphaelite Movement, 1846-1900*

<[http://www.engl.duq.edu/servus/PR\\_Critic/index.html](http://www.engl.duq.edu/servus/PR_Critic/index.html)>.

Prettejohn, Elizabeth, *Art of the Pre-Raphaelites* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).

Priestly, Philip, *Victorian Prison Lives: English Prison Biography, 1830–1914* (New York: Routledge, 1985).

Rees, Nigel, *Brewer's Famous Quotations* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2006).

[http://books.google.com/books?id=uiribovti4c&pg=pa489&lpg=pa489&dq=john+wesley+sermons+cleanliness+godliness&source=web&ots=wwgvvgg7zkx&sig=sn9x6d7cphpdxytgoibiz6iv-no&hl=en&sa=x&oi=book\\_result&resnum=3&ct=result%23ppa489.m1](http://books.google.com/books?id=uiribovti4c&pg=pa489&lpg=pa489&dq=john+wesley+sermons+cleanliness+godliness&source=web&ots=wwgvvgg7zkx&sig=sn9x6d7cphpdxytgoibiz6iv-no&hl=en&sa=x&oi=book_result&resnum=3&ct=result%23ppa489.m1)

Reynolds, Graham, *Victorian Painting* (New York: Macmillan, 1966).

Roger, Henry N., 'The Fixed Period: Trollope's "Modest Proposal"', *Utopian Studies*, 10 (1999), pp. 16–24.

Ruskin, John, *Elements of Drawing* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1857).

Ruskin, John, *The Stones of Venice* (New York: Merrill and Baker, 1851).

Sullivan, Dick, 'The Victorian Navy'

<<http://www.victorianweb.org/history/work/navvy.html>>

Taubes, Frederic, *The Painter's Question and Answer Book, With*

*Contributions by Thomas Hart Benton, Jacob Getlar Smith, Aaron Bohrod, and Henry Varnum Poor* (New York: Watson-Guption Publication, Inc., 1948).

Thomas, Kate, *Postal Pleasures: Sex, Scandal, and Victorian Letters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

Townsend, Joyce H., Jacqueline Ridge, and Stephen Hackney, *Pre-Raphaelite Painting Techniques, 1848-56* (London: Tate Publishing, 2004).

Trollope, Anthony, *An Autobiography*, ed. by David Skilton. (London: Penguin Books, 1996).

---. *Ayala's Angel* (London: Trollope Society, 1989).

---. *Barchester Towers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

---. *Last Chronicle of Barset* (New York: Penguin Books, 2002)

Weisberg, Gabriel P., *Beyond Impressionism: The Naturalist Impulse* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1992).

'Working Sheffield', in *Working Classes in the Victorian Age: Debates on the Issue from 19<sup>th</sup> Century Critical Journals*, with an Introduction by J.M. Goldstrom, Vols. I and II (Hants, England: Gregg International Publishers Limited, 1973), II, p. 464.



## DIRT, DUST AND DEVILMENT: UNCOVERING FILTH IN THE WORKHOUSE AND CASUAL WARDS

Laura Foster

(Cardiff University)

### *Abstract*

In an era of increasing anxiety about the filth of the slums and the threat of disease, it is little wonder that ideas of dirt and cleanliness come to prominence in discussions about the nineteenth-century workhouse. Cleanliness, with its long-standing associations of health and morality, was an integral part of the disciplinary mechanism of the institution, functioning to contain and control the disorderly pauper body. Many workhouse representations, however, suggest that the ostensible cleanliness of the workhouse space is nothing more than an oppressive facade that obscures a crueller and dirtier reality. In narratives of the workhouse casual wards, descriptions of dirt intensify and the excess of filth is shown to pose a bodily and psychological threat to the poor. This article explores the representation of the workhouse and casual wards through the lens of cleanliness and dirt, and analyses the connection of filth to ideas of contagion; sexuality; the body; and social class.

The 1834 New Poor Law overhauled the provision for the destitute. It sought to reduce drastically expenditure on outdoor relief, usually dispensed in the form of money or food, by making the workhouse the main form of support offered to the poor. In order to avoid any possible enticement to indoor pauperism, the workhouses were to be made institutions of discipline and so 'intolerable to the indolent and disorderly'.<sup>1</sup> Within the workhouse, paupers were segregated by age and sex, made to wear a uniform, follow a timetable that dictated meal, work and bed times, eat a regulated diet and, in the case of able-bodied adults, carry out physically-demanding work. The tenet behind the disciplinary workhouse was that, whilst the genuinely impoverished would be grateful for the shelter, idle claimants would instead choose to support themselves independently.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> *Report from His Majesty's Commissioners for Inquiring into the Administration and Practical Operation of the Poor Laws*, Ordered by the House of Commons to be printed 21 February 1834, p. 129.

<sup>2</sup> For more information on the New Poor Law and its workhouses, see M. A. Crowther, *The Workhouse System 1834–1929: The History of an English Social Institution* (London: Methuen, 1983).

The rules of the workhouse, included in an appendix to the *First Annual Report of the Poor Law Commissioners for England and Wales* (1835), suggest that cleanliness was an inherent part of the disciplinary regime. They stipulate that, before admittance to the house, paupers must first be ‘thoroughly cleansed’.<sup>3</sup> Within the workhouse, paupers were supposed to be subjected to daily scrutiny; it was the duty of the master ‘[t]o inspect and call over the names of all the paupers immediately after morning prayers every day, and see that each individual is clean, and in a proper state’.<sup>4</sup> Punishment, in the form of ‘confinement or alteration of diet’, would be meted out to anyone who did not ‘duly cleanse his or her person’.<sup>5</sup> The workhouse, and its staff, were also under the surveillance of the board of workhouse guardians, who periodically inspected the house and oversaw the master and matron. The rules instruct the guardians to check that the house is ‘clean and well ventilated in every part’ and that ‘the inmates of the workhouse, of all classes, appear clean in their persons, and decent and orderly in their language and demeanour’.<sup>6</sup> This latter instruction associates bodily cleanliness with ‘decent and orderly’ behaviour and draws attention to the assumed link between cleanly habits and moral character. The surveillance of cleanliness in the workhouse links it to ideas of discipline and control. As Michel Foucault points out, ‘[h]e who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself’.<sup>7</sup> The subjection of the inmates to the inspecting gaze of the master, and the master to the gaze of the guardians, creates a ‘field of visibility’ in the workhouse. This awareness of being visible, and the threat of punishment or dismissal would, in theory, ensure that the residents conformed to the workhouse rules.

The idea of cleanliness as a disciplinary mechanism, and its association with ‘decent’ behaviour, is nowhere more evident than in Harriet Martineau’s

---

<sup>3</sup> *First Annual Report of the Poor Law Commissioners for England and Wales*, Ordered by the House of Commons to be Printed, 10 August 1835, p. 59.

<sup>4</sup> *First Annual Report*, p. 62.

<sup>5</sup> *First Annual Report*, p. 61.

<sup>6</sup> *First Annual Report*, p. 61.

<sup>7</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin, 1991), p. 202. Foucault is discussing Jeremy Bentham’s late-eighteenth-century plan for a panopticon prison. Early architectural designs for New Poor Law workhouses incorporated the central supervisory hub that was integral to the panopticon. See Kathryn Morrison, *The Workhouse: A Study of Poor-Law Buildings in England* (Swindon: English Heritage at the National Monuments Record Centre, 1999).

*The Hamlets: A Tale* (1833). This fictional narrative is one of four tales in the propagandist series *Poor Laws and Paupers Illustrated* (1833–34), commissioned by the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge to expose the supposed iniquities of the Old Poor Law, and to promote the principles that would form the basis of the New Poor Law.<sup>8</sup> As Oz Frankel notes, each of the tales ‘purported to demonstrate the supposed abuses and corrupting effects of parish relief and the benefits of reform’.<sup>9</sup> *The Hamlets* is set within a small community that has been ruined by a lax system of outdoor relief. In order to remove the enticement to pauperism, the new overseer, Mr Barry, replaces this system of relief with the offer of the workhouse. The existing workhouse, which is thought of by paupers as ‘no bad lot to live in’, is transformed under Mr Barry’s instruction into a deterrent institution.<sup>10</sup> Inside the house, the paupers are segregated by gender, made to work, wear a uniform and denied luxurious food and drink. A brick wall shuts off their view of the road and they are no longer allowed to come and go as they please.

A regime of cleanliness operates within the overhauled workhouse. When Adams, a work-shy pauper, is admitted to the institution, he is confronted by a space in which there is ‘[n]ot a speck, or a crack, or a cobweb [...] to be seen along the whole range of the whitewashed walls’ (p. 38). Lauren Goodlad points out that, in her Poor Law fiction, Martineau’s ‘intent was clearly to present deterrence as a means by which working-class habits might be almost instantaneously transformed’; interestingly, it is the cleanliness of the institution that seems to have the most immediate effect on the behaviour of the paupers.<sup>11</sup> Adams finds the thorough cleanliness disconcerting: so unused is he to ‘so clean a place, that he looked round him with some degree of awe, and walked as if he trod on eggs’ (p. 38). The ‘awe’-inspiring cleanliness implicitly exerts control over Adams’ body, making him exercise self-restraint in his movements.

---

<sup>8</sup> For more information on Martineau and her politics, see Elaine Freedgood, ‘Banishing Panic: Harriet Martineau and the Popularization of Political Economy’, *Victorian Studies*, 39:1 (1995), pp. 33–55.

<sup>9</sup> Oz Frankel, *States of Inquiry: Social Investigations and Print Culture in Nineteenth-Century Britain and the United States* (Maryland: John Hopkins University Press, 2006), p. 39.

<sup>10</sup> Harriet Martineau, *Poor Laws and Paupers Illustrated: The Hamlets. A Tale* (London: Charles Fox, 1833), p. 36. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

<sup>11</sup> Lauren Goodlad, *Victorian Literature and the Victorian State* (Maryland: John Hopkins University Press, 2003), p. 57.

The cleanliness demanded in the workhouse has connotations of parental and religious instruction: Adams is made to '[beautify] himself with soap and water, to a degree which he had not practised since his mother taught him how to dress on a Sunday morning' (p. 38). These associations are seen once again when the male paupers, having finished their stint grinding corn, are sent through to the dining hall; the text relates that

[t]here was something [...] in the aspect of the apartment which at once quieted their glee. The cleanliness and order put them in mind of Sunday; of the old Sundays, which they did not like to look back upon (p. 40).

The reluctance of the paupers to remember these 'old Sundays' suggests that they are evocative of chastisement and restraint. It seems that the cleanliness demanded in the workhouse exerts control over both the bodies and minds of the poor, covertly disciplining them into "good" behaviour; cleanliness suppresses the paupers' riotous nature and, psychologically, returns them to a state of disempowered childhood.

The discipline enforced in the workhouse is such that the paupers decide that a life of work outside the institution is preferable to an idle one living off the state. After one night in the workhouse, the paupers rush out of the gates and, at the end of the tale, pauperism has been eliminated from the community. A grateful magistrate says to the overseer:

[l]et there never be an end of honouring Howard for having explored the depths of prison-houses; but he achieves a yet nobler task, who so sweeps out the abominations of our pauper-houses as to leave no temptations to guilt and idleness to harbour there (p. 162).<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> In *The State of the Prisons* (1777), John Howard exposed the poor conditions of prisons and advocated for reform.

The reformation of poor relief is couched here in the language of cleanliness. The implementation of a newly disciplinary system is akin to a moral broom that 'sweeps' the institution clean of the metaphorical dirt of 'guilt' and 'idleness'. Advocating for a similar overhaul of the existing Poor Law, the text equates the inauguration of a system of disciplinary poor relief to an act of ideological spring cleaning.

Martineau's fictional workhouse is the saviour of the community; it removes the enticement to pauperism while simultaneously providing for the truly destitute, who are 'thankful to be saved from starvation' (p. 46). In the anti-Poor Law literature that circulated in the wake of the passing of the New Poor Law, however, workhouses were characterised as 'bastilles', in which the poor were starved, neglected and beaten.<sup>13</sup> The intense debates about the New Poor Law led to the publication of articles that sought to assuage public anxieties about the workhouses. Favourable accounts of workhouses appeared, for instance, in *Chambers's Edinburgh Gazette* and in the *Penny Magazine*. Amongst other strengths, such accounts note with approbation the cleanliness of the workhouse space. 'Visit to an English Workhouse', published in *Chambers*, is a first-hand report of a gentleman's exploration of a workhouse near London. In the account, he relates that 'every thing is kept as clean as a new shilling, and wears an air of comfort'.<sup>14</sup> An article in the series 'A Few Weeks from Home' (1841), also published in *Chambers*, is equally encouraging; it comments upon the 'spotless purity' of the Battersea workhouse and describes the wards of St George's as 'neat' and 'clean'.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, in the article 'Two Hours at a Union Workhouse' (1841), in *Penny Magazine*, the narrator remarks that 'the rooms are cheerful, light, airy, clean even to a Dutch housewife's cleanliness'.<sup>16</sup> According to these texts, then, the scrupulous cleanliness of Martineau's workhouse also existed in reality. The association of cleanliness with 'comfort', 'purity' and 'cheerful[ness]' serves to dispel disquiet about the treatment of the workhouse poor. Despite these positive associations, cleanliness remains deterrent. 'Two Hours' claims that, the 'dirty

---

<sup>13</sup> See, for instance, G. R. Wythen Baxter, *The Book of the Bastiles; or, the History of the Working of the New Poor Law* (London: J. Stevens, 1841).

<sup>14</sup> 'Visit to an English Workhouse', *Chambers's Edinburgh Journal*, 23 September 1837, p. 277.

<sup>15</sup> 'A Few Weeks from Home: Visit to Workhouses', *Chambers's Edinburgh Journal*, 13 February 1841, pp. 29–30; p. 29.

<sup>16</sup> 'Two Hours at a Union Workhouse', *Penny Magazine of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge*, 9 October 1841, pp. 397–398; p. 397.

vagabond [...] likes not the cleanliness and order [...] abides not here'.<sup>17</sup> The article suggests that the cleanliness of the workhouse dissuades the idle poor from consuming the nation's resources.

The belief that dirtiness was synonymous with immorality gained the weight of officialdom in Edwin Chadwick's *Report on the Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Population of Great Britain* (1842).<sup>18</sup> Chadwick had gone to extraordinary lengths in conducting this influential social investigation; Priti Joshi explains that he 'contacted over two thousand poor law guardians, medical officers, factory inspectors, and local luminaries [...] and asked them detailed questions on the conditions of poor homes, streets, drains, morals, and manners'.<sup>19</sup> The subsequent *Report* revealed to the public the intrinsic connection between dirt, dissipation, and disease, and demonstrated the need for improvements in public sanitation.<sup>20</sup> In the *Report*, a brief mention of the workhouse serves to consolidate the idea that paupers had a natural, and dangerous, affinity to dirt. It is related that, when new paupers are washed prior to admittance to the workhouse, 'they usually manifest an extreme repugnance to the process'.<sup>21</sup> This objection to washing is not because it is a cold or otherwise uncomfortable experience but, the text suggests, because dirt is seen by them as a possession.<sup>22</sup> Thus, '[t]heir common feeling was expressed by one of them when he declared that he considered it "equal to

<sup>17</sup> 'Two Hours at a Union Workhouse', p. 398.

<sup>18</sup> In their analysis of the *Report*, Peter Stallybrass and Allon White draw attention to a 'metaphorical language in which filth stands in for the slum-dweller: the poor *are* pigs'. Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (London: Methuen, 1986), p. 131.

<sup>19</sup> Priti Joshi, 'Edwin Chadwick's Self-Fashioning: Professionalism, Masculinity, and the Victorian Poor', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 32:2 (2004), pp. 353–370; p. 359. Chadwick, secretary to the three Poor Law Commissioners, had previously assisted in collecting information for the 1832 Royal Commission into the Operation of the Poor Laws.

<sup>20</sup> Chadwick ensured that his findings were widely disseminated by sending copies of the *Report* to newspapers and journals. See Mary Poovey, *Making a Social Body: British Cultural Formation, 1830–1864* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 117.

<sup>21</sup> Edwin Chadwick, *Report on the Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Population of Great Britain*, ed. M. W. Flinn [1842] (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1965), p. 316.

<sup>22</sup> As Nataalka Freeland comments, 'many Victorians considered the omnipresent coincidence of filth and poverty evidence that the poor chose to be dirty. Thus, Edwin Chadwick complains that sanitary progress is an uphill battle because the poor value their dirt as their only property.' Nataalka Freeland, 'The Politics of Dirt in *Mary Barton* and *Ruth*', *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900*, 42:4 (2002), pp. 799–818 (p. 802).

robbing him of a great coat which he had had for some years".<sup>23</sup> This comparison to a 'coat' invests dirt with ideas of warmth, protection and familiarity, all of which are stripped away by the workhouse. The ensuing text makes clear, however, that the enforced cleanliness is for the good of the poor; it claims that, when sick paupers are brought to the infirmary, 'the act of cleansing them is itself the most efficient cure'.<sup>24</sup> Dirt, then, is shown to be the direct cause of disease in the poor; in its role as remover of dirt, the workhouse heals the pauper body.

Collectively, narratives such as *The Hamlets*, 'Two Hours' and Chadwick's *Report* construct the binary opposition of clean workhouse versus dirty poor. This dichotomy is unsettled, however, by numerous texts that challenge the sanitary representation of the workhouse. In 1856, the cleanliness of the Chorlton union workhouse was disputed in the pages of the *Manchester Times* by a poor but educated woman who claimed to be a former inmate. Amongst numerous other ills, her letter draws attention to the deficiency of the facilities for personal hygiene in the institution:

In a well-conducted workhouse it is generally supposed there is every accommodation for perfect personal cleanliness for those who wish to avail themselves of the privilege, but this I soon discovered was a mistake. The morning after my arrival I wished to wash myself before breakfast, and followed the other women towards the washhouse for that purpose; but there was neither soap nor towel. Upon inquiring for them, they laughed at my simplicity in asking such a question, and said I must not expect a towel there, as they always used their aprons or petticoats for that purpose; and which I did while I remained there.<sup>25</sup>

The writer dispels here the public expectation that 'perfect personal cleanliness' is synonymous with the workhouse; the idea of soap and a clean

---

<sup>23</sup> Chadwick, *Report on the Sanitary Condition*, p. 316.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> 'The Chorlton Union Workhouse', *Manchester Times*, 22 November 1856, p. 7.

towel apparently provoked mirth amongst women used to drying their bodies with their petticoats.

In addition to the lack of soap and towels needed for cleaning the body, this workhouse also apparently lacked the utensils needed to clean the space:

I cannot pass over the very poor supply of articles for cleaning, which are or were in the building. Upon every scrubbing day, everything had to be looked for, by which a deal of time was lost, and the unlucky cleaners reaped the benefit thereof. No pail! no scrubbing brushes! no floor cloths! in fact, nothing in a place where one would expect to find a plentiful supply of such things and a proper place for all of them.<sup>26</sup>

The depiction of missing and misplaced cleaning paraphernalia draws attention to, and subverts, the association of the workhouse with cleanliness and order. Not only this, but the process of cleaning the house seems to be doubly disciplinary: as well as being labour intensive, it is hinted that the 'unlucky cleaners', forced to waste time searching for lost items, are punished for completing their task too slowly. This lack of soap, towels, brushes and pails, the letter suggests, goes unnoticed by the workhouse guardians and other visitors to the institution: as the writer bitterly points out, '[a]nyone visiting this place on Friday (the guardians' day) would naturally say, – what a nice, clean, comfortable place it was'.<sup>27</sup> The text exposes the superficial nature of comfort and cleanliness, suggesting that it is a facade put on for the guardians.

Unsurprisingly, the letter was met with animosity by some of the guardians. An account of a board meeting, published in the *Manchester Times*, reveals that a Mr Markland contested the authenticity of the letter and its contents: Markland alleged that he had made a surprise visit to the workhouse that very morning, found the entire building to be clean, and a supply of fresh towels in the wash-house. If the women were not clean, he argued, then this

---

<sup>26</sup> 'The Chorlton Union Workhouse', p. 7.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.



was their choice: '[t]hey had plenty of soap, and dried themselves in their own way, and if they had chosen to have gone into the wash-house, they might have had towels'.<sup>28</sup> His words suggest that any lack of personal cleanliness in the institution was the result of the dirty habits of the paupers themselves.

Provoked by these accusations of dishonesty, the woman responded with a second letter. Ideas of cleanliness come once again to the fore, as the writer contends that 'I did not say anything about the building being dirty; in fact, in my opinion, they carry their cleanliness to an excess there, as the rooms which are unoccupied are continually being cleaned'.<sup>29</sup> This idea of 'excess' cleanliness is intrinsically linked in the two letters to corporal punishment and cruelty. These accounts of the workhouse tell of 'sore knees', 'aching limbs' and freezing hands consequent upon completing cleaning tasks.<sup>30</sup> The act of cleaning it seems, is an indirect way of meting out violence upon the bodies of the women. While physical labour is a way to punish the pauper body, the knowledge that the endless scrubbing of empty rooms is pointless is also a form of psychological punishment.

Disturbingly, in the second letter, the writer alleges to have witnessed pregnant women 'within a day of their confinement [...] sent to clean the outside of the top windows, by sitting on the narrow stone ledge'.<sup>31</sup> This dangerous task suggests the little value placed on the life of an unborn pauper child; the pregnant pauper belly is implicitly seen to contain only another burden upon the poor rates. The writer also alleges that she saw a mother ordered from her dying child's bedside to work in the washhouse.<sup>32</sup> In these accounts of the workhouse, cleanliness is stripped of its positive associations of

---

<sup>28</sup> 'Chorlton Board of Guardians', *Manchester Times*, 29 November 1856, p. 7.

<sup>29</sup> 'The Chorlton Guardians and their Workhouse', *Manchester Times*, 6 December 1856, p. 7.

<sup>30</sup> 'The Chorlton Union Workhouse', p. 7.

<sup>31</sup> 'The Chorlton Guardians and their Workhouse', p. 7.

<sup>32</sup> The letters led to an official inquiry. The letter writer, identified in a report in the *Manchester Times* as a Mrs Clarke, was unable to substantiate her allegations. The nurse of the infant nursery testified that the mother of the dying child was not called away to the washhouse. During the inquiry, significance was placed upon Clarke's social class: it was stated that she was 'not one of the class which usually find their way into a workhouse' and that 'she was never brought up to scouring and washing'. The transcript suggests that perception of workhouse conditions is dependent upon social class: while the cleaning work demanded in the house may be gruelling for Clarke, it would not be found so by the other paupers. See 'The Chorlton Board of Guardians', *Manchester Times*, 20 December 1856, p. 4.

health and morality and instead takes on connotations of dehumanising cruelty and ‘excess’.<sup>33</sup>

The sense of excessiveness about workhouse cleanliness is also apparent (initially at least) in Anne Thackeray-Ritchie’s novella, *Jack the Giant-Killer* (1867–68). The story appeared in three parts in the middle-class family publication *Cornhill Magazine*. A contemporary rewriting of the classic fairy tale, the story features, not a mythical giant, but the monstrosities and inhumanities of the workhouse authorities. The protagonist of the narrative is Jack Trevithic, a clergyman, who initially visits the Hammersley workhouse because he is considering applying for the position of chaplain. Again, the ostensible cleanliness of the workhouse conceals a miserable reality. On a tour of the workhouse wards, Jack is depressed ‘by the sight of so much that was sad, and in orderly rows, and in a blue cotton uniform’; everywhere he looks he sees imposing whitewashed walls and, after leaving, he remains disturbed by the remembrance of ‘hopelessness, age, failure, all neatly stowed away, and whitewashed over’.<sup>34</sup> The text suggests that there is something unnatural and ‘haunt[ing]’ about the orderliness imposed upon the workhouse paupers.<sup>35</sup> Read retrospectively, the emphasis upon the whitewashed walls implicitly points to the ‘whitewashing’ of the systemic cruelties of this workhouse.

Though Jack initially refuses the post, the workhouse intrudes back into his life in the form of Davy Hopkins, a former pauper, who he discovers lying in a ditch. Davy explains to Jack that he has left the workhouse for good and claims that, ‘I’d rather die in the ditch any day than go back to that d— place’.<sup>36</sup> In answer to Jack’s protest that ‘[it] looked clean and comfortable enough’, Davy exclaims, ‘[c]lean, comfirable! [sic] [...] Do you think *I* minds a little dirt, sir? Did you look under the quilts? Why, the vermin was a-running all over the place like flies, so it were.’<sup>37</sup> The narrative suggests that a very different state of affairs lurks beneath the exterior workhouse cleanliness noted by

<sup>33</sup> Freeland demonstrates the equivocal meanings of cleanliness in Elizabeth Gaskell’s fiction and argues that, in *Mary Barton*, cleanliness is ‘morally suspect’. Freeland, ‘The Politics of Dirt’, p. 807.

<sup>34</sup> Anne Thackeray-Ritchie, *Jack the Giant-Killer* [part 1], *Cornhill Magazine*, November 1867, pp. 589–608; p. 600.

<sup>35</sup> Thackeray-Ritchie, *Jack the Giant-Killer* [part 1], p. 600.

<sup>36</sup> Anne Thackeray-Ritchie, *Jack the Giant-Killer* [part 2], *Cornhill Magazine*, December 1867, pp. 739–760; p. 747.

<sup>37</sup> Thackeray-Ritchie, *Jack the Giant-Killer* [part 2], p. 747.

visitors. Though well meaning, Jack, in his position touring the wards as visitor, is unable to penetrate the guise of cleanliness.

When Jack decides to accept the position after all, he discovers first-hand the corruptions that exist in the workhouse. The hidden cruelties of this institution are represented in metaphorical terms of dirt and dust; though '[n]ew brooms sweep clean', Jack cautiously does not begin to 'sweep' for a week because he fears that he might 'stir up the dust, which had been lying so thickly, and make matters worse than before'.<sup>38</sup> Fittingly, one of the worst outrages to exist in the workhouse takes the form of literal sewage. The matron, horror-struck, at seeing Jack drinking 'mirky-looking [sic] water', exclaims

My goodness, it's the water from the tap, —we never touch it! I'll send you some of ours; the tap-water comes through the cesspool and is as nasty as nasty can be.<sup>39</sup>

The paupers, she continues, are 'used to it' and 'nothing hurts them'.<sup>40</sup> The matron's words conjure up an impression of the paupers as a different species that has adapted to live off the excreted filth of society. The text draws attention to, and criticises, this inhuman attitude displayed by the workhouse authorities towards the poor they supposedly care for. This idea of the drinking water laced with human excrement also plays upon contemporary anxieties about water and disease. As Erin O'Connor points out in a discussion of cholera and the Thames, '[d]ebates about water purification [...] centred not on whether the water was full of human waste – that was unanimously conceded – but on whether such water was safe to drink'.<sup>41</sup> The threat of cholera haunts the narrative: in part one, it is revealed that Jack's persistence in forcing through improvements to a town's 'neglected sewer' meant that the residents

---

<sup>38</sup> Thackeray-Ritchie, *Jack the Giant-Killer* [part 2], p. 750. Jack's struggle to reform the institution is a long and uphill struggle, but it is eventually purged of its worst evils.

<sup>39</sup> Thackeray-Ritchie, *Jack the Giant-Killer* [part 2], p. 750.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Erin O'Connor, *Raw Material: Producing Pathology in Victorian Culture* (London; Durham, N. C: Duke University Press, 2000), p. 41.

escaped a deadly outbreak of cholera.<sup>42</sup> In light of this narrow escape, the dirty drinking imbibed by the paupers comes to symbolise the very real threat of cholera looming over the workhouse; readers are implicitly asked to imagine the devastating results such an outbreak would yield.

Thackeray-Ritchie's retelling of *Jack the Giant-Killer*, with its latent anxieties about drinking water and disease, appeared within a context of increasing concern about the sanitary conditions of workhouses and, in particular, the infirmaries for the sick poor. Two years earlier, in 1865, the *Lancet* medical journal had announced its intention for the newly formed *Lancet* Sanitary Commission to investigate the state of metropolitan workhouse infirmaries, in order that 'public opinion should be fully enlightened and deliberately directed'.<sup>43</sup> The Sanitary Commissioners visited workhouses, first in London and later across the country, compiling information about the incidence of disease, the salaries of nurses and the system of nursing, the cubic feet of wards, and the diets of sick paupers; their reports detail the (un)sanitary state of individual workhouses and demonstrate the need for urgent reform.<sup>44</sup>

In the first report, it is suggested that 'the metropolitan workhouses illustrate in a most striking way the two distinctive features of London life – comfort, if not luxury, in close companionship with filth and misery'.<sup>45</sup> The lack of a standardised system of care across Poor Law workhouses is made very apparent; in contrast to City of London union workhouse, which is described as having 'almost every sanitary requirement', in the workhouse of St George-the-Martyr 'almost all these desiderata are wanting'.<sup>46</sup> The report prepares readers for some shocking revelations about the sanitary state of the workhouses inspected:

---

<sup>42</sup> Thackeray-Ritchie, *Jack the Giant-Killer* [part 1], p. 595.

<sup>43</sup> "'The Lancet' Commission to Inquire into the State of Workhouse Hospitals', *Lancet*, 15 April 1865, p. 410.

<sup>44</sup> The *Lancet* reports were instrumental in bringing about the improvement of workhouse infirmaries. Kim Price points out that 'the very public agitation led to the Metropolitan Poor Act of 1867'. See Kim Price, *Medical Negligence in Victorian Britain: The Crisis of Care under the English Poor Law, C. 1834-1900* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), p. 12.

<sup>45</sup> 'The Lancet Sanitary Commission for Investigating the State of the Infirmaries of Workhouses: Reports of the Commissioners; No. I.; Metropolitan Infirmaries', *Lancet*, 1 July 1865, pp. 14–22 (p. 14).

<sup>46</sup> 'Metropolitan Infirmaries', p. 14.

the crucial test, after all, of good ward-management is the amount of attention bestowed on *cleanliness*, and on this point we confess we have been fairly horrified. Some readers will be startled. There is (to the superficial observer) rather a special air of *bescrubbedness*, rather a powerful odour of soap-and-water, about the wards of workhouse infirmaries. So much for the surface; now for the inside of the cup and platter.<sup>47</sup>

The text seeks to demonstrate that the atmosphere of ‘bescrubbedness’ is a veneer that distracts from the real state of affairs.<sup>48</sup> Unlike the visitors of ‘Visit to an English Workhouse’ and ‘Two Hours’, who may well have been taken in by the ‘air of soap-and-water’, the Sanitary Commissioners are not ‘superficial observers’; the text makes it clear that their intention is to delve beneath the surface in order to examine the ‘inside of the cup and platter’.

The report on the Shoreditch workhouse is characterised by this tension between surface and reality, exterior and interior. In this workhouse, ‘the shell is good, although the kernel is rotten’ and ‘scandals [...] exist here under the surface’.<sup>49</sup> The description of the paupers’ bed linen, examined by the Sanitary Commissioners, mimics the sense of movement from exterior to interior: the report finds that

[t]he outer surface of the beds [in the imbecile ward] was clean, and the linen generally, through the able-bodied wards tolerably so; but as to the lying-in wards, they were frequently filthy with

---

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, p. 18.

<sup>48</sup> In a poem, *Punch* comments upon the maltreatment of the workhouse poor and draws attention to the idea of hidden dirt. Two lines read: ‘Visiting Guardians arrive – quick, ere they pass the doors,/Have the filth swept below the beds, the sheets drawn o’er the sores!’ See ‘Fast and Humiliation; or, Sick Beasts v. Sick Paupers’, *Punch*, 7 April 1866, p. 142.

<sup>49</sup> ‘The Lancet Sanitary Commission for Investigating the State of the Infirmaries of Workhouses. Reports of the Commissioners. No. III. Metropolitan Infirmaries. St Leonard’s, Shoreditch.’, *Lancet*, 29 July 1865, pp. 131–133 (p. 132).

crusted blood and discharges, and in the sick wards also they were far from being well kept.<sup>50</sup>

While the beds for the imbeciles and the able-bodied are clean, those of the most vulnerable paupers (the expectant mothers and the sick) are found in a state of neglect, coated in bodily secretions. In one bed the Sanitary Commissioners discover a bed-bound patient with 'a fearful and very extensive sore, in a state of absolute putridity', who has been left 'covered with filth'.<sup>51</sup> Pamela K. Gilbert suggests that '[t]he scandal of filth in the heart of the modern city was an actual scandal [...] of the uncivilised, grotesque, leaky body persisting in the midst of managed civilisation'.<sup>52</sup> The sick beds, then, with their evidence of the 'leaky' body, undermine the idea of a 'civilised' and sanitary society. The 'rotten kernel' of the workhouse and, implicitly, society, is nowhere more evident than in the depiction of the living human bodies left to rot in the infirmaries.

Having completed a thorough investigation of metropolitan infirmaries, in 1867, the focus of *Lancet* moved to country workhouses. Like many of the reports, the one on the Walsall workhouse draws attention to various shortfalls, amongst them inadequate washing facilities, overcrowding, 'defective' ventilation and 'stink[ing]' waterclosets.<sup>53</sup> Despite these various ills, the *Lancet* claims that the workhouse has been 'favourably reported to the Poor-law Board for more than twenty years' and implicitly accuses the Poor Law Inspector of deliberately whitewashing the workhouse.<sup>54</sup> If the Inspector's reports are misleading, however, then so too is the appearance of the workhouse: the 'tidy appearance of the wards' is stated to be 'superficial and

---

<sup>50</sup> 'St Leonard's, Shoreditch', p. 132.

<sup>51</sup> 'St Leonard's, Shoreditch', p. 133.

<sup>52</sup> Pamela K. Gilbert, 'Medical Mapping: The Thames, the Body, and *Our Mutual Friend*', in *Filth: Dirt, Disgust and Modern Life*, eds. William A. Cohen and Ryan Johnson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), pp. 78–102, p. 80.

<sup>53</sup> 'The Lancet Sanitary Commission for Investigating the State of the Infirmaries of Workhouses. Country Workhouse infirmaries. No. V. Walsall Workhouse, Staffordshire', *Lancet*, 9 November 1867, pp. 585–586, p. 586.

<sup>54</sup> The report provoked a backlash. The writer, J. H. Stallard, was accused by the Poor Law Inspector of being intentionally sensational. In a letter published in the *Lancet*, Stallard defends himself against this accusation and describes the pains taken to ensure a truthful account of the workhouse. See 'Correspondence', *Lancet*, 1 February 1868, pp. 176–177.

deceptive'.<sup>55</sup> The conclusion reached by the Sanitary Commissioners is that 'the Walsall Workhouse presents an example of cleanliness and order calculated to deceive a superficial observer'.<sup>56</sup> Cleanliness, it seems, is not just 'superficial' but also intentionally deceitful. The neglect uncovered in the Walsall workhouse was commented upon in the pages of *Punch*. In 'A Satisfactory Workhouse' (a deliberate comment upon the so-called 'satisfactory' condition of the Walsall workhouse), the work of the medical journal is praised: '[n]ever did lancet let out anything worse than the *Lancet's* disclosures'.<sup>57</sup> The institutions are imagined here as purulent boils on the body of society, finally pierced by the attention of the *Lancet*.

Though the *Lancet* reports are primarily interested in the state of workhouse infirmaries, they also often foreground the appalling conditions of the casual wards. In the report on the Walsall workhouse, for example, the male casual ward is described as 'something like a hound-kennel, though neither half so clean nor comfortable'.<sup>58</sup> The casual wards, situated nearby the main workhouse building, provided overnight accommodation for the transient poor. The vagrants and itinerant workers who sought the shelter of the wards were expected to pay for their accommodation with labour the next morning, usually in the form of stone breaking or oakum picking.<sup>59</sup> While the *Lancet* reports suggest that a trained eye was needed to detect the hidden dirt of the workhouse infirmaries, no such professional gaze appears to have been necessary to uncover the filth of the casual wards. In January 1866, the squalid conditions of these wards were brought into the public eye by the investigative journalism of the *Pall Mall Gazette*.<sup>60</sup> Frederick Greenwood, the editor, was inspired by the *Lancet* reports to commission an undercover investigation. As

---

<sup>55</sup> 'Walsall Workhouse', p. 585.

<sup>56</sup> 'Walsall Workhouse', p. 586.

<sup>57</sup> 'A Satisfactory Workhouse', *Punch*, 7 December 1867, p. 236.

<sup>58</sup> 'Walsall Workhouse', p. 585.

<sup>59</sup> An image in the *Illustrated London News* depicts the various stages of a night in a casual ward. The vignettes that make up the image include the queue for admission, the washing room, the sleeping quarters, the disinfectant room and the task of stone breaking. See 'A Casual Ward', *Illustrated London News*, 19 November 1887, pp. 585–586, p. 586.

<sup>60</sup> Investigative journalism became a recognisable genre in the nineteenth century. Its practitioners sought to expose hidden social ills and to agitate for reform. For more information, see Stephen Donovan and Matthew Rubery, 'Introduction', in *Secret Commissions: An Anthology of Victorian Investigative Journalism*, eds. Stephen Donovan and Matthew Rubery (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2012), pp. 9–24.

Seth Koven points out, Greenwood ‘believed that the *Lancet* had hit upon a story he could transform from a worthy public-health controversy into a media sensation’.<sup>61</sup> He tasked his brother, James Greenwood, with spending the night disguised as a pauper in the Lambeth casual ward, in order to experience the conditions therein. ‘A Night in a Workhouse’ is a three-part narrative of James Greenwood’s experiences and sensations within the ward. As well as making infamous the ward and its residents, the report ‘overnight created a new mode of journalistic reporting – incognito social investigation using cross-class dress – and a new style of sensational and self-consciously theatrical writing about the poor’.<sup>62</sup> ‘A Night in a Workhouse’, with its melodramatic descriptions of filth, degradation and nakedness, brought the casual wards, the unseen domains of society’s most destitute, into the homes and consciousness of the public.

In part one of the narrative, James Greenwood assumes the costume of an impoverished engraver, ‘marked with every sign of squalor’.<sup>63</sup> He reports to the clerk of casual ward and, upon admission, is shown to a room set up for bathing. There he immerses himself in a bath ‘containing a liquid [...] disgustingly like weak mutton broth’.<sup>64</sup> The purifying function of the bath is subverted; as Koven points out, ‘[i]nstead of cleansing Greenwood, the water fouls his body with the dirt of at least a dozen tramps who have entered the workhouse and the tub before him’.<sup>65</sup> Next, Greenwood is led to a crowded sleeping room that is ‘roofed with naked tiles which were furred with [...] damp and filth’; horribly, the floor is ‘so thickly encrusted with filth’ that Greenwood claims to have ‘mistook it first for a floor of natural earth’.<sup>66</sup> The casual ward is constructed here as a monstrous, primitive space in the heart of ‘civilised’

---

<sup>61</sup> Seth Koven, *Slumming: Sexual and Social Politics in Victorian London* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006), p. 25.

<sup>62</sup> Koven, *Slumming*, p. 26. Donovan and Rubery also credit Greenwood as a ‘[pioneer]’ of the practice of ‘incognito investigations’. They point out that a disguise enabled reporters to gain a first-hand experience of their subject matter and to insist upon ‘the right to speak for individuals [...] who had no means of representing themselves’. Donovan and Rubery, *Secret Commissions*, pp. 17, 23.

<sup>63</sup> [James Greenwood], ‘A Night in a Workhouse’ [part 1], *Pall Mall Gazette*, 12 January 1866, pp. 9–10, p. 9. The following parts were published on 13 and 15 January 1866.

<sup>64</sup> [Greenwood], ‘A Night in a Workhouse’ [part 1], p. 9.

<sup>65</sup> Koven, *Slumming*, p. 39.

<sup>66</sup> [Greenwood], ‘A Night in a Workhouse’ [part 1], p. 10.



London. The depiction of the bath and sleeping ward aim to revolt and thrill readers.<sup>67</sup>

The loathsome nature of the surroundings is matched by the text's construction of the moral filthiness of the men who populate the ward: they swear, sing offensive songs, and spit. Most worrying for Greenwood, however, seems to be the possibility that the male paupers might be engaging in illicit sexual activity. Many of the casuals 'clubbed beds and rugs and slept together' and Greenwood's discovery of 'a stain of blood bigger than a man's hand' in the middle of his bed is covertly construed as evidence of homosexual intercourse.<sup>68</sup> The homoerotic energies of the text are focalised upon the figure of Kay, a young boy with 'soft and silky' hair, 'large blue eyes' and a voice as 'soft and sweet as any woman's', who enters the ward during the night.<sup>69</sup> When the space starts to fill up, Greenwood's fear of physical violation becomes palpable: he is gripped with horror at the thought of having to share his sleeping place with 'some dirty scoundrel of the Kay breed'.<sup>70</sup>

'A Night in a Workhouse' made the casual wards a matter of national concern. However, moral unease about the behaviour of male casuals was nothing new. In the article 'Destitution in the Metropolis' (1848), published in the *London Journal*, an account is included of a night-time visit made to the casual ward on Gray's Inn Lane by Mr Cochrane, the chairman of the Poor Man's Guardian Society. In this account, he describes being shown down flights of stairs to a dark and crowded underground room in which men sleep together beneath rugs. Cochrane says to some of these men:

<sup>67</sup> The narrator of *Jack the Giant-Killer* leaves the horrors of the casual ward to the imagination of a reader familiar with 'A Night in a Workhouse': '[t]he sight Trevithic saw is not one that I can describe here. People have read of such things as they are and were only a little while ago when the *Pall Mall Gazette* first published that terrible account'. [Thackeray-Ritchie], *Jack the Giant-Killer* [part 2], p. 752.

<sup>68</sup> Greenwood, 'A Night in a Workhouse' [part 1], p. 10.

<sup>69</sup> Greenwood, 'A Night in a Workhouse' [part 2], 13 January 1866, p. 10. Koven's analysis of 'A Night in a Workhouse' focuses upon the erotic subtext of homosexuality. In his discussion of Kay, he notes that, by feminising him, 'Greenwood makes him into a somewhat more acceptable object of male admiration and lust' - see Koven, *Slumming*, p. 44.

<sup>70</sup> Greenwood, 'A Night in a Workhouse' [part 2], p. 10.

Now, my friends, I have come into this place for your benefit, to see if I cannot succeed in having introduced such alterations as it may be advisable to adopt. Will you feel offended if I pull down the rugs which are covering you? <sup>71</sup>

On their acquiescence, Cochrane relates that,

I pulled down the rugs, and there, as I suspected, beheld the seven persons lying in a complete state of nudity, and so closely huddled together [...] that they could not have occupied a space of more than five feet in width. It was impossible not to feel a deep sense of disgust at witnessing so indecent and humiliating a sight.<sup>72</sup>

The men explain that they sleep naked so they can easily ‘wipe off the vermin’ that infest the rugs. Cochrane’s reaction, however, suggests his unspoken suspicion that homosexual relations might occur between the men.<sup>73</sup> It seems that the dirt of the casual ward is intrinsically connected to the subversive sleeping arrangements. The dirty conditions of the ward push the poor to enact behaviour that is then labelled as immoral.<sup>74</sup> The article’s condemnation of the casual wards for ‘sanctioning and encouraging the disgusting practice of the male poor sleeping naked together in bed’, implies that the desire to inaugurate improvements manifests from an urge to police the bodies and sexual proclivities of the poor. <sup>75</sup>

---

<sup>71</sup> ‘Destitution in the Metropolis’, *London Journal*, 26 February 1848, pp. 412–413.

<sup>72</sup> ‘Destitution in the Metropolis’, p. 413.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.* The sleeping men are given visual expression in one of six vignettes accompanying the article. In the image, six naked men lay side by side, their lower-halves covered by a rug. The image sensualises and feminises the men, and the interconnection of their bodies suggests the covert narrative subtext of homosexuality.

<sup>74</sup> In regards to ‘A Night in a Workhouse’, Koven notes that the sensation of the text stems from Greenwood’s suggestion that ‘public authorities were using public money to create the conditions that encouraged the most vicious male members of the metropolitan underclass to engage in sodomy’, Koven, *Slumming*, p. 27. ‘Destitution in the Metropolis’ seems to suggest that a similar facilitation of homosexual intercourse exists in the Gray’s Inn Lane casual ward.

<sup>75</sup> ‘Destitution in the Metropolis’, p. 413.

In the wake of Greenwood's sensational exploration of the casual wards, the workhouse reformer J. H. Stallard employed a poor woman to conduct an undercover investigation into the female casual wards.<sup>76</sup> Stallard's introduction to *The Female Casual and her Lodging* (1866) asserts that disorderly vagrants 'drive away the decent poor' and that 'we can scarcely wonder that in Bethnal Green an honest woman should prefer to spend a cold December night in the public water-closet rather than enter one of these dens of infamy and filth'.<sup>77</sup> The introduction explains the difficulty of selecting a suitable woman to undertake the experiment; she must be someone 'accustomed to dirt and rags' in order to endure the vagrant ward, but should also be 'sufficiently familiar with cleanliness, honesty, and plenty', so as to be able to comment accurately upon the conditions (p. 3). Stallard's words conflate cleanliness with honesty and, implicitly, dirtiness with dishonesty. The woman selected for the job was an impoverished widow who, in her narrative, initially goes by the name of Ellen Stanley.<sup>78</sup> Disguised in filthy clothes, Stanley stayed overnight in the casual wards of the Newington, Lambeth, Whitechapel and St George's-in-the-East workhouses respectively. The narrative of her experience is set within the frame of Stallard's introduction and conclusion; the professional, masculine voice works subliminally to legitimise and contain this poor woman's account of filth and vermin.

A more threatening form of filth exists in Stanley's accounts than in the *Lancet* reports or even Greenwood's 'A Night in a Workhouse'. Contrasting Greenwood's erotically-charged narrative with that of Ellen Stanley's, Koven points out that '[i]t is hardly surprising that Ellen Stanley, a poor woman, felt no attraction to dirt. She lived far too close to dirt to romanticise it; her very survival and self-respect depended upon the daily struggle to keep her body and clothes clean'.<sup>79</sup> Filth is shown to pose a constant threat to the bodies of

<sup>76</sup> Stallard authored the later *Lancet* report on the Walsall workhouse.

<sup>77</sup> J. H. Stallard, *The Female Casual and her Lodging: With a Complete Scheme for the Regulation of Workhouse Infirmarys* (London: Saunders, Otley, 1866), p. 5. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

<sup>78</sup> Jane Long argues that '[t]his example of nineteenth-century imposture in the cause of capturing 'authentic' experience is more grimly ironic than most. Ellen's own circumstances saw her 'performing' a role which in many ways may have been close to her own already, starring in some strange Victorian semi-autobiographical melodrama', Jane Long, *Conversations in Cold Rooms: Women, Work and Poverty in 19<sup>th</sup>-Century Northumberland* (Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 1999), p. 9.

<sup>79</sup> Koven, *Slumming*, p. 187.

the women: when Stanley enters the Whitechapel ward, the porter who gives her a soiled shirt to wear cannot allay her fears of catching disease because, as he says, the women who frequent the ward are a 'dirty lot' (p. 32). Stanley's anxieties about the contagion of disease are realised when both she, and the other casuals, begin to suffer with diarrhoea. It is not only the bodies of the female casuals at risk from the diseased space of the ward, however, but the body of the city also. As Erin O'Connor suggests, '[c]holera [...] became [...] a figure for the fluidity of boundaries in metropolitan space'.<sup>80</sup> This idea resonates in Stanley's bitter observation that it is '[n]o wonder there is cholera at the East of London, for it is generated every night in the Whitechapel casual ward' (p. 37). The casual ward is pathologised here as the producer of dangerous disease. Physical boundaries collapse in the idea of disease seeping out of the casual ward to infect the body of the metropolis.

In the narrative of the St George's workhouse, descriptions of filth intensify. Gilbert notes that, in the mid-century, '[b]odily wastes were seen no longer as simply byproducts of the life process, but as animated and hostile filth that would, given the chance, attack the body itself'.<sup>81</sup> This idea of excrement as 'animated and hostile' holds true in Stanley's representation of the water-closet:

I thought it must be the dead-house, and that I had made a mistake; and when I lifted the seat-lid I flew back, for there was no pan, and the soil reached nearly to the top. I felt too ill to remain, for even the floor was saturated and wet with the filth which oozed up out of it. (p. 48)

The casual ward is itself imagined here as a leaky body. The human waste it produces is active, oozing up through the floor and over spilling the boundaries meant to contain it.<sup>82</sup> Not only this, but the conflation of the

---

<sup>80</sup> O'Connor, *Raw Material*, p. 41.

<sup>81</sup> Gilbert, 'Medical Mapping', p. 79.

<sup>82</sup> Alison Bashford points out that, in sanitarian discourse, 'bodies and buildings were mutually affective' and analyses the idea suggested by the sanitary reformer John Simon that buildings actively fouled themselves. Alison Bashford, *Purity and Pollution: Gender, Embodiment and Victorian Medicine* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998), p. 17.

water-closet with the dead-house associates this excess waste with the abjection of the corpse. According to Julia Kristeva, 'the corpse [...] is cesspool and death; [...] [i]t is death infecting life'.<sup>83</sup> Thus, in its association with the decay of the corpse, human excrement works symbolically in this narrative to unsettle the boundary between life and death.

The vermin, described obsessively by Stanley, represent a more insidious attack than even the oozing filth of the water-closet. Lice speckle the walls, cover the bread, infest the beds and rugs, and cover the bodies of the women.<sup>84</sup> The physical suffering induced by the insects has a psychological impact; in the St George's workhouse, Stanley describes how 'I felt stung and irritated until I tore my flesh till it bled in every part of my body' (p. 50). Driven to distraction, Stanley attacks her own body, piercing the skin-deep boundary between the inside of the body and the living filth of the casual ward.<sup>85</sup> While disease collapses the border between ward and city, the descriptions of vermin seep out from the boundaries of the text, afflicting readers of the narrative with phantom itches. The filth and vermin of the casual ward, unknown to most readers, becomes a more threatening reality as they are made to share in Stanley's physical discomfort.

As demonstrated by Stanley's own reaction, the vermin push the women into behaviour associated with psychological collapse. The connection between vermin and madness is most poignantly manifested in the description of a woman in the Lambeth workroom:

After sitting at her work for an hour and doing very little, this woman became suddenly frantic; she jumped up, and rushed about the ward, as if she were insane, crying piteously, 'I cannot bear it – I cannot bear it.' (p. 25)

---

<sup>83</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), pp. 3, 4.

<sup>84</sup> In the Lambeth ward, Stanley notes that the vagrants 'all seem accustomed to vermin, and they look for nothing better' (p. 24); this implied acceptance is belied, however, by the narrative's repeated focus upon how the women pick lice from their dresses and bodies.

<sup>85</sup> Gilbert discusses the boundaries of the body in relation to the idea of the middle-class self and suggests that '[t]he pulpiness within was always threatening to burst the bounds of the skin, which defined, contained, and disciplined the individual'. Gilbert, 'Medical Mapping', p. 83. In *The Female Casual*, 'pulpiness' erupts through the broken boundary of a working-class woman's body.

Unable to cope with the constant irritation caused by the lice, whether real or imagined, the woman, 'roaring with madness', strips off all her clothes and rips them to shreds in order to be issued clean ones (p. 26). But when the assistant matron inspects the rags of clothing, she proclaims that 'they were clean and free from vermin; that she had seen much worse; and that it was not through dirt she did it, but devilment' (p. 26). Though the conditions of the ward are shown to push the women into criminalised behaviour, the representative of power suggests that the fault lies instead with the 'devilment' of the individual.

One of the conclusions drawn by Stallard is that the casual wards are largely filled with hardened vagrants who 'wallow in filth and look upon vermin as their natural companions' (p. 63). But Stanley's narrative seems to be at odds with this assertion. Rather than revealing myriads of vagrants happy to 'wallow in filth', the text seems instead to be a narrative of their struggle for cleanliness. Those Stanley meets are far from being unaffected by the dirtiness of their shelter: in the Whitechapel ward, '[t]he principal subject of conversation was the filthiness of the place' (p. 35). Although many of the women encountered by Stanley express their desire to cleanse their bodies and clothes, they are prevented from doing so by the dearth of facilities inside the wards and the prohibitive cost of the public wash-house. The desperation to wash is movingly articulated by 'Cranky Sal', a beggar who is 'more rogue than fool', in the St George's workhouse (p. 28). Sally laments 'I want to buy a clean gown [...]. I am so dirty now that I do not know what to do; and I want some soap to wash me and my clothes, more than food' (p. 56). Sally's hunger for cleanliness is such that it exceeds her need to eat; in an act of compassion from one woman to another, Stanley promises Sally a penny to buy a piece of soap. Repeatedly, Stanley's accounts demonstrate that the uncleanness of the women is not through choice. In the Whitechapel ward, a bucket of water is provided in the morning, but the attendant checks the women's ablutions, 'continually driving them on by saying "be quick," "be off," "get on," ect. ect.' (pp. 37-8). Likewise, in the St George's workhouse, a girl who pleads for 'a drop of water in a pail just to swill our faces' is refused because the assistant has 'no orders' (p. 58). Rather than encouraging cleanliness, the workhouse authorities actively prevent the women from washing; it is the workhouse system that forces the women to remain physically unclean.

Dirt and vermin in this narrative are not simply matters of physical and psychological danger. They are also linked to the policing of class boundaries. When Stanley is told by the other casuals in the Newington ward that there is no water allowed for washing, one of the hawkers expresses her regret, explaining that 'it was a shame that they might not wash themselves, because their hands were dirtied by the oakum, and it was impossible to sell her bits of lace without soiling them' (p. 15). The hawker's comment that the workhouse task leaves her unable to sell her lace draws attention to the hypocrisy of a system that hinders the poor from being self-sufficient and so makes them more reliant upon a state that condemns them for this reliance. It is the dirt of the casual ward that implicitly entraps the women in a cycle of vagrancy.<sup>86</sup> The criminalisation of these women is suggested in the advice given to the narrator:

The young woman advised me to stay as long as I could over my work, "for", she said, "it is the only chance of making yourself clean.' I asked her why, and she explained that in the fields men were often about and drove you away, and that "if you did it in the streets the police are down upon you, you are so well looked up" (p. 15).

The woman is referring here to the opportunity to pick lice from her dress. The sense of social oppression is tangible; the male labourers and state authorities are united in a concerted effort to move the homeless poor on. Stanley experiences this social displacement for herself: after leaving the casual ward in the company of the young hawker, they 'tried at several cottages to get some water to wash, but they all refused us' (pp. 15–16). According to Mary Douglas, dirt is 'matter out of place' and 'the by-product of a systemic ordering and classification of matter'.<sup>87</sup> It seems, however, that it is not the physical muck

---

<sup>86</sup> Writing on a later undercover investigation into the casual wards by Mary Higgs, Koven notes that Higgs's narrative 'demonstrated first, that dirt could and did control poor women's economic fortunes, and second, that the economics of dirt were closely bound up with laboring women's sexual vulnerability. [...] Each time a woman resorted to the casual ward (or cheap lodging house), she left it a dirtier, shabbier person and hence less eligible for paid employment. In this way, workhouse regulations trapped female inmates in a vicious downward cycle whose logical endpoint was prostitution', see Koven, *Slumming*, p. 188.

<sup>87</sup> Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London and New York: ARK, 1989), p. 35.

on the clothing or skin of the women that is out of place in the eyes of society, but rather the bodies of the women themselves: whether in the fields or in the streets, the women are driven away and prevented from making themselves clean. In a society in which they have no function, these women, and implicitly the destitute poor in general, have become, like dirt, 'matter out of place'.

What emerges from a study of workhouse representation is a sense of both the centrality and instability of ideas of dirt and cleanliness. While cleanliness was supposedly an intrinsic part of institutional discipline, numerous workhouse narratives suggest that dirt lurked beneath an outer veneer of sanitation. Typically associated with health and morality, cleanliness acquires new meanings of cruelty and deception. Moreover, the idea of the poor as naturally dirty is often destabilised. Within a society that reviled dirt, in representations of the workhouse it is often the institution itself that imposes uncleanliness upon the poor and pushes them into behaviour that is then labelled as dirty. By making the poor fulfil this socially-ascribed role, the workhouse implicitly justifies the cruel treatment of the poor within the institution. An examination of the workhouse space through the lens of cleanliness and dirt reveals the social and politically-charged values that informed the representation of the poor in the nineteenth century.



## Bibliography

‘A Few Weeks from Home : Visit to Workhouses’, *Chambers’s Edinburgh Journal*, 13 February 1841, pp. 29–30.

‘A Satisfactory Workhouse’, *Punch*, 7 December 1867, p. 236.

Bashford, Alison, *Purity and Pollution: Gender, Embodiment and Victorian Medicine* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998).

Chadwick, Edwin, *Report on the Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Population of Great Britain*, ed. M. W. Flinn [1842] (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1965).

‘Chorlton Board of Guardians’, *Manchester Times*, 29 November 1856, p. 7.

‘Correspondence’, *Lancet*, 1 February 1868, pp. 176–177.

Crowther, M. A., *The Workhouse System 1834–1929: The History of an English Social Institution* (London: Methuen, 1983).

‘Destitution in the Metropolis’, *London Journal*, 26 February 1848, pp. 412–413.

Donovan, Stephen and Matthew Rubery, *Secret Commissions: An Anthology of Victorian Investigative Journalism*, eds. Stephen Donovan and Matthew Rubery (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2012).

Douglas, Mary, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London and New York: ARK, 1989).

‘Fast and Humiliation; or Sick Beasts v. Sick Paupers’, *Punch*, 7 April 1866, p. 142.

*First Annual Report of the Poor Law Commissioners for England and Wales*, Ordered, by the House of Commons, to be Printed, 10 August 1835.

Foucault, Michel, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin, 1991).

Frankel, Oz, *States of Inquiry: Social Investigations and Print Culture in Nineteenth-Century Britain and the United States* (Maryland: John Hopkins University Press, 2006).

Freedgood, Elaine, ‘Banishing Panic: Harriet Martineau and the Popularization of Political Economy’, *Victorian Studies*, 39:1 (1995), pp. 33–55.

Freeland, Natalka, ‘The Politics of Dirt in *Mary Barton* and *Ruth*’, *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900*, 42:4 (2002), pp. 799–818.

Gilbert, Pamela K., ‘Medical Mapping: The Thames, the Body, and *Our Mutual Friend*’, in *Filth: Dirt, Disgust and Modern Life*, eds. William A. Cohen

and Ryan Johnson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), pp. 78–102.

Goodlad, Lauren, *Victorian Literature and the Victorian State* (Maryland: John Hopkins University Press, 2003).

Greenwood, James, 'A Night in a Workhouse', *Pall Mall Gazette*, 12 January 1866, pp. 9–10.

Greenwood, James, 'A Night in a Workhouse', *Pall Mall Gazette*, 13 January 1866, p. 10.

Joshi, Priti, 'Edwin Chadwick's Self-Fashioning: Professionalism, Masculinity, and the Victorian Poor', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 32:2 (2004), pp. 353–370.

Koven, Seth, *Slumming: Sexual and Social Politics in Victorian London* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006).

Kristeva, Julia, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

Long, Jane, *Conversations in Cold Rooms: Women, Work and Poverty in 19<sup>th</sup>-Century Northumberland* (Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 1999).

Martineau, Harriet, *Poor Laws and Paupers Illustrated: The Hamlets. A Tale* (London: Charles Fox, 1833).

Morrison, Kathryn, *The Workhouse: A Study of Poor-Law Buildings in England* (Swindon: English Heritage at the National Monuments Record Centre, 1999).

O'Connor, Erin, *Raw Material: Producing Pathology in Victorian Culture* (London; Durham, N. C: Duke University Press, 2000).

Poovey, Mary, *Making a Social Body: British Cultural Formation, 1830-1864* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

Price, Kim, *Medical Negligence in Victorian Britain: The Crisis of Care under the English Poor Law, C. 1834-1900* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015).

*Report from His Majesty's Commissioners for Inquiring into the Administration and Practical Operation of the Poor Laws*, Ordered by the House of Commons to be Printed, 21 February 1834.

Stallard, J. H., *The Female Casual and her Lodging: With a Complete Scheme for the Regulation of Workhouse Infirmarys* (London: Saunders, Otley, 1866).

Stallybrass, Peter and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (London: Methuen, 1986).

Thackeray-Ritchie, Anne, *Jack the Giant-Killer*, *Cornhill Magazine*, November 1867, pp. 589-608.

Thackeray-Ritchie, Anne, *Jack the Giant-Killer*, *Cornhill Magazine*, December 1867, pp. 739–760.

‘The Chorlton Board of Guardians’, *Manchester Times*, 20 December 1856, p. 4.

‘The Chorlton Union Workhouse’, *Manchester Times*, 22 November 1856, p. 7.

‘The Chorlton Guardians and their Workhouse’, *Manchester Times*, 6 December 1856, p. [7].

“‘The Lancet’ Commission to Inquire into the State of Workhouse Hospitals’, *Lancet*, 15 April 1865, p. 410.

‘The Lancet Sanitary Commission for Investigating the State of the Infirmarys of Workhouses. Country Workhouse infirmarys. No. V. Walsall Workhouse, Staffordshire’, *Lancet*, 9 November 1867, pp. 585–586.

‘The Lancet Sanitary Commission for Investigating the State of the Infirmarys of Workhouses: Reports of the Commissioners; No. 1.; Metropolitan Infirmarys’, *Lancet*, 1 July 1865, pp. 14–22.

‘The Lancet Sanitary Commission for Investigating the State of the Infirmarys of Workhouses. Reports of the Commissioners. No. III. Metropolitan Infirmarys. St Leonard’s, Shoreditch’, *Lancet*, 29 July 1865, pp. 131–133.

‘Two Hours at a Union Workhouse’, *Penny Magazine of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge*, 9 October 1841, pp. 397–398.

‘Visit to an English Workhouse’, *Chambers’s Edinburgh Journal*, 23 September 1837, p. 277.

Wythen Baxter, G. R., *The Book of the Bastiles; or, the History of the Working of the New Poor Law* (London: J. Stevens, 1841).

ECO-CONSCIOUS SYNAESTHESIA: DIRT IN KINGSLEY'S *YEAST* AND *ALTON LOCKE*

Margaret S. Kennedy

(State University of New York, Stony Brook)

*Abstract:*

Miasmic language in Charles Kingsley's novels *Yeast* and *Alton Locke* imaginatively renders unseen dirt visible through synaesthesia. I suggest that Kingsley is engaging in discursive activism through consistent suggestion of the concept of miasma in these works in order to increase public anxiety about pollution. This linguistic strategy was designed to incite real action through a provocation toward what I call 'eco-consciousness' in his readers. Miasmic language gets under the skin, opening readers' eyes to anthropogenic pollution and their concomitant vulnerability to contagion. Kingsley sensationalises toxicity to uncover the environmental horrors in domestic spaces. Miasma startles fictional characters, who "see and feel" smell, as the reader ought to be startled by miasmic language designed to stimulate or overwhelm the senses. Kingsley's fictional authors, Locke and Smith, frequently employ words from the miasmic lexicon – i.e., 'foul', 'reeking', and 'stagnant' – to describe the filth engulfing England. Though these words connote vapours, or miasmata, Kingsley broadens the concept of foul dampness from organic matter to man-made dangers, such as industrial fumes and waste particles. *Yeast*, set in the rural South, and *Alton Locke*, set in urban London, offer a complete picture of filth, revealing widespread environmental injustice.

Foul. Pestilential. Squalid. Teeming. Choking. Dust. Ash. Smoke. Fog. Filth. These words, all synonyms for dirt or dirty, clutter the pages of Victorian novels, revealing a preoccupation with toxic industrial by-products, litter, human grime, and excrement. These words also form a lexicon of miasmic language; toxic pollution described as vapour or putrid odours exposes the inescapable reach of anthropogenic pollution. Charles Kingsley's poet-tailor Alton Locke frequently employs words from the miasmic lexicon, such as 'foul', 'teeming', and 'choking', to describe the filth engulfing Victorian England, as in this description of a London night:

Foul vapours rose from cowsheds and slaughter-houses, and the doorways of undrained alleys, where the inhabitants carried the filth out on their shoes from the back-yard into the court, and from the court up into the main street; while above, hanging like cliffs

over the streets – those narrow, brawling torrents of filth, and poverty, and sin – the houses with their teeming load of life were piled up into the dingy choking night.<sup>1</sup>

Miasma startles Locke as the reader ought to be startled by miasmic language designed to stimulate or overwhelm the senses. Locke traces the dirt from the marketplace into the main street. Though this dirt is located in the slums, Kingsley reveals the complicity of the upper classes as he investigates the social causes of dirt.

Far from an exclusively lower class problem, pollution emerges as a universal experience. In *Yeast* (1848) and *Alton Locke* (1850), Kingsley imaginatively renders the unseen visible through sensation. Privileging sensory evidence of pollution, specifically smell, miasmic language permeates throughout the Victorian novel to expose networks of disease and the vital need for a protected environment. This technique that I refer to as eco-conscious synaesthesia urges readers to feel the sights and smells of environmental degradation through visceral reactions to graphic description. Miasmic language provokes a physical response to dirt. Kingsley's protagonists often retch or feel faint when confronted by filth, and readers may find themselves wincing or shuddering as they imagine the scene. By diffusing anxiety-producing representations to incite action, these novels participate in discursive activism: opposition to hegemonic thought circulated through conversations and publications in order to instigate reform. Like the filth that invades the main street, literature brings filth before public view, confronting readers in their homes. The pernicious presence of miasma gets under the skin, opening readers' eyes to anthropogenic pollution and their own vulnerability to contagion.

While Kingsley's synaesthesia sensationalises dirt to advocate environmental conservation, he goes further than most Victorian sanitation reformers, by asking his readers to literally awaken to an enlarged worldview. Kingsley preaches an ethical awareness of the current of exchange between the human body and its environment, what I call "eco-consciousness", throughout

---

<sup>1</sup> Charles Kingsley, *Alton Locke*. ed. by Elizabeth A. Cripps (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 87. Further references are given after quotations in the text.



his literature. He rejected 'conceited' anthropocentrism, and in his first work of natural history, *Glaucus, or the Wonders of the Shore* (1855), he repines:

Alas for the pride of human genius, and the autotheism which would make man the measure of all things and the centre of the universe! All the invaluable laws and methods of sanatory [sic] reform at best are but clumsy imitations of the unseen wonders which every animalcule and leaf have been working since the world's foundation, with this slight difference between them and us, that they fulfill their appointed task, and we do not.<sup>2</sup>

That is, if human beings understood their place in nature, they would see the cause-and-effect relationships leading to pollution and reform their 'conceited' and toxic behaviour.

### Mundane Horrors: Sensationalising Dirt

Victorian literature's emphasis on dirt critiqued industry and overcrowding. Authors foregrounded visible forms of dirt (offal, dung, mud, smoke) and challenged themselves to portray invisible forms of dirt (germs, toxins, noxious fumes). As David Trotter has theorised, smell emerges as a trope of nineteenth-century sanitation literature intended to provoke anxiety in the reader, while William Cohen has shown that the representation of dirt took various forms 'ranging from slums to contagious diseases to pestiferous rivers'.<sup>3</sup> Dirt, whether rendered as vapour, fluid, or corporeal, signified disease. Miasma theory, voiced famously by the sanitary reformer Edwin Chadwick, cautioned that 'all smell is disease', that the smell emanating from contaminated water,

---

<sup>2</sup> Charles Kingsley, *Glaucus; or The Wonders of the Shore*, 4<sup>th</sup> Ed. (Cambridge: Macmillan and Co., 1859), p. 121, 163.

<sup>3</sup> David Trotter, 'The New Historicism and the Psychopathology of Everyday Modern Life' in *Filth: Dirt, Disgust, and Modern Life*, ed. by William A. Cohen and Ryan Johnson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), pp. 30–48; William A. Cohen, 'Introduction: Locating Filth', in *Filth: Dirt, Disgust, and Modern Life*, ed. by William A. Cohen and Ryan Johnson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), pp. vii–xxxvii (p. xxi).

foul air, dust heaps, and the unwashed masses sickened those who breathed it in. Though germ theory later revealed that disease was spread by contagious micro-organisms passed from person to person, the associated smells nevertheless successfully identified the primary environmental factors of improper sanitation and poor hygiene. We see above that Kingsley locates foul vapours in slaughterhouses, undrained alleys, and backyards. This is important as regards miasma theory, since miasmata originally designated organic (“natural”) hazards emanating from swampy or damp conditions. Kingsley recasts miasma as man-made, anthropogenic emissions. While dirt and human by-products like excrement and waste are arguably natural, they become unnatural when they overwhelm the environment due to overcrowding and reckless disposal. Creatively portraying miasma gave tangible form to intangible contagions and environmental deterioration.

Ultimately, smell opens the eyes. Kingsley, as with many Victorian authors including Dickens and Gaskell, “sensationalises” dirt to uncover the environmental horrors in domestic spaces. While the genres of realism and sensation were often considered antithetical, as Anthony Trollope insisted in his autobiography, ‘[a] good novel should be both, and thus ‘many realists employ sensational tactics to impress on their readers the “truth” of fictional representations. Victorian commentators struggled to define sensation fiction, however; they predominantly identified sensation novels ‘by their bodily impact on readers, who find when reading them that “the flesh creeps”’.<sup>4</sup> The essay ‘Sensation Novels’ from the *Quarterly Review*, attributed to H. L. Mansel, cynically examines the widespread appeal of sensation novels during their heyday, the 1860s. He disparagingly asserts the genre ‘preach[es] to the nerves [seeking] [e]xcitement, and excitement alone’, some novels ‘aspire to set his [the reader’s] hair on end or his teeth on edge; while others [...] are strongly provocative of that sensation in the palate and throat which is a premonitory symptom of nausea’.<sup>5</sup> Sacrilegiously wielding the power of the pulpit, the genre ‘mould[s] the minds and form[s] the habits and tastes of its generation’.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Ellen Miller Casey, “‘Highly Flavoured Dishes’ and ‘Highly Seasoned Garbage’: Sensation in the *Athenaeum*” in *Victorian Sensations: Essays on a Scandalous Genre*. ed. by Kimberly Harrison and Richard Fantina (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2006), pp. 3–14 (p. 4).

<sup>5</sup> ‘Sensation Novels’, *Quarterly Review*, Vol. 113, No. 226 (1863), 482–514, p. 482, p. 487. Such physical responses are usually evoked by “horrors” mined from newspaper accounts of crime and vice. Mansel provides a litany of examples of sensational incidents drawn from Collins, Braddon,

Kingsley, however, writes with didactic purpose and invites the contagious spread of his ideas via literature that exploits sensation for precisely the reasons that Mansel condemns it – namely, a lasting reaction in the reader. Miasmic language blurs the boundaries between sensation and realism. The influential eco-critic Lawrence Buell describes the ‘gothicization of public health issues’, lurid portrayals of environmental squalor to produce fear, citing Dickens’s *Hard Times* and Engels’s *The Condition of the Working Class in England* as exemplars.<sup>7</sup> By Gothicisation, Buell means exaggerated and shocking description. While Buell identifies the atmosphere as something worth considering, what he fails to recognise is the domestication of this atmosphere, a particularly Victorian gesture that characterises sensation fiction. Patrick Brantlinger identifies the ‘sensation’ in sensation fiction as the mysteries lurking in the shadows of every street and in the respectable Victorian home. Subversive by uncovering the evils hidden beneath Victorian propriety, the sensation novel exposes that ‘truth has been hidden, buried, smuggled away behind the appearances’.<sup>8</sup> In other words, novelists interpret signs that readers have failed to comprehend in their own world. Like the sensation novelist, then, Kingsley deliberately intends to provoke discomfort and nausea, relying on miasmic language to render visible the ubiquity of pollution. What seems to rescue him from the brand of sensation that Mansel describes is Kingsley’s focus on *mundane* horrors. This at first seems to be a paradox, but dirt becomes horrifying *because* it is commonplace.

Victorian literary critics have widely examined the metaphorical resonances of dirt – filth may indicate moral decay, usually in the lower classes, emblematising their primitiveness, licentiousness, or idleness.<sup>9</sup> My work

---

and even Dickens: the suspense evoked by hidden identities, near-death experiences, frenzied and violent exchanges, and hair’s breadth escapes that ‘carry the whole nervous system by steam.’ The essay identifies two classes of sensation fiction: ‘those that are written merely for amusement, and those that are written with didactic purpose’ (p. 487). Interestingly, Mansel distrusts the latter precisely because of the genre’s substantial influence over its readers. He feels the morals or lessons are not worth teaching; i.e., defending bigamous unions or the rights of illegitimate children.

<sup>6</sup> ‘Sensation Novels’, p. 482. Mansel conceives of the ‘morbid’ appetite for sensation as a ‘moral disease’.

<sup>7</sup> Lawrence Buell, *Writing for an Endangered World* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2001), p. 43.

<sup>8</sup> Patrick Brantlinger, ‘What Is “Sensational” About The “Sensation Novel”?’ *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 37.1 (1982), pp. 118 (pp. 26–7).

<sup>9</sup> Michelle Allen, for instance, demonstrates that sanitary reformers were equally interested in purifying the soul and the body, and her readings of Dickens’s and Gissing’s works reveal dirt’s

attempts to re-orient examinations of dirt towards its literal meanings; though Kingsley championed the plight of the demoralised working classes, he nevertheless focuses on actual dirt and the reality that disease is *not* symptomatic of immoral behaviour; it can be prevented by practical attention to hygiene and cleanliness. Looking again to the description of the marketplace, filth travels from the slums into the main street. Kingsley insists that dirt cannot be repudiated, Othered or quarantined.<sup>10</sup> It cannot be ascribed to the working class alone. This evil invades respectable avenues and homes, and even if the visible dirt is cleared away, the sinister threat of contagion remains. Kingsley's sensational use of synaesthesia focuses on smell to help the reader "see" and feel the unobserved or invisible health risks in the environment; his explicit references to faeces, death, and decay intend to incite a sensational response for moral purpose.

In this way, Kingsley encouraged eco-consciousness, an ethical perception of humanity's intermingling with the environment made possible through keen vision, what George Perkins Marsh famously distinguished as 'seeing' rather than merely 'looking' in *Man and Nature* (1864). Kingsley wants his readers to truly see dirt, to see the consequences of introducing filth into the environment, and to see the suffering caused by that contamination. Dirt indiscriminately disseminates through England's permeable borders, just as the novel itself metaphorically tracks dirt into the home, into popular discourse. Kingsley's eco-conscious synaesthesia demands environmental justice.

### ***Yeast*: Rural Dirt**

Charles Kingsley was a man of many trades: professor of history at Cambridge, Anglican priest, Christian socialist, poet, novelist, naturalist, and social

---

function as a metaphor that muddies the distinction between physical disease and moral disease. Her exemplar of the sanitary novelist, Kingsley, 'conducted a lifelong campaign to redeem the social and spiritual condition of the poor by improving their physical condition' – see *Cleansing the City: Sanitary Geographies in Victorian London* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2008), p. 14, p. 15.

<sup>10</sup> Cohen and Mary Douglas have shown that 'filth' is a condemnatory word for dirt, carrying moral overtones that ascribe 'filth' to the other, to the working classes as if they are a separate race, morally culpable for the rank conditions in factories and slums. Cohen, p. ix; Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London, Routledge, 1966).

reformer. J. M. I. Klaver observes of Kingsley's participation in many intellectual arenas that he 'was a public figure who was listened to'.<sup>11</sup> Non-fiction works such as 'How to Study Natural History' (1846), *Glaucus* (1855), and *Town Geology* (1872) reveal his commitment to factual, accurate representation as well as his firm belief in evolution, so much so that Piers J. Hale dubs him 'Darwin's other bulldog'.<sup>12</sup> His studies earned him a place in both the Linnaean and Geological Societies, and his 1870 article in the journal *Nature* was even cited by Charles Darwin in *The Descent of Man* (1871). Kingsley was personally able to reconcile religion and science, and preached that man was part of, not apart from, nature. His belief in humanity's kinship with other species and the brotherhood of humanity undergirds his Christian Socialism. Christopher Hamlin, in his ecocritical analysis of Kingsley's works, writes that Kingsley preached the combination of 'consciousness and conscience', fostered in an organic community wherein Christians live in accordance with natural law (God's law).<sup>13</sup> Klaver underscores Kingsley's firm belief that 'fresh air and pure water did much towards removing the ills of society. This idea is based on a kind of environmental awareness which stems from an adequate knowledge of the workings of natural processes: [such] an ecological stance is closely linked to Kingsley's sanitary work'.<sup>14</sup>

Kingsley's novels, known for their descriptive qualities, were influenced by the method of natural history that demanded careful observation, recorded with minute truthfulness.<sup>15</sup> We see this type of painstaking description in Kingsley's first novel. Written during the second cholera epidemic in England (the horrors of which Kingsley witnessed first-hand as he ministered to

<sup>11</sup> J. M. I. Klaver, *The Apostle of the Flesh: A Critical Life of Charles Kingsley* (Boston: Brill, 2006), p. 3.

<sup>12</sup> Piers J. Hale, 'Darwin's Other Bulldog: Charles Kingsley and the Popularisation of Evolution in Victorian England', *Science & Education* 21.7 (2012), pp. 97–113.

<sup>13</sup> Christopher Hamlin, 'Charles Kingsley: From Being Green To Green Being', *Victorian Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal Of Social, Political, And Cultural Studies* 54.2 (2012), pp.255–81 (p. 271).

<sup>14</sup> Klaver, p. 363, p. 361.

<sup>15</sup> Mary Wheat Hanawalt also reflects that Kingsley's scientific enthusiasm is 'almost their [his novels] *raison d'être*'. 'Kingsley was primarily interested in science because it could ameliorate the condition of mankind', proving that disease is curable, rather than part of God's plan for humanity. She further suggests that science – and Kingsley's 'desire for its widespread appreciation and application' – unifies the chaotic plot of *Yeast*, 'Charles Kingsley And Science', *Studies In Philology* 34 (1937), pp. 589–611 (p. 593, p. 607, p. 594). Here, I revisit Kingsley's scientific background in relation to contemporary eco-criticism.

patients in his parish) and just as the government crushed the Chartist movement, *Yeast: A Problem* announces itself as a social problem novel through its sub-title.<sup>16</sup> Kingsley was directly inspired by the 1843 Blue Book, a 'Report on the Employment of Women and Children in Agriculture' and its explicit, emotional details of the suffering of the labouring classes.<sup>17</sup> His novel provides the literary counterpart to Commissioners' reports and the sanitary journalism of the public health movement. Lauded as 'the "essential" Kingsley' and his 'seminal' work,<sup>18</sup> *Yeast* establishes a set of eco-conscious thematic concerns that persist throughout Kingsley's career. Writing to J. M. Ludlow in November 1849, Kingsley lamented that newspaper accounts, particularly Henry Mayhew's disturbing article in the *Morning Chronicle* about the cholera districts of Bermondsey earlier that year, had 'produced no effect'.<sup>19</sup> Prompted to take up his own pen, Kingsley poured graphic detail into 'some of the most popular of Victorian popular literature', reaching the masses more effectively than even his own journal articles and tracts.<sup>20</sup>

Though the city dominates sanitary narratives in the period, *Yeast* brings economic causes of pollution into a rural setting, removed from the factory system. Graphic portrayals of filth de-idealise the countryside, discrediting the image of a pastoral, peaceful country in contrast to a corrupt, chaotic city. Far from enlisting the pastoral as foil to identify toxicity in urban environments, Kingsley exposes that similar working conditions and environmental hazards exist in the country. The novel's attention to toxicity heralds the modern environmental justice movement, which insists upon all people's equal right to live and work in a healthy environment. Environmental justice activists critique the world's unequal distribution of wealth and its connection to an unequal distribution of environmental devastation. Many Victorian novelists similarly demonstrate how labourers, often confined to pestilential residential

---

<sup>16</sup> Charles and Frances Eliza Grenfell Kingsley, *Charles Kingsley: His Letters and Memoires of His Life*, 2 vols. (London: H.S. King & Co., 1877), I, p. 217.

See Sheila M. Smith, 'Blue Books and Victorian Novelists', *The Review of English Studies* 21.81 (Feb., 1970), pp. 23–40.

<sup>18</sup> Larry K. Uffelman, *Charles Kingsley* (Boston: Twayne, 1979), p. 48; Allen J. Hartley, *The Novels of Charles Kingsley: A Christian Social Interpretation* (Folkestone: Hour-Glass Press, 1977), p. 61.

<sup>19</sup> Kingsley and Kingsley, p. 216.

<sup>20</sup> Edward R. Norman, *The Victorian Christian Socialists* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 13.

areas, suffer from pollution disproportionately to their employers or social superiors who migrate to cleaner neighbourhoods. Environmental justice activists consider the way issues of race, class, and gender affect environmental conditions, prompting citizens to mobilise by offering politicised accounts of personal hardship. Novels featuring pollution and subsequent illness, in their emphasis on individual suffering (particularly of women and children) and class discrimination share these concerns, and, whether written during the nineteenth century or now, can function as discursive activism.<sup>21</sup> Though his stories are fictional, Kingsley draws from actual fact to widen concern about environmental abuses.

Lancelot Smith, an independently wealthy gentleman, witnesses economic disparity between estate workers and owners, maturing from an idealistic view of life to a pragmatic awareness of social problems and human beings' dependence on a clean environment. His name, a mixture of the romantic and prosaic, suggests this transition. As a proxy for the reader, he tours the South of England, guided by the Chartist gamekeeper Tregarva, whose lengthy lectures comprise much of the plot. Staying on Squire Lavington's estate, Smith quickly falls in love with his daughter Argemone, a beautiful snob who believes in liberal theories without actually practising charity. Kingsley pokes fun at his characters with authorial interjections, often interrupting pictures of frivolous upper-class life, with its superficial melancholy, to present social reality. The novel quickly moves from romance to realism, chronicling Smith's "conversion" to social reformer through exposure to the squalid homes and habits of the working class.<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>21</sup> Mary Katzenstein defines discursive activism as the 'effort to reinterpret, reformulate, rethink, and rewrite the norms and practices of society and state', challenging the flawed assumptions of mainstream discourse. See *Faithful and Fearless: Moving Feminist Protest inside the Church and Military* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), p. 17. As Stacey Young has shown, feminism has a strong tradition of discursive political activism, whether through consciousness-raising groups or iconoclastic publications, and more recently Frances Shaw has written about the politics of online blogs; however, other social movements such as environmentalism clearly engage in discursive activism as well. Stacey Young, *Changing the Wor(L)D: Discourse, Politics, and the Feminist Movement* (New York: Routledge, 1997); Frances Shaw, 'The Politics of Blogs: Theories of Discursive Activism Online', *Media International Australia*, No. 141 (2012), pp. 41–9. Kingsley availed himself of multiple mediums to circulate his ideas: the pulpit, the classroom, and the press.

<sup>22</sup> P.G. Scott and Larry K. Uffelman review the extensive revisions to *Yeast* between its original appearance as six monthly instalments serialised in *Fraser's Magazine* (July–December 1848) and its 1851 book form. Kingsley enlarges the conversion narrative focusing on Luke to deepen the

Tregarva confronts Smith with reality, correcting Smith's impressions of beauty, citing '[f]ever, and ague, and rheumatism' (p. 26) spread by the 'white fog', which unlike the bearable river-damps, are of 'man's sending' and unendurable (p. 36). Tregarva specifies human agency as the culprit behind toxic dirt, carefully distinguishing between river-damp and toxic effluvia.<sup>23</sup> He observes, 'A man's eyes can only see what they've learnt to see' (p. 38); sympathetic clergymen and landlords 'see the evils, and yet they don't see them. They do not see what is the matter with the poor man' (p. 233). In other words, they do not see like the naturalist with eco-consciousness. Tregarva thus brings Smith to experience first-hand the "reeking" village atmosphere, because the only way to see is to smell, taste, touch, and hear. Smith, sheltered by his elite education, had expected beauty, 'pastoral sentiment', 'innocent, simple enjoyment', and is startled by the dirty reality of the 'stale', rotten, 'reeking' atmosphere, and the 'half-articulate', 'guttural' speech of the primitive labouring classes who stay perpetually drunk to drown out the drudgery of their existence (p. 190). What is the matter is not an innate predilection for sin or vice. Kingsley implies successive generations of inadequate food and shelter have poisoned blood" betraying an anxiety about de-evolution. A polluted environment pollutes the body and turns the blood. Kingsley claims, 'Whatsoever may seem extravagant or startling is most likely to be historic fact, else I should not have dared to write it down, finding God's actual dealings here much too wonderful to dare to invent many fresh ones for myself' (p. 15). Kingsley contends that reality is sensational, even more horrifying than the melodramatic ingredients of sensation novels precisely because it is "fact". Nauseated by the assault on his senses exposing rural dirt, Smith also displays discomfort at his kinship to these revellers, realising, through Tregarva's

---

novel's disapproval of Catholicism and to increase its didactic tone. 'Kingsley's Serial Novels: Yeast', *Victorian Periodicals Newsletter* 9 (1976), pp. 111–19. However, Lancelot's "conversion" remains central, and ecology is arguably the axis of his change.

<sup>23</sup> In addition to incorporating "man-made: dangers into miasma theory, Kingsley also insists upon human agency because it indicates that toxic conditions and subsequent disease are *preventable*, rather than divinely ordained. He resumes this argument in his fifth novel, *Two Years Ago* (1857), in which the hero, Tom Thurnall, champions the cause of sanitary reform despite fierce opposition from the townspeople against his meddling. The residents of Aberalva, particularly the dissenters, stubbornly believe that cholera is a visitation from God to punish sinfulness, and therefore cannot be circumvented. This, too, shows the fallacy of regarding dirt as a problem of moral or spiritual pollution rather than hygiene and ecological ignorance. The novel acerbically denounces the pride and ignorance of the townspeople who thwart public health officials from making necessary improvements.



explanations, that he is not inherently different from them, but born in better circumstances.

Tregarva writes an inflammatory poem voicing the plight of his comrades. In the first stanza, he accuses the gentry of making poaching necessary by denying work and adequate money, and then subsequently punishing poachers. He describes the 'reeking', overcrowded, dilapidated cottages that provide little shelter from the elements, which, by preventing the ill from working, increases their poverty until the master sends them to the workhouse. The labourers are worse fed and housed than the estate's livestock and hunting hounds (p. 148). The poem describes the role of landlords and employers in creating toxic conditions, effectually rewriting 'filth' to be the fault of the gentry, not the working classes. Likely correcting the impression of many of the novel's readers, Tregarva explains that outdoors or agrarian work under such oppressive conditions is no healthier than factory work. The clean, idyllic environment Smith expected is only found on the areas of the estate occupied by the wealthy.

Social problem novels commonly uncover the inadequacy of Victorian philanthropy. Tregarva explains that visible problems receive immediate relief: sympathetic passers-by 'pull out their purses fast enough', but these 'charitable people' are unable to make the connection between the poor that they see, and the thousands more that they do not. Tregarva highlights the difference between one or two unfortunate cases, and a prevailing social problem happening 'all the year round' (p. 37). Individual acts of charity, while appreciated, are no match for a massively harmful social system. These labourers are not out of work because of a flaw on their part that they can correct; they are born into a class prohibited from reaping the benefits of work and consigned to unhealthy spaces. Tregarva successfully convinces Smith of these distinctions, and it is Smith's subsequent decision to write about these revelations that potentially circulates them widely.<sup>24</sup> The narrative's use of

---

<sup>24</sup> Smith's conversion at this juncture entails dropping 'all faith in anything but Nature' (p. 126). Kingsley criticises the Church for ignoring material needs to minister to the soul. The novel's theme of religious hypocrisy speaks a powerful message about environmental justice. It is unacceptable that 'in a country calling itself civilised and Christian, pestilence should be the peculiar heritage of the poor!' (p. 220). Tregarva recognises that contagious diseases are 'confined to the poor', 'while the rich, by the mere fact of money, are exempt from such curses, except when they come in contact with those whom they call on Sunday "their brethren", and on week days "the masses"' (p. 220).

miasmatic language strives for a parallel conversion in readers, who “seeing” smell may, too, become eco-conscious. Kingsley invites his readers’ participation: his book itself is ‘from beginning to end, as in name, so in nature, Yeast – an honest sample of the questions, which, good or bad, are fermenting in the minds of the young of this day, and are rapidly leavening the minds of the rising generation’ (p. 135). Kingsley deploys a metaphor of fermenting yeast to suggest how polemical ideas may multiply through word of mouth, similar to the function of miasmatic language in spreading a public conversation about environmental contamination. The young dictate the nation’s destiny, and Kingsley looks outward to his audience for cures for pollution.

When Squire Lavington hears of Tregarva’s poem, instead of feeling shame or remorse, or even pausing for a moment to consider the truth of the verses, he rages over Tregarva’s audacity and disloyalty. He subsequently dies of apoplexy, unenlightened, and this begins a series of sensational incidents as Argemone, finally reaching out to the suffering poor, contracts a fatal case of typhus, and a ‘mysterious’ and ‘agonising’ disease afflicts her sister, Honoria.<sup>25</sup> This literally demonstrates the upper classes’ susceptibility to contagion. However, the town attributes the deaths to the ‘nun’s curse’ upon the Lavingtons for their neglect of the poor (p. 241). Though even folklore considers their fate as divine retribution for ignoring environmental injustice, Kingsley ‘preaches to the nerves’ to suggest that underneath this superstition is the ecological lesson that disease defies class barriers, and the treatment of the labouring classes *will* affect the nation as a whole.

Smith leaves with Tregarva to ‘the country of Prester John’, the fabled Christian nation in the Orient. This mysticism is partly why *Yeast* has not enjoyed the attention of other Victorian novels. Kingsley, leaving the story open-ended, refuses to ‘draw the horoscope of the Whitford poor, or any others. Really that depends principally on yourselves’ (p. 269). He ‘advocates the ideals of cooperation and brotherhood as the solution to the pressing issues of his age’, which, as John Kijinski points out, typifies an ideological stance shared by Victorian writers on social issues, ‘the belief that the increasing

---

<sup>25</sup> Kingsley wrote the Squire’s death into his revision of the text from its serial form, as well as revoking Honoria’s happier ending. Scott and Uffelman seemingly regard these changes as less ‘important’ than the expansion of Luke’s story (p. 118), yet they are actually quite instrumental in reinforcing the novel’s didactic purpose (while also introducing plot points that again demonstrate Kingsley’s use of ‘sensational’ tactics).

hostility between rich and poor could be ameliorated [...] if only members of all classes could increase their imaginative sympathy and communicate with each other in a more humane manner'. He continues, 'the condition of England will improve only once individual citizens of England understand that all human beings must be viewed as members of the family that is ruled by a common Father, and that each person must willingly take responsibility for the well-being of the members of this family'.<sup>26</sup> Kijinski describes Kingsley's Christian Socialist beliefs, which also serve as a vehicle for an ecological imperative. All classes belong to the same human family; we are 'all animals after all' (p. 25), and contagious disease and environmental contamination that threaten one group become threats to all.<sup>27</sup> Miasmatic language, with its emphasis on networks, demonstrates this eco-consciousness. Kingsley's use of eco-conscious synaesthesia reveals environmental injustice to mobilise lasting reform, not temporary charity.

### ***Alton Locke*: Urban Dirt**

In *Yeast*, illness reveals the inexorable connection between classes, and miasmatic language verbalises the perpetual fog of filth afflicting the English. *Alton Locke* similarly stitches his tale together; the common ecological problems of his age function as the pieces that, when brought together, reveal the interconnections between urban and rural, poor and rich. The "propaganda novel" *Alton Locke, Tailor and Poet: An Autobiography* encapsulates the Hungry Forties.<sup>28</sup> Written eight years before the Great Stink would force legislators into addressing London's degradation, the novel aggressively confronts its readers with unflinching portrayals of filth. Kingsley's graphic descriptions distinguish his fiction from that of Gaskell, whose descriptions of poorly drained cellars in *Mary Barton* (1848) seem tame in comparison, and

---

<sup>26</sup> John L. Kijinski, 'Charles Kingsley's *Yeast*: Brotherhood And The Condition Of England', *VII: Victorians Institute Journal* 13 (1985), pp. 97–109; p. 98, pp. 98–99.

<sup>27</sup> *The Guardian*'s review of the novel acknowledges the success of Kingsley's social protest, particularly his demonstration of the moral necessity of recognising kinship with the poor. The review praises Kingsley's ability to '[see] clearly many evils of which most people have but dim and vague conceptions.' Qtd. in Klaver, p. 158.

<sup>28</sup> Klaver, p. 216.

from that of Dickens, whose euphemistic use of words like 'dust' for 'dung' failed to startle. The closest Dickens comes to recognising filth on Kingsley's scale are the dust-heaps in *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-5).

Locke, a tailor by trade and poet by inclination, suffers from damaged lungs. He regards his Cockney heritage as God's gift

that I might learn to feel for poor wretches who sit stifled in reeking garrets and workrooms, drinking in disease with every breath, – bound in their prison-house of brick and iron, with their own funeral pall hanging over them, in that canopy of fog and poisonous smoke, from their cradle to their grave. (pp. 5-6)

Each breath imbibes dirt and disease; Locke portrays the workshop as an infectious prison, improperly maintained by owners looking to maximise profit without regard for human health. Locke confidently identifies the cause of his ailing body as exposure to poisoned fumes and inadequate ventilation. In these passages he emphasises smog and dirty, overcrowded spaces, 'reeking with human breath', creating a miasma in itself. In his descriptions, Kingsley once again attempts to give physical form to pathogens. Locke identifies social causes for his disease: 'I think that it was the will of the world and of the devil, of man's avarice and laziness and ignorance [...]. A sanitary reformer would not be long in guessing the cause of my unhealthiness' (p. 6). Catherine Gallagher suggests that 'Alton seems obsessed with a great contradictory truth [...]: man is free yet determined'.<sup>29</sup> Even while exercising his or her own free will, a person's environment inevitably dictates the outcome of his/her decisions. Kingsley proves the suffering of the poor to be an environmentally determined evil. Humanity's avarice, a devil embodying capitalism, creates the conditions that weaken Locke's constitution. He views his talents as a means to expose social inequality and environmental pollution through miasmatic language, demonstrating the point early on that the poor bear the burden of pollution. Locke's autobiography, like Kingsley's novel, exposes preventable

---

<sup>29</sup> Catherine Gallagher, *The Industrial Reformation of English Fiction: Social Discourse and Narrative Form, 1832–1867* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), p. 95.

environmental injustice to his reader's vision, and his sensational descriptions of toxicity intend to jolt readers into action.

Despite his narrow sphere of observation, Locke studies 'natural objects' with 'intense keenness' (p. 9). He longs for the tropical climates described by missionaries, contrasting the exotic, wondrous scenery with his 'little dingy, foul, reeking, twelve-foot square back-yard, where huge smoky party-walls shut out every breath of air and almost all the light of heaven' (p. 14). Kingsley's repeated use of the word 'reeking' signals his sensitivity to smell, so even when describing water, he frames the problem as toxic air to create a sense of claustrophobia. He attempts to study his local pond, in truth the buildings' water supply, dirty fluid 'crusted with soot and alive with insects, to be renewed only three times in the seven days' (p. 14). Even the teeming insects prove a type of filth that dramatises toxicity, perhaps standing-in for the invisible germs infecting the water much as *Punch* that same year illustrated a magnified 'Drop of London Water' as crowded with microscopic "pests" to represent germs. Dubious "wonders" are revealed under a microscope. To the Seer it is explained

how the pure fluid differs from the liquid constituting the Thames, and from that which exists in metropolitan wells, when the former has received the contents of sewers, and the latter the oozings of intramural graveyards. Some delicate subjects, even of the male sex, cannot endure this process, it affecting them with faintness and nausea.<sup>30</sup>

In fact, the sight is intended to nauseate. Similarly to the Seer, as Locke searches for specimens, 'all of a sudden the horror of the place came over [him]; those grim prison-walls above, with their canopy of lurid smoke; the dreary, sloppy, broken pavement; the horrible stench of the stagnant cesspools; the utter want of form, colour, life, in the whole place, crushed me down' (p. 14). Experiencing synaesthesia, Locke *feels* the stench as a debilitating weight. Here is Locke's moment of recognition: "horror" – dirt – originates in England,

---

<sup>30</sup> Anon., 'A Drop of London Water', *Punch* Vol. 18 (1850), p. 188.

in his own backyard. Locke transposes the canopy of the rainforest into thick smoke, revealing the perversion in the East End. The only “wonders” in this tiny backyard are monstrous insects (‘great larvae’ breeding in the water) and the filth suffocates Locke's ambition to be a naturalist, while prompting him to share these discoveries with a blind populace. We can see how Kingsley's references to “exotic” locales gain increased significance by reading this scene in light of the recent cholera epidemic. A disease that originated in India, ‘Asiatic cholera took shape in the Victorian imagination as an Oriental raider, a barbaric force whose progress westward exposed the weak spots of an expanding industrial culture’. Soon, the popular press began imagining cholera as the lord of the English slum. Social critics, including Kingsley, ‘agreed that England was mass-producing a distinctly exotic squalor out of its own ill-disposed waste’. <sup>31</sup>

Locke transfers his naturalist energies to his method of literary representation. He continually demonstrates clear causal relationships to awaken eco-consciousness in the reader. There are numerous passages describing the unsanitary, dangerous, and suffocating conditions of London's workshops, homes, and streets, such as the tailor's workshop, which Kingsley likens to a hospital. Each floor nourishes a type of illness: dampness breeds rheumatism; exposure to cesspools leads to typhoid and dysentery; close, thick air clouded with sweat and fabric particles causes asthma and consumption (p. 25). None of these illnesses are 'natural'. The workshop, a microcosm of the larger city, shows the man-made origin of these illnesses, which are propagated through careless relations with the environment. Once again, Kingsley broadens the miasma concept to not only include any type of hazardous airborne substance (sweat, sewage, mildew, dust), but to go beyond the popular fear of smell, as some of the dangers are both odourless (fabric) and invisible (germs).

Describing a foggy night in Bermondsey, Kingsley exposes environmental contaminants. He illustrates the way the city distorts the natural:

---

<sup>31</sup> Erin O'Connor, *Raw Material: Producing Pathology in Victorian Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), p. 22, p. 30.

From the butchers' and greengrocers' shops the gas-lights flared and flickered, wild and ghastly, over haggard groups of slip-shod dirty women, bargaining for scraps of stale meat and frostbitten vegetables, wrangling about short weight and bad quality. Fish-stalls and fruit-stalls lined the edge of the greasy pavement, sending up odours as foul as the language of sellers and buyers. Blood and sewer-water crawled from under doors and out of spouts, and reeked down the gutters among offal, animal and vegetable, in every stage of putrefaction (p. 87).

Gas, rotting meat and vegetables, overflowing cesspools, manure, and human sweat create the dirty fog engulfing the neighbourhood; this sensory miasmic language demonstrates filth's contagious properties. Kingsley often uses the word 'crawling', embodying toxicity as monstrous. 'Teeming' like so many insects, the inhabitants cannot afford the luxury of cleanliness (p. 87). One may say the swarm of people becomes another re-imagining of miasma. Perpetually carrying filth on their shoes and in their groceries, they ignore the causal relationships Kingsley is eager to render. Cholera was most often contracted through swallowing infected water, but food such as Kingsley describes was also a carrier of the bacteria, which could last for days in meat, dairy products, and produce.

The urban market reveals another invisible reality of London, the chaotic presence of "rural" activities. Kingsley's rhetoric echoes his assessment of Locke's London yard: abuse ruins what should be beautiful. Like the human inhabitants, the animals are kept in close confinement, improperly fed, and cruelly used. Here, violations of the land (the build-up of trash, dirt, and manure) pollute the environment as a whole. Cesspools spill over onto the ground, polluting the land from within by seeping through the soil into groundwater. The barnyard conditions engender squalor, but the city's insanitariness also harms the animals' health. They cannot thrive any better than the people, imbibing ash-coated food and fetid water. Grown at a great distance, produce spoils before it reaches the table. As Hamlin asserts, Kingsley denied the consciousness of a 'nature separate from human involvement',

forcing the confrontation between the human and nonhuman realms.<sup>32</sup> Kingsley's scene shows the reliance on healthy land for survival. Londoners suffer from imported or poor quality crops and livestock inadequately cared for. In blunt terms, Londoners poison themselves by failing to separate their dirt from their food.

Kingsley roots his moral melodrama in everyday, if ghastly, realities. P. J. Keating finds this particular scene so successful because Kingsley withholds commentary and lets the details, which are horrifying enough, speak for themselves. He argues, 'Kingsley's sole intention is [...] to re-create the feeling of repulsion experienced by himself [...]. [It] is notable that Kingsley has deliberately chosen what would normally be a fairly gay scene – a street market at its busiest moment, Saturday evening [and] makes no attempt whatsoever' to moderate the uncomfortable realities. Kingsley chooses the market as 'typical working-class London as a whole: it is not simply an isolated plague spot'. These descriptions, in Keating's words, that 'grip the reader and stir his conscience' characterise the Victorian use of miasmatic language and the veracity essential to the novel's confrontation with the actual environment.<sup>33</sup> Kingsley aims to induce the physical sensation of repulsion. In his grotesque market scene, Kingsley represents actual, disturbing facts, implying that the "real" will be "sensational" as long as such evils exist.

In Victorian London, the workers lack opportunities of engagement with healthy environments. One labourer in a "sweaters den" raves, 'when will I get out to the fresh air? For five months I haven't seen the blessed light of the sun' (p. 201). Maddened by his imprisonment in the carceral city, Jemmy Downes attempts to jump off Waterloo Bridge. After being prevented by Locke, Downes, intoxicated with gin and toxic water, leads Locke to a rat-infested, putrid den above a sewer. In far and away the most lurid scene, Downes confesses to killing his family by allowing them to live in claustrophobic quarters. His family succumbs to the 'fever devils', the noxious vapour rising from the sewer below, and the sensory description of the 'hot breaths' of miasma uncovers visible and invisible threats – the dirt covering the floor and the infectious germs emanating from unsanitary conditions.

---

<sup>32</sup> Hamlin, p. 258.

<sup>33</sup> P. J. Keating, *The Working Classes in Victorian Fiction* (New York: Barnes & Noble, Inc., 1971), p. 20.



Locke first experiences the smell: ‘The stench was frightful – the very air heavy with pestilence. The first breath I drew made my heart sink, and my stomach turn’ (p. 332). Air, land, and water pollution converge in this house of horror, where the environment revenges itself upon human beings for their abuse. The contamination of the water with excrement and industrial fluids contaminates the air, and pollution of the land is pollution of the water, as litter clogs rivers and cesspools. Locke forgets his discomfort (the smell) upon seeing the three corpses on the floor: Downes’s wife and her two children, half-devoured by rodents. Downes wails,

“I watched ‘em dying! Day after day I saw the devils come up through the cracks, like little maggots and beetles, all manner of ugly things, creeping down their throats; and I asked ‘em, and they said they were the fever devils.” It was too true; the poisonous exhalations had killed them. The wretched man’s delirium tremens had given that horrible substantiality to the poisonous fever gases (p. 332).

Downes imagines contagion as embodied insects: since ‘fever’ and ‘gas’ (or the germs and viruses at their core) are largely invisible, Downes uses metaphor to articulate the cause of his family’s misfortunes. Both literal insects and nightmarish hallucinations of insects representing toxins invade the body, “creeping” into their lungs. Locke implies Downes suffers from typhus, known to cause delirium. ‘All manner of ugly things’ creates the miasma, a myriad of pestilential particles including sewer gases, industrial fumes, and the insects that feed on human flesh and reside in their clothes and hair (p. 332). Kingsley’s use of adjectives like ‘heavy’ and verbs like ‘crawling’ attempt to give a stable form to miasma. Novelists faced a problem when trying to render evanescent miasma real to audiences; Kingsley’s intense descriptions give ‘horrible substantiality’ to invisible or microscopic toxins, encouraging an eco-consciousness in the reader that will allow them to recognise these dangers in the actual world.

Locke suggests Downes drink water instead of gin, only to learn that the sewer water is the sole option. Gin becomes a necessity, a desperate effort to

mask the taste of the 'hell-broth' and combat nausea. Running to fetch water to illustrate his point, Downes falls into the foul sewer, suffocating in the stench as much as drowning. The water, 'as opaque as stone', engulfs and hides his body (p. 333). There is no euphemism here as Downes drowns in shit.

Kingsley employs sensationalism in the cause of environmental justice. At the novel's end, Locke's highborn cousin will die of typhus fever, contracted from the coat he commissioned, the same coat Downes was working on, and used to cover the corpses of his family.<sup>34</sup> Alan Rauch observes, 'It is, after all, fabric itself that is the vector for disease between the ill-used tailors and the upper classes for whom they must work'; his analysis points to the metaphorical contamination of the cloth, which patterns this exploitation.<sup>35</sup> Cloth, itself a kind of web, becomes another way to represent contagion and ecological connections. Environmental injustices cannot be quarantined in the poorer districts. The fleas and lice birthed out of the "great unwashed" (the exploited labouring classes) know no hierarchies, indiscriminately biting and infecting the rich with the blood of the poor. Kingsley recasts the scene in *Past and Present* (1843) where Carlyle makes this point through an anecdote about the Irish widow who infects her unsympathetic neighbours with typhus. Disease functions as the ironic 'proof that she *was* flesh of your flesh', bone of your bone'.<sup>36</sup> Epidemic pollution reveals ecological truths. Their strategic deployment of miasmatic language suggests that Victorians were so eco-conscious as to be aware of interchanges induced by pollution, even without accurate knowledge of germ theory. Writing these networks into the novel awakened perception of inescapable linkages between classes, exposing the reality that dirt, often understood as a working-class problem, affected every person in England.

Locke collapses into a feverish dream state after inhaling the poisonous gases of the cellar.<sup>37</sup> In an allegorical saga, ghosts of an ecological past haunt Locke: he dreams he has de-evolved into a madreporé, and then evolves over

---

<sup>34</sup> Typhus was most often spread by lice; often confused with typhoid fever, the two illnesses were not distinguished until 1869.

<sup>35</sup> Alan Rauch, 'The Tailor Transformed: Kingsley's *Alton Locke* And The Notion Of Change', *Studies In The Novel* 25.2 (1993), pp. 196–213 (p. 200).

<sup>36</sup> Thomas Carlyle, *Past and Present* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1872), p. 129, p. 128.

<sup>37</sup> He may also have contracted typhus.

time back into a human.<sup>38</sup> Locke's evolution is triggered through altruism; it is when he protects his cousin from a falling tree, sacrificing his own life, that Locke evolves into an ape, the first stage of development towards humanity. During this stage, 'Each man coveted the universe for his own lusts, and not that he might fulfil in it God's command to people and subdue it' (p. 349). Subdue in this context means cultivate, referring back to an earlier allusion in the novel to Bacon's golden rule, 'Nature is conquered by obeying her' (p. 370). The universe must not be divided into resources for individual use: everyone must cooperatively share the land. Locke can only wake when he teaches his companions the proper relationship to the earth. He brings back to the present a past model of England and the "commons", free use of public land. His imagined evolution, an allegory of progress, resuscitates part of England's heritage. Locke, however, sets sail for America, where he hopes he may start a new life, and dies shortly upon reaching its shore. While Locke's autobiography lives on to inculcate the need for brotherhood, it offers an ambivalent conclusion. It is up to the reader to act.

### 'Kingsley Fever': Reforming Dirt

In *Sartor Resartus* (1836), Carlyle asks, 'What too are all Poets and Moral Teachers, but a Species of Metaphorical Tailors?'<sup>39</sup> Kingsley weaves a panoramic view of England: urban sweatshops and rural hovels tenanted by the lower classes, and the luxurious country estates and opulent drawing rooms of the elite. Miasma – inescapable – reveals currents of exchange; the workers are exploited by masters, who become infected by the hazardous conditions they create. Tina Choi argues that in urban fiction of the 1840s and 1850s, these intimate relationships between the biological and social create the connective tissue of the city, citing an 1843 *Quarterly Review* article: 'we reflect that the air

<sup>38</sup> A madreporite is a kind of stony coral. Darwin's first monograph, *The Structure and Distribution of Coral Reefs*, based on his investigations aboard the *Beagle* from 1832–1836, expounds his theory of the formation of coral reefs. Published in 1842, the monograph cemented Darwin's celebrity in scientific circles and earned him, in 1853, the Royal Society's Royal Medal. Given the Victorian mania for natural history, it is possible that the genus madreporite would be recognisable to Kingsley's contemporary readers.

<sup>39</sup> Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus*. ed. by Kerry McSweeney and Peter Sabor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 219.

the labouring classes breathe [...] is the fluid in which rich and poor are equally immersed—that it is a commonwealth in which all are born, live, and die equal'.<sup>40</sup> The feared miasma communicates these lessons, wafting the message from the core of London, from the gases sublimated by human activity, across the nation. Kingsley's miasmatic portrayal of dirt serves its purpose: the shock value in *Alton Locke* and *Yeast* forcefully awakens perception, playing on cultural anxiety to disseminate unforgettable truths. To return to the yeast metaphor, Kingsley clearly sought out a mass response to his ideas. If solutions depend principally on his reader, we may assume he did not simply mean individual action, but individuals as part of a collective acting cooperatively. As a proponent of sanitation reform, we may also assume Kingsley approved of government-helmed and centralised responses to public health issues.<sup>41</sup> Though he soundly condemns the Poor Law, via Tregarva, he suggests that better national education and equal economic opportunities are necessary to improve social conditions, both of which require collaborative action.<sup>42</sup>

Kingsley wrote for England's youth, who, inspired by his zeal and radical ideas, caught what Henry James dubbed 'Kingsley fever'.<sup>43</sup> This phrase captures Kingsley's hopes that his reforming fervour would be contagious. Significantly, both Smith and Locke become authors, and like their creator,

---

<sup>40</sup> Tina Young Choi, 'Writing the Victorian City: Discourses Of Risk, Connection, And Inevitability', *Victorian Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal Of Social, Political, And Cultural Studies* 43.4 (2001), pp. 561–89 (p. 569).

<sup>41</sup> As assumption confirmed in *Two Years Ago*, which features Tom Thurnall's exhaustive efforts on behalf of the Board of Health.

<sup>42</sup> Most biographies of Kingsley chronicle his increasing conservatism and his rejection of Chartism or political reform that would lead to democracy, as well as ambivalence towards state intervention; rather, he proposed 'self-help' and 'self-improvement'. See Norman, p. 38, p. 45; Klaver pp. 454–7. However, Norman and Klaver also suggest that if Kingsley's radicalism waned as he grew older, it was because he believed that significant progress had been achieved, and Kingsley's novels surely contributed to that. Uffelman describes Kingsley's social attitudes as more 'paternalistic' than truly 'egalitarian' (p. 56). His ethical, if not political agenda, nevertheless propagates ecological truths that insist upon the equal right of all people to a healthy environment, and, furthermore, the right of the nonhuman environment to be healthy.

<sup>43</sup> Endeavouring to instil his views in an even younger age group, Kingsley revisits these issues in his didactic children's story, *The Water-Babies* (1863). A young chimney sweep, Tom, becomes so fascinated with clean water that he drowns in the attempt to wash off the soot covering his body. This not only alludes to the lack of 'water up the court where he lived', but the city's smoky air. Kingsley's toxic discourse insists that Tom cannot survive in a contaminated environment, and so is transformed into a 'water-baby'. Charles Kingsley, *The Water-Babies: A Fairy Tale for a Land-Baby*. Ed. Richard D. Beards (New York: Penguin Books, 2008), p. 1.

they use literature as the carrier of ideas that by spreading and multiplying may lead to environmental justice.

## Bibliography

Allen, Michelle, *Cleansing the City: Sanitary Geographies in Victorian London* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2008).

Anon., 'A Drop of London Water', *Punch* Vol. 18 (1850), p. 188.

Brantlinger, Patrick, 'What Is "Sensational" About The "Sensation Novel"?',

*Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 37.1 (1982), pp. 1-28.

Buell, Lawrence, *Writing for an Endangered World* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2001).

Casey, Ellen Miller, "'Highly Flavoured Dishes" and "Highly Seasoned Garbage": Sensation in the *Athenaeum*'. *Victorian Sensations: Essays on a Scandalous Genre*, ed. by Kimberly Harrison and Richard Fantina (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2006), pp. 3-14.

Carlyle, Thomas, *Past and Present* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1872).

Carlyle, Thomas, *Sartor Resartus*, ed. by Kerry McSweeney and Peter Sabor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

Choi, Tina Young, 'Writing the Victorian City: Discourses Of Risk, Connection, And Inevitability' *Victorian Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal Of*

*Social, Political, And Cultural Studies* 43.4 (2001), pp. 561–89.

Cohen, William A., 'Introduction: Locating Filth', in *Filth: Dirt, Disgust, and Modern Life*, ed. by William A. Cohen and Ryan Johnson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), pp. vii–xxxvii.

Douglas, Mary, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London, Routledge, 1966).

Gallagher, Catherine, *The Industrial Reformation of English Fiction: Social Discourse and Narrative Form, 1832-1867* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).

Hale, Piers J., 'Darwin's Other Bulldog: Charles Kingsley and the Popularisation of Evolution in Victorian England', *Science & Education* 21.7 (2012), pp. 977–1013.

Hamlin, Christopher, 'Charles Kingsley: From Being Green To Green Being', *Victorian Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal Of Social, Political, And Cultural Studies* 54.2 (2012), pp. 255–81.

Hanawalt, Mary W., 'Charles Kingsley And Science', *Studies In Philology* 34 (1937), pp. 589–611.

Hartley, Allen J., *The Novels of Charles Kingsley: A Christian Social*

*Interpretation* (Folkestone: Hour-Glass Press, 1977).

Katzenstein, Mary Fainsod, *Faithful and Fearless: Moving Feminist Protest inside the Church and Military* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).

Keating, P. J., *The Working Classes in Victorian Fiction* (New York: Barnes & Noble, Inc., 1971).

Kijinski, John L., 'Charles Kingsley's Yeast: Brotherhood And The Condition Of England', *VII: Victorians Institute Journal* 13 (1985), pp. 97-109.

Kingsley, Charles, *Alton Locke*, ed. By Elizabeth A. Cripps (Oxford: Oxford

University Press, 1983).

Kingsley, Charles, *Glaucus; or The Wonders of the Shore* (Cambridge: Macmillan and Co., 1859).

Kingsley, Charles, *Yeast: A Problem* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1888).

Kingsley, Charles, *The Water-Babies: A Fairy Tale for a Land-Baby*, ed. by Richard D. Beards (New York: Penguin Books, 2008).

Kingsley, Charles, and Frances Eliza Grenfell Kingsley, *Charles Kingsley: His Letters and Memoires of His Life* (London: H.S. King & Co., 1877), 2 vols.

Klaver, J. M. I., *The Apostle of the Flesh: A Critical Life of Charles Kingsley* (Boston: Brill, 2006).

Mansel, H. L., 'Sensation Novels', *Quarterly Review*, Vol. 113, No. 226 (1863), pp. 482–514.

Norman, Edward R., *The Victorian Christian Socialists* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

O'Connor, Erin, *Raw Material: Producing Pathology in Victorian Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000).

Rauch, Alan, 'The Tailor Transformed: Kingsley's *Alton Locke* And The Notion Of Change', *Studies In The Novel* 25.2 (1993), pp. 196–213.

Scott, P. G., and Larry K. Uffelman, 'Kingsley's Serial Novels: Yeast', *Victorian Periodicals Newsletter* 9 (1976), pp. 111–19.

Shaw, Frances, 'The Politics of Blogs: Theories of Discursive Activism Online', *Media International Australia*, No. 141 (2012), pp. 41–9.

Smith, Sheila M., 'Blue Books and Victorian Novelists', *The Review of English Studies*, New Series, Vol. 21, No. 81 (Feb., 1970), pp. 23–40.

Trotter, David, 'The New Historicism and the Psychopathology of Everyday Modern Life', in *Filth: Dirt, Disgust, and Modern Life*, ed. by William A. Cohen and Ryan Johnson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), pp. 30–48.

Uffelman, Larry K., *Charles Kingsley* (Boston: Twayne, 1979).



Young, Stacey, *Changing the Wor(L)D: Discourse, Politics, and the Feminist Movement* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

## BAD PROPERTY: UNCLEAN HOUSES IN VICTORIAN CITY WRITING

Erika Kvistad  
(University of Oslo)

### *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.’<sup>1</sup>

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

### **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

---

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

<sup>2</sup> 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'.<sup>3</sup>

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.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup>

Harold James Dyos takes the writers more on their own terms, describing them broadly as 'researcher[s]' and 'investigators',<sup>6</sup> while Lee Jackson describes them as 'intrepid social reformers' and 'investigative journalists'.<sup>7</sup> 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

---

<sup>3</sup> 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.attackingthediabol.co.uk/spiritualism/clairvoyant.php>> [accessed 21 July 2015]

<sup>4</sup> 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.

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

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

<sup>7</sup> 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',<sup>8</sup> 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).<sup>9</sup> 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'.<sup>10</sup>

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.

---

<sup>8</sup> 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.

<sup>9</sup> 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.

<sup>10</sup> 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’.<sup>11</sup> 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’.<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup>

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

---

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

<sup>12</sup> 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.

<sup>13</sup> 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.

<sup>14</sup> 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'.<sup>15</sup> 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

---

<sup>15</sup> 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.<sup>16</sup> ‘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.<sup>17</sup> 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’.<sup>18</sup> 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,

---

<sup>16</sup> 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.

<sup>17</sup> Metropolitan Sewage Committee proceedings, *Parliamentary Papers*, 10.651 (1846).

<sup>18</sup> 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'.<sup>19</sup> 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 foggiess 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'.<sup>20</sup> 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

---

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

<sup>20</sup> 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’.<sup>21</sup> 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’)<sup>22</sup>. 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

---

<sup>21</sup> 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.

<sup>22</sup> 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’.<sup>23</sup> 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!<sup>24</sup>

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**

---

<sup>23</sup> 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.

<sup>24</sup> ‘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.<sup>25</sup>

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,<sup>26</sup> 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

---

<sup>25</sup> 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.

<sup>26</sup> 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.<sup>27</sup> 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.<sup>28</sup> 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

<sup>27</sup> J.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).

<sup>28</sup> 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'.<sup>29</sup> 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.<sup>30</sup> 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

---

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

<sup>30</sup> 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.<sup>31</sup> 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.<sup>32</sup> 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

---

<sup>31</sup> 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.

<sup>32</sup> 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.<sup>33</sup>

---

<sup>33</sup> 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'.<sup>34</sup> 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,<sup>35</sup>

---

<sup>34</sup> 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.

<sup>35</sup> 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.

## Bibliography

Bataille, Georges, 'Poussière', *Documents*, 1.5 (1929), quoted and translated in Anthony Vidler, 'Fantasy, the Uncanny, and Surrealist Theories of Architecture', *Papers of Surrealism*, 1 (2003).

Benjamin, Walter, 'Manorially Furnished Ten-Room Apartment', *One Way Street and Other Writings*, trans. by Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter (London: Verso, 1985).

Benjamin, Walter, *The Arcades Project*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann, trans. by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (New York: Belknap Press, 2002).

Booth, Charles, *Life and Labour of the People in London* [1889], in *Charles Booth's London*, ed. by Albert Fried and Richard Elman (Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1971).

Booth, William, *In Darkest England and the Way Out* [1890], BiblioBazaar, 2006.

Clunas, Alex, '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

Colby, Robert and Vineta Colby, 'A Beleaguered City: A Fable for the Victorian Age', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 16.4 (1962), pp. 283–301.

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

'Editorial', *The Times*, 12 Oct. 1843, p. 4.

Edmundson, Melissa, 'The "Uncomfortable Houses" of Charlotte Riddell and Margaret Oliphant', *Gothic Studies* 12.1 (2010), pp. 51–67.

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

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

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

Jackson, Lee, *Dirty Old London: The Victorian Fight against Filth* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014).

Jackson, Shirley, *The Haunting of Hill House* [1959] (London: Penguin, 1987).

Jerrold, Blanchard, *London: A Pilgrimage*, illus. by Gustave Doré, ed. by Peter Ackroyd (London: Anthem, 2005).

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

Mayhew, Henry, *London Labour and the London Poor* (London: Woodfall, 1851), *Electronic Text Center*, University of Virginia Library, <[http://web.archive.org/web/20080923195808/http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/toc/mode  
ng/public/MayLond.html](http://web.archive.org/web/20080923195808/http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/toc/mode/ng/public/MayLond.html)>

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

Metropolitan Sewage Committee proceedings, Parliamentary Papers 651.10 (1846).

Morris, William, *News from Nowhere* (1890) (London: Penguin, 1993).

Oliphant, Margaret, *A Beleaguered City* (1880), in *A Beleaguered City And Other Tales Of The Seen And The Unseen*, ed. by Jenny Calder (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2000).

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

Smith, George Davey, 'Behind the Broad Street pump: aetiology, epidemiology and prevention of cholera in mid-19th century Britain', *International Journal of Epidemiology*, 31 (2002), pp. 920–932.

Stanley, Henry Morton, *In Darkest Africa* (New York, 1890).

Stead, William Thomas, *Borderland: A Casebook of True Supernatural Studies* (1897) (Stuart: New York, 1970), *The W.T. Stead Resource Site*, <<http://www.attackingthedevil.co.uk/spiritualism/clairvoyant.php>>  
---., 'The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon', *Pall Mall Gazette*, 4-10 July 1885, *The W.T. Stead Resource Site*, <<http://www.attackingthedevil.co.uk/pmg/tribute/mt1.php>>  
---., *Real Ghost Stories* (1897), ed. by Estelle W. Stead (New York: Doran, 1921)

Stevenson, Robert Louis, 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.

Stevenson, Robert Louis, *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde and Other Tales of Terror*, ed. by Robert Mighall (London: Penguin, 2002).

Tristan, Flora, *London Journal* (1840), trans. by Dennis Palmer and Giselle Pincetl (London: George Prior, 1980).

Vidler, Anthony, *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely* (1992) (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999).

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

Walkowitz, Judith R, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London* (London: Virago, 1992).

Warner, Marina, *Phantasmagoria: Spirit Visions, Metaphors, and Media Into the Twenty-first Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

Yelling, J.A., 'L. C. C. Slum Clearance Policies, 1889–1907' *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 3.7 (1982), pp. 292–303.



## NEO-VICTORIAN DIRT AND DECOMPOSITION

Nicola Kirkby  
(King's College London)

### *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

---

<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

---

<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.

---

<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.

---

<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

---

<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

---

<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-

---

<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

---

<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

---

<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>

---

<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.

---

<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

---

<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

---

<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.

---

<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'

---

<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’.

---

<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

---

<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.

---

<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.

## Bibliography

Alexander, Catherine, and Joshua Reno, *Economies of Recycling: Global Transformations of Materials, Values and Social Relations* (London: Zed Books, 2012)

Barnes, David S., 'Confronting Sensory Crisis in the Great Stinks of London and Paris', in *Filth: Dirt, Disgust, And Modern Life*, ed. by William A. Cohen and Ryan Johnson (Minneapolis, MN and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), pp. 103–29.

Bond, Robert, *Iain Sinclair* (Cambridge: Salt, 2005).

Carlisle, Janice, *Common Scents : Comparative Encounters in High-Victorian Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

Cohen, William A., 'Introduction: Locating Filth', in *Filth: Dirt, Disgust, And Modern Life*, ed. by Ryan Johnson and William A. Cohen (Minneapolis, MN and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), pp. vii–xxxvii.

Colella, Silvana, '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.

Crook, Tom, 'Putting Matter in Its Right Place: Dirt, Time and Regeneration in Mid-Victorian Britain', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 13 (2008), pp. 200–222

Douglas, Mary, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 2013).

Faber, Michel, *The Apple: Crimson Petal Stories* (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2006).

---. *The Crimson Petal and the White* (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2010).

Ferguson, Christine, '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), pp.45–64.

Gilbert, Pamela K., 'Medical Mapping: The Thames, the Body, and Our Mutual Friend', in *Filth: Dirt, Disgust, And Modern Life*, ed. by William A. Cohen and Ryan Johnson (Minneapolis, MN and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), pp. 78–102.

Gold, Barri J., *ThermoPoetics: Energy in Victorian Literature and Science* (MIT Press, 2012).

Heilmann, Ann, and Mark Llewellyn, *Neo-Victorianism: The Victorians in the Twenty-First Century, 1999-2009* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010)

Kohlke, Marie-Luise, 'Introduction: Speculations in and on the Neo-Victorian Encounter', *Neo-Victorian Studies*, 1 (2008), pp. 1–18.

Kristeva, Julia, *Powers of Horror*, trans. by Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

Laporte, Dominique, *History of Shit*, trans. by Nadia Benabid and Rodolphe el Khoury (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000).

Llewellyn, Mark, 'Neo-Victorianism: On the Ethics and Aesthetics of Appropriation', *Lit: Literature Interpretation Theory*, 20 (2009), pp.27–44.

Miller, William Ian, *The Anatomy of Disgust* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

Roberts, Adam, *Swiftly: A Novel* (London: Orion, 2010).

Sinclair, Iain, *White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings* (London: Penguin UK, 2004).

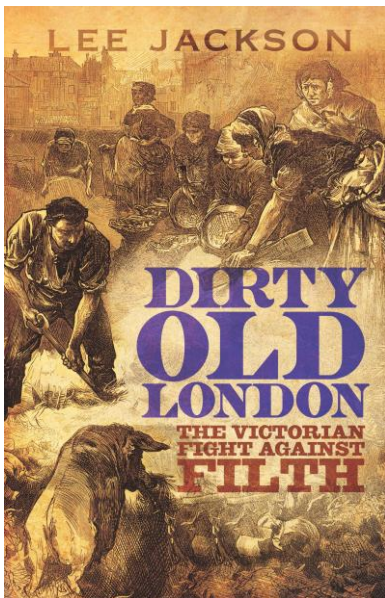
Stallybrass, Peter, and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986).

Trotter, David, *Cooking with Mud: The Idea of Mess in Nineteenth-Century Art and Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

## BOOK REVIEW

*Dirty Old London: The Victorian Fight Against Filth*, by Lee Jackson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014). 304 pp. Hardback, £20.

Reviewed by Sarah Ross  
(Johns Hopkins University)



Living in the Victorian city was a dirty experience, a fact known by the contemporary writer as much as by the modern-day historian. Giving a ‘true history of metropolitan dirt’, Lee Jackson takes up an examination of *Dirty Old London: The Victorian Fight Against Filth* (2014), providing an inviting and valuable resource for both the academic and everyday reader. While numerous studies have enquired into Victorian theories of hygiene and contagion (both medical and moral), corruption, and disgust,<sup>1</sup> Jackson’s work uncovers the grit of Victorian London on its own terms: how did the physical, day-to-day realities of Victorian mud, waste, smoke, and disease arise, and how did nineteenth-century Londoners contribute to (or, at

times, resist) the public works established to combat these problems (p. 2)? Despite chronicling ‘numerous battles ending in stalemate or’, ultimately, ‘defeat’, *Dirty Old London*’s chapters animate how and why ‘[r]eforming zeal was frequently met with plain indifference’, reorienting reformers’ biographies and theoretical claims about the rise of the modern state towards an examination of nineteenth-century dirt and debris. Jackson looks to the graphic details to paint their own picture of the city: ‘The stench of overflowing dustbins, dung-filled

<sup>1</sup> Notable recent publications include: Seth Koven, *Slumming: Sexual and Social Politics in Victorian London* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006); William A. Cohen and Ryan Johnson eds., *Filth: Dirt, Disgust, and Modern Life* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2005); Michelle Allen, *Cleansing the City: Sanitary Geographies in Victorian London* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2008); Alison Bashford, especially *Imperial Hygiene: A Critical History of Colonialism, Nationalism and Public Health* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); Stephen Halliday, *The Great Filth: Disease, Death & The Victorian City* (New York: The History Press, 2011); and Peter Hounsell, *London’s Rubbish: Two Centuries of Dirt, Dust and Disease in the Metropolis* (Stroud: Amberley, 2014).



thoroughfares, the choking soot-filled atmosphere – even the peculiar history of the public toilet’ becomes here ‘part of the (in)sanitary history of Victorian London as [much as] the more familiar story of its sewers’ (p. 2). While nineteenth-century Londoners often operated on the principle of ‘out of sight, out of mind’, Jackson attempts to recuperate the unappealing material facts of life at the heart of the British Empire.

For any sceptical readers who might anticipate (perhaps judging from the pop-history-esque cover and title) a perfunctory or sensationalist account of scandalous ladies and Dickensian pauper boys crammed up chimneys, rest assured. When familiar figures appear, they do so seeking public toilets (largely, and late into the century, at urinals rather than in full, multi-gendered lavatories – p. 168); accosted at, or working to clear, street crossings; or, in a brutally chilling account, deformed and sickened by years (pp. 214–17). Rather than simply confirming or dispersing the common notion of Victorian London as a dingy, grubby, foggy metropolis, Jackson fills in the details of exactly what made up the grit and grime depicted in Gissing’s *The Nether World*, and what the fuliginous scenery of Dickens and Gaskell meant for working-class as well as middle-class Victorians.

Jackson works, as it were, from the ground up. Early chapters tackle the underexamined histories of dust and mud, the two main culprits fouling up nineteenth-century streets and homes. Chapters One and Two focus on the haphazard enterprises of ‘dust’ collecting and street sweeping, and of how local and national authorities came to complicate standardisation across the metropolis. The practicalities of the dustman’s trade were marked not just by the coals, ‘offal and bones’, ‘linen rags’, ‘broken pots, crockery, and oyster shells’, food scraps, and (most profitably) ash, but also by the ‘large “D” neatly printed on a piece of card’ that signalled for the dustman’s visit (pp. 11, 8). Jackson also highlights the unsystematic projects introduced for recycling dust to power the city’s growing electricity needs (p. 25). Vestrymen and parish administrators (collectively a recurring character in *Dirty Old London*’s drama of sanitation reform) invariably feared expense and, unsurprisingly, danger to their own political standing. They were thus often reluctant to do more than discuss contracting work out, unwilling to take on more work directly under their administration.

As Jackson makes clear, local officials, like all Londoners, were literally standing in filth: ‘The sheer volume of London traffic, drawn by the humble, long-suffering horse, was the principal source of all this dirt. By the 1890s, it took 300,000 horses to keep London moving, generating 1,000 tons of dung daily, not to mention a large volume of urine’ (p. 28). On streets which were

inconsistently made of granite or other stone, new asphalt, or even wood, the burgeoning London population made its way slipping and sliding across town. The life of the dustman or street sweeper is less the focus of Jackson's study as the public discourse on neglect and reform – the disputes between the 'trouble[some] nuisance' of 'beggarly' sweepers and middle- and upper-class pedestrians, as one writer to the *Morning Post* described as late as 1883 (p. 34). Jackson's book thus adds to Miles Ogborn's chapter on metropolitan paving, in which he considers the formation of modern ideas of uniformity and state control in the eighteenth century.<sup>2</sup> Jackson largely refrains from any such Habermasian social theory or ecocriticism, venturing only to suggest a cautionary tale: how the 'nineteenth century's alchemical dreams' of converting rubbish and smoke into energy have a place (if perhaps an ominous one) in the story of twenty-first century efforts to combat climate change (p. 26).

Two later chapters, on 'The Great Unwashed' and on 'Wretched Houses', offer perhaps the strongest, yet occasionally incomplete, investigations for the Victorian cultural historian. Specifically, Chapter Six considers nineteenth-century views on bathing, discussing the sanitarian cry for greater access to public bathhouses for the poor. Here, and at times elsewhere, Jackson's somewhat middle-class sensibility comes through. We hear it in moments when he is describing the realised separation between 'first- and second-class facilities' as 'highly cosmetic' and 'superficial', and when discussing the problem for working-class Londoners of being excluded from public toilets in fashionable shopping streets that were accessible only to customers (pp. 148, 167–8). Admittedly, a more theoretical framework might have provided deeper analysis about the political and ontological implications of (state and private) attempts to determine the origins and consequences of the dirt on the unwashed citizens and streets of the metropolis. Overall, however, the book brings together a well-researched, if thus under-theorised and de-politicised, study.

Like much of *Dirty Old London*, Chapter Six draws on a wealth of material combed from a variety of sources: beyond the familiar history told by governmental legislation and city maps, Jackson uses extant posters and public notices, letters to the editor from the Bishop of London, accounts from bath house and public toilet ventures on their building plans and financial and personal intake, Old Bailey testimonies of working-class 'attitudes' (p. 138), and forty images of photographed and illustrated impressions of London's

---

<sup>2</sup> Miles Ogborn, *Space of Modernity: London's Geographies 1680-1780* (London: The Guilford Press, 1998), pp. 75–115.

uncleanliness. As in Chapter Eight on 'urban poverty' and housing reform Jackson presents a bird's eye view of the project to 'disinfect London slums' (p. 184), either by renovation (complete with Jackson's recurring object, the novel water closet) or by demolition.

This is not to say that Jackson fails to consider the working-class subjects, whose 'wretched' homes were neglected by slum landlords and whose streets remained ignored by dustmen or rubbish collectors well into the century. His depiction surveys the appalling treatment of working-class bodies after death, not just in the 'Magnificent Seven' garden cemeteries of the middle classes, but also in the Spa Fields burial ground. Jackson's evaluation of this infamous site, 'more akin to a butcher's shop and crematorium' for shoving multiple, dismembered corpses, including those of children, into single coffins, is a compassionate account of the horrors and grotesque spectacle that led to the 'near riot' by working-class families in the East End in 1850 (pp. 120–4). Equally, his findings on reports of slum living, spurred by cholera outbreaks, reveal the investigators' biases as much as their horror at the antiquated use of communal cesspools shared among hundreds in the face of ever-rising rents (pp. 61, 191–2).

Jackson is not entirely unmindful of the roles of gender, class, race, and queer sexuality in the Victorian experience of the city, topics which elsewhere have yielded much to our understanding of nineteenth-century 'dirt' (in all its forms).<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, the major criticism to be levelled against *Dirty Old London* is that it seldom enters into the arenas of politics or religion, except as part of narratives of public works and personal careers of reformers (or anti-reformers). In general, this book keeps its eye on spaces rather than identities, in order to interrogate the kinds and causes of that dirt, allowing the washed and unwashed to speak, though limitedly, for themselves.

If the sign of a good book is the reader's craving for additional chapters, *Dirty Old London* is certainly a good book. A chapter on Victorian dockyards might have offered interesting insights into discussions of empire and foreign 'dirt'; another on knackers yards or food stalls, though certainly unappetising, could have entered into a scholarly conversation on historical attitudes to consumption, taste, diet, and unsanitary human and animal bodies. But this yearning for more comes from an appreciation of Jackson's work as it appears here: producing an appealing, accessible study that belies the incredible research apparent in his copious, but unobtrusive, footnotes. Well-known politicians and reformers including Edwin Chadwick (particularly in Chapter 4,

---

<sup>3</sup> See Koven, particularly Chapter Four, 'The Politics and Erotics of Dirt: Cross-Class Sisterhood in the Slums', pp. 183–227.

'Removable Causes'), Lord Shaftesbury, and Joseph Bazalgette appear alongside lesser-known agents of change, including the menacing figure of cholera and the ever-present, if inconsistent, conscience of public opinion. Jackson does not take anyone's word for granted, tracing the origins and courses of his subjects as much as of the dirt they struggled to combat.

Overall, *Dirty Old London* provides a study of Victorian life on the ground, examining the origins of both the unclean modern city and the public programmes that worked to clean it. It adds vividly to our understanding of that proverbial question: what would it be like to live in another time? By Jackson's account, living in Victorian London meant wading through a battle of public and private interests, through social apathy and individual fervour, through a city variously under new construction and doggedly, unaccommodatingly historic, and through the seemingly irreversible tide of soot, mud, foul water, and all things unpleasant in the city.

## Bibliography

Allen, Michelle, *Cleansing the City: Sanitary Geographies in Victorian London* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2008).

Bashford, Alison, *Imperial Hygiene: A Critical History of Colonialism, Nationalism and Public Health* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

Cohen, William A., and Ryan Johnson, eds, *Filth: Dirt, Disgust, and Modern Life* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2005).

Halliday, Stephen, *The Great Filth: Disease, Death & The Victorian City* (New York: The History Press, 2011).

Hounsell, Peter, *London's Rubbish: Two Centuries of Dirt, Dust and Disease in the Metropolis* (Stroud: Amberley, 2014).

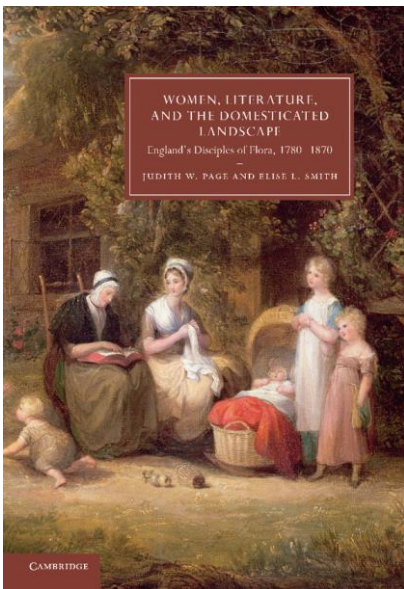
Koven, Seth, *Slumming: Sexual and Social Politics in Victorian London* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

Ogborn, Miles, *Space of Modernity: London's Geographies 1680-1780* (London: The Guilford Press, 1998).

## BOOK REVIEW

*Women, Literature, and the Domesticated Landscape: England's Disciples of Flora, 1780 - 1870*, by Judith W. Page and Elise L. Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011). 388 pp. Hardback, £59.99. Paperback (2014), £18.99.

Reviewed by Tara Puri  
(University of Warwick)



Originally published in 2011, Judith W. Page and Elise L. Smith's ambitious, extensively researched, and beautifully illustrated monograph has recently been republished in a more accessible paperback form. The authors argue that eighteenth- and nineteenth-century gardens functioned both as actual sites of pleasure and labour, and as complex symbolic spaces that were central to the ways in which women negotiated transitions between private and public life (p. 1). Represented as liminal zones, gardens often occupied contradictory positions as enclosed refuges and discomfiting locations for self-fashioning, and as sites of instruction and experimentation.

Gardening, engaging in botanical studies, documenting the natural world in writing and in paint, and using the garden as a locus for social, moral, and cultural lessons, allowed women to successfully connect their seemingly contained domestic lives with larger socio-political prospects.

Building on the classic texts of Gaston Bachelard and Yi-Fu Tuan, and on the work of feminist geographers like Gillian Rose and Doreen Massey, Page and Smith attempt to bring a strong theoretical grounding to their exploration of garden spaces.<sup>1</sup> The book looks not only at gardens, but also at particular

<sup>1</sup> See Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon, 1964); Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977); Gillian Rose, *Feminism and Geography: The Limits of Geographical Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993); and Doreen Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994).

articulations of the garden in the form of the arbor, the bower, and the greenhouse. It highlights the boundaries that separate gardens from interior spaces and exterior expanses, thus doors, windows, walls, and gates become focal points of analysis. The question at the heart of the book is not simply concerned with eighteenth- and nineteenth-century horticultural practices, but relates to larger interrogations about the nature of domesticity, interiority, and selfhood, and the charged negotiations between inside and outside. Drawing on the Deleuzian idea of the pleat, the authors propose that the garden 'is one of the spaces of greatest flux in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century view of the home-ground, as it operates as a kind of valve (or pleat) that paradoxically both reinforces and destabilises the idea of the home as a protected retreat' (p. 6).<sup>2</sup> Though a useful theoretical tool for Page and Smith, this notion remains underdeveloped and problematised by the fact that they reach it secondhand through the work of Rose, who herself arrives at it through Probyn.<sup>3</sup>

The book is divided into four sections, organised by theme and approach – moral order, visual frames, personal practice, and narrative strategies – , with each consisting of two chapters that read almost like self-contained essays. This clearly structured plan and chronological progression guides the reader smoothly through a vast range of sources and long historical span. However, this itself gestures towards the partial success of the work. The extraordinary diversity of texts examined is remarkable; moving from children's stories with obvious moral lessons to botanical studies, gardening manuals, poetry, personal journals, periodicals, and novels, Page and Smith build an impressive argument on the centrality of gardens and the language of cultivation in the cultural imagination of the period. Consequently, canonical works are put in conversation with lesser-known writings; poetic vision is explored along with the scientific eye, the imaginative along with the instructive, and the labour of the mind along with the toil of the hands. These close readings of texts are supported and extended by the book's visual material, which becomes one of its main strengths. However, the ambitious timeframe of the book is less successful. While the authors attempt to tell a longer story that links key

<sup>2</sup> The notion of the pleat reoccurs throughout Deleuze's work but is most clearly articulated in his book on Leibniz. See *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, trans. Tom Conley (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992). For Deleuze, the fold (*le pli*) is a creative way of rethinking subjectivity in terms of continuum or process: the inside is simply a fold of the outside, and subjectivity may be understood as a complex arrangement of different kinds of folds.

<sup>3</sup> See Elspeth Probyn, 'This Body Which Is Not One: Speaking an Embodied Self', *Hypatia*, (Autumn 1991), pp. 111–124.

Romantic and Victorian ideas, the argument in the second half of the book falters and the leaps in time from one chapter to the next become less tenable.

Chapter One takes us to the gardens of children's moral tales, where these cultivated natural spaces function as safe and protected training grounds. In story after story, the garden reveals itself to be 'a moral, psychological, and physical threshold' that connects the sanctuary of the home with the risky adventure of the outer world (p. 17). It is in this in-between space that certain sensibilities may be inculcated most organically, with children acting out undesirable behaviour that can then be changed and restrained. Yet the stereotypical gender norms that were largely advocated in children's narratives, Page and Smith suggest, must not be read simply as rigid didacticism, but rather as models for empowerment in which women are given the tools to regulate their own behaviour. This potential for self-fashioning is at the centre of Chapter Two, which looks at botanical texts, often meant for children and young readers, that emphasised careful study of the natural world not simply for scientific learning, but for appreciating an aesthetic of the minuscule which would in turn lead to enlarged sympathies. Examining the fascinating journal of Emily Shore and the botanical studies of Maria Jacson, Agnes Ibbetson, and Mary Roberts, Page and Smith show the scientific curiosity of these female botanists, and the ways in which this peculiarly feminine science allowed these women the space for scientific expertise (p. 55), while their methodological rigour gave them access to the secret lives of everyday objects that could only be uncovered by intense observation (p. 67). This microscopic view of the world then morphed the rational scientist into the dreamer.

This creative mobility is further explored within the genres of botanical illustration and landscape painting, in Chapter Three. While the comparison of Anna Maria Hussey's detailed studies of fungi and Maria Spilsbury's paintings of cottages and family portraits underlines the overdetermined relationship between women and the domesticated natural world in the period, it interestingly shows the ways in which the two women cannily used this stereotype to consolidate their professional identities. The following chapter also focuses on two women, the sisters Ann and Jane Taylor, to uncover the personal topography manifested in Jane's drawings, as well as in their published and private writing. In doing so, it deciphers the centrality of the garden in the mapping of memories, homeliness, and intimacy, and in negotiating the tussle between domestic duties and professional desires evident in their work.

Dorothy Wordsworth's garden in Grasmere is the subject of Chapter Five. In Grasmere, Dorothy Wordsworth set about creating 'a natural garden',

transplanting into the domestic refuge local specimens from the wild. At the same time, she continued working on her journal and travel diaries, in which she recorded both her observations and gardening experiments. The garden and the book then become part of the same creative continuum, products of her imagination and her hands, through which she fashions a sense of self and a place for accommodating this self. Chapter Six subsequently takes up the question of practice, exploring the physical labour that gardening required and the suitability of this work for women. While tending the garden might be a healthy pursuit and akin to housekeeping, the idea of women digging in the dirt, soiling their hands, begriming their clothes, and sweating over manual work, was clearly a problematic one and produced a range of strategic responses in women's gardening manuals. One of the most interesting ways in which this anxiety was managed was through tools (rakes, hoes, shears, baskets, spades, forks, as well as specially designed long-handled wheelbarrows), that at once showed the serious commitment of the gardener to her work and made that work itself seem less arduous – more like an easy chore than an activity requiring serious physical exertion.

The final chapters of the book engage in analyses of gardens in novels: Lucilla Stanley's philanthropic gardening in Hannah More's *Cælebs* (Chapter Seven), Fanny Price's private potted garden in Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* (Chapter Seven), and Margaret Oliphant's fictional gardens in the Carlingford stories. The examination of Oliphant's *Miss Marjoribanks* (Chapter Eight) in particular brings together many of the issues that Page and Smith have already explored in the book. In all of these readings, the garden emerges as a 'working, productive, and sustaining plot of ground', containing possibilities for the formation of independent, articulate selfhoods (p. 214). However, this is where Page and Smith's argument most clearly shows its limits. While the authors repeatedly remind us of these potentialities, we are never really presented with these radical selves. In the epilogue, Page and Smith state that Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden* leads us to 'a rich inner garden of transformation, interiority replacing exteriority as the site of greatest risk and potential' (p. 251). Yet, why is that risk left unexamined, gestured towards but finally marginal to the book's argument? The close readings, while thoughtful, do not probe and interrogate the text in ways that would unearth the fugitive, fragile crosscurrents that lie beneath the plot lines. For instance, Page and Smith fail to draw out the implications of the space and language of gardens in terms of sexuality and erotic desire. Women have long been associated with delicate flowers, ornamental hothouse exotics, vines that need to be trained, ivy that clings for support and sustenance, and to Eve in her pre-lapsarian



garden in a period of innocence and beauty. Women's bodies and sexual maturity are often described through floral metaphors – blooming, blossoming, flowering, unfurling – and the garden frequently acts as a metaphor for the body of the woman who tends or inhabits it. So Fanny Price's red geraniums are as much about her emergent sexual and romantic consciousness as they are about the cultivation of a quiet but confident selfhood.

Despite this blind spot, readers will find in this book much to think about. While the book may not describe the raptures, passions, and disordered emotions that gardens inspire, it does show the more placid contentment and delight they bring, and is a rich interdisciplinary resource for scholars interested in questions of women's self-fashioning and the politics of space.

## Bibliography

Bachelard, Gaston, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon, 1964).

Deleuze, Gilles, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, trans. Tom Conley (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992).

Massey, Doreen, *Space, Place, and Gender* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994).

Probyn, Elspeth, 'This Body Which Is Not One: Speaking an Embodied Self', *Hypatia*, 1: 3 (Autumn 1991), pp. 111–124.

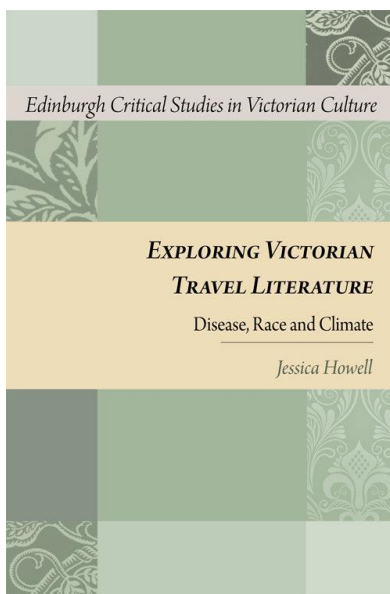
Rose, Gillian, *Feminism and Geography: The Limits of Geographical Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

Tuan, Yi-Fu, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977).

## BOOK REVIEW

*Exploring Victorian Travel Literature: Disease, Race and Climate*, by Jessica Howell (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014). 208 pp. Hardback, £70.

Reviewed by Katie E. Wetzel  
(University of Iowa)



The growing consequences of global climate change have recently made climate studies relevant for the humanities as well as the sciences. This burgeoning field focuses primarily on the history of climate and its influence on cultural development. In *Exploring Victorian Travel Literature: Disease, Race and Climate*, Jessica Howell opens up new avenues of enquiry into climate studies and Victorian literature by juxtaposing narratives of illness and pathology, or pathographies, onto tropical climate history and colonial topography in the Victorian British Empire. The result is a thorough investigation of several lesser-known travel writers, including Mary Seacole, Richard Burton, Africanus Horton, and Mary Kingsley, and a new and insightful reading of

disease, atmosphere, and colonial ambivalence in the more-widely read work of canonical novelist Joseph Conrad. This dynamic combination of travel writers, from diverse backgrounds and with diverging perspectives, offers a multivalent contextualisation of how foreign soil, atmosphere, race, and gender informed Victorian identity and health. This groundwork on medical, social, and environmental observations in the British Empire subsequently opens up Victorian discourse to the material environmental concerns of climate and pathology, and how they impact upon self-perception and colonial attitudes in fiction.

Howell uses these narratives of travel and illness to negotiate how mud, fog, and flora operate as mediators of narrative authority in Victorian fiction. Her analysis of these writers' representations of foreign environments and their perceptions of the spread of diseases pinpoints the connections between

physical dirt, the less-tangible vapours of exotic lands, and the interior perceptions or attitudes that inform English health and identity in Victorian writing. 'The torrid heat, the miasma exhaled from the soil, the noisome vapours enveloping every path', to use the words of Henry Morton Stanley, are pervasive throughout Howell's study (p. 1). Her identification of the materiality of atmosphere, which is typically figured in Victorian literature as aesthetic and abstract, is profound. She renders soil, air, and the vapours of decomposition part of the atmosphere and climate of British colonies, and thereby a physical presence and possible threat to the bodily integrity of colonial travellers. Since the role of climate and miasmas in causing illness was, in the nineteenth century, 'illdefined and uncontrollable', the influence of the atmosphere offers each writer the freedom to manipulate environmental illness imagery to 'support different, even contradictory conclusions regarding disease causation and resistance' (p. 15).<sup>1</sup> Howell's attention to the earth, atmosphere, and climate through her discussion of narrative and miasma theory allows readers to see the material connections between environmental concerns, biomedical threats, and cultural corruption, making this an innovative and important work of Victorian literary criticism that relates to contemporary environmental concerns.

Within Howell's selection of travel narratives, Richard Burton's prolific work on the occupation of Africa offers the stereotypical explorer's perception of the 'qualitative and quantitative value' of the African landscape, as well as the racialised and pathologised dispositions of foreign earth and atmosphere. However, Howell expands this popular reading by highlighting Burton's own illness as a source of narrative authority, along with his propensity for topographical contrast, as a way of imagining British potential and limiting 'dangers to the white body' (p. 55). Burton's incorporation of his illness into his writing authenticates his authority to 'map the healthfulness of the land' and glorifies the "white man's burden" of tropical disease... in the service of the empire' (p. 56). According to Howell, Burton's pro-imperial work suggests that African climates could be conquered through greater knowledge of its landscape, which Burton divides into the lower and 'unhealthful jungle, swamps and marshes', and the elevated and healthy 'headlands' and 'capes' (p. 55). Furthermore, Burton depicts the tropics in terms of 'excess', full of 'rot and decomposition', which must be cultivated, controlled, and contained (p.66). This includes the unhealthy soils and marshes that offer concealment for

---

<sup>1</sup> Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century theories of miasmas proposed that infectious diseases spread through fumes, filth, decomposition, and improper ventilation. See Nadja Durbach, *Body Matters: The Anti-Vaccination Movement in England, 1853 – 1907* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), p. 152.

runaway slaves and thereby belie the imperial project (pp. 68-69). As a result, Howell's study of Burton significantly identifies an underlying connection between Burton's body, his narrative, and the African landscape that privileges division and control in order to achieve better health and prosperity for white British bodies.

While Howell highlights Burton's use of natural and topographical phenomena to justify colonialism, she traces the complexities of diverging perspectives on race as a means to resist or understand tropical environments and diseases in Jamaican Creole author Mary Seacole and Sierra Leonean James Africanus Beale Horton. According to Howell, these writers question white superiority by attributing their own prevailing health to their racial identity. For instance, in Mary Seacole's *Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Seacole in Many Lands* (1857), Seacole exploits contemporary beliefs that 'mixed-race subjects are not only "natural" but in fact "fitter" to survive myriad environments', promoting the heightened disease-resistance and hardiness of her body as she offers to serve as surrogate mother and nurse to young white British subjects on foreign soil (p. 32). Seacole establishes her narrative authority by identifying with her mixed-race background: 'I am a Creole, and have good Scotch blood coursing in my veins' (quoted in Howell, p. 30). Howell suggests that by employing her mixed-racial identity as protection against foreign climates and soil, Seacole is taking an anti-colonial stance by implying that 'the Jamaican climate "refuses" to adopt whites' or allow them to inhabit its land without a great sacrifice (p. 45). As a result, this mixed-race narrator looks with an anti-imperial gaze on the frailty of male British bodies incompatible with foreign climates, atmospheres, and landscapes.

Howell's analysis of the work of black West African doctor and writer Africanus Horton, *Physical and Medical Climate* (1867), similarly both complicates and advocates the agency of colonized and coloured bodies by affirming native knowledge of the natural world. She claims that Horton validates 'the African eye' by portraying Africa as impenetrable to colonial forces, but knowable to black African subjects (p. 107). Horton intentionally privileges the details of his perceived environment and the indigenous uses of its flora over the events and concerns of his life. As a result, Horton's technique of citing native knowledge alongside his own observations within his medical writing demonstrates his unique authority within West African medicine and politics (p. 91). Yet, Howell observes the complexity of Horton's claims since his association of African natives with flora unintentionally contributes to eco-colonialism, which privileges colonial forces as 'outsiders who tame the tropical environment' and dominate indigenous people (p. 103). Ultimately, however,

Horton's recognition of the 'unique and irreplaceable familiarity' of the African natives with their environment acknowledges a bond that supersedes colonial force (p. 86). As a result, Horton's authoritative favouring of observed landscapes subordinates colonial Linnaean botanical cataloguing of nature to the native Africans' knowledge and authority over their environment.

Howell's chapter on Mary Kingsley offers some of the book's most valuable contributions to the intersections of gender, race, and environmental illness. Howell identifies Kingsley's work *Travels in West Africa* (1897) as a model of feminine health and hardiness, in contrast to the pathologised representations of women that dominate Victorian discourse. This model portrays a female constitution that 'transcends childbearing and domesticity [...] refuses to adopt wholesale either contemporary ideas of masculine vigour or feminist visions of the "New Woman"' by portraying 'woman's climatic invulnerability' (p. 122). Howell points to examples of Kingsley's depiction of her own comfort and pleasure, wherein she even claims to belong to the swamps, rather than disavowing them like her predecessors. Instead, Kingsley conflates African natives with miasmatic places such as "his own [...] swampy valley": the places of miasma and disease are where he is most comfortable' (p. 120). Howell clarifies that Kingsley makes these claims not to abuse Africans, but to reassert the danger of the African swamps, dirt, and miasmas for most white subjects. Kingsley expresses her own harmony with the atmosphere, miasmas, and swamps by misappropriating lines from Wordsworth on Toussaint that support her stance of "non-intervention" on colonialism, claiming that "the air and all nature will fight for you" and rejecting climatic or pathological threats to her own body (p. 110). By drawing this link between the atmosphere and Kingsley's body and authorship, Howell makes a strong claim about the role of narrative in establishing cultural associations between climate and illness, particularly as it pertains to the Victorian female body and mind.

In her final chapter, Howell bridges the genres of fiction and non-fiction by examining the impact of foreign atmospheres on psychological and physiological health across Joseph Conrad's writing. She asserts that the external environments in Conrad's fiction, namely in *Heart of Darkness* (1899) and "An Outpost of Progress" (1897), influence the characters' 'internal balance and therefore their health' (p. 138). Howell specifically looks at the influence of the sun and mists, which cause various forms of emotional and physical illness. For instance in *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow associates his lack of joy with the environment: 'The air was warm, thick, heavy, sluggish. There was no joy in the brilliance of sunshine' (p. 139). Additionally, Howell suggests that Conrad's use of atmosphere, such as the 'clammy fog', not only 'immerse[s] readers in the

characters' experience of both sensing and making sense of the world', but also fabricates the experience of becoming ill (p. 140). Of the five authors in this study, only Conrad produces a narrator who is 'defined by his susceptibility [...] and who is unable to mitigate this vulnerability by controlling his circumstances', which Howell links to Conrad's reflections on his own experiences with foreign soil and diseases (p. 141). In his personal writing, Conrad's depiction of his environment changes from "charming" and 'beautiful' to 'heavy' based on his health (p. 145). Howell claims that Conrad's responses to his changing health, and his corresponding representations of the African climate in his fiction, indicate his ambivalence towards colonial occupation. Howell subsequently uses Conrad's personal reflections on climate and health, along with his characters' anxiety over the integrity of their minds and bodies, to negotiate the cultural discourse of narrative authority and to articulate the prevalence of British ambivalence towards imperial expansion.

Howell's mediation of foreign soil and climate allows her to trace narrative authority through illness travel narratives that rely on racial identity and bodily integrity. Her accumulative work on pathographies reveals the British ambivalence towards imperial expansion and the ways in which environmental rhetoric informed Victorian beliefs about identity and health. Furthermore, by addressing environmental issues within illness and travel narratives, Howell implicates climate's engagement with elements of atmosphere, landscape, and culture throughout colonial rhetoric and thereby asserts the significance of climate studies as an urgent and tangible field for both Victorian literary criticism and studies of the British Empire in the nineteenth century.

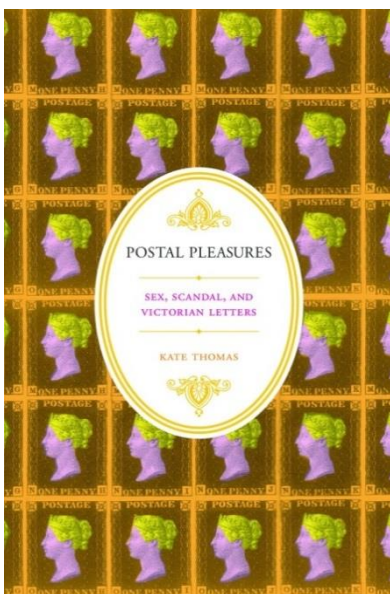
## Bibliography

Durbach, Nadja, *Body Matters: The Anti-Vaccination Movement in England, 1853 – 1907* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).

## BOOK REVIEW

*Postal Pleasures: Sex, Scandal, and Victorian Letters*, by Kate Thomas (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). 264 pp. Hardback, £69. Paperback, £16.99.

Reviewed by Karin Koehler  
(University of St Andrews)



Kate Thomas's richly evocative and captivating book *Postal Pleasures: Sex, Scandal, and Victorian Letters* traces the interaction between two Victorian institutions: the Post Office and the literary marketplace. Both institutions, Thomas notes, facilitated human exchange and suggested models for the organisation of personal, social, and even international relations. *Postal Pleasures* explores how the late-Victorian literary imagination responded to one particular idea offered by the modern postal service: 'that all people in all places are connected by the mail' (p. 1). It is due to this idea, Thomas hints, that the postal service was perceived as a facilitator for the

production, circulation, and proliferation not only of useful information, but also of filth. The postal service came to be perceived as a vehicle for sexually transgressive discourses and relationships, and it therefore played a crucial role in a number of Victorian scandals.

The universal penny post was introduced by Rowland Hill in 1840. According to Thomas, its accessibility, affordability, and anonymity, as well as its capacity to connect "everyone" to anyone, ensured that the reformed postal service 'was almost immediately understood to engender queer interfaces' (pp. 4-5). Her study examines a body of work which 'shows the postal network enabling a diversity of erotic interactions' and allowing 'for queer interactions to be undifferentiated and unmarked from straight ones' (p. 8). By placing texts by writers including Anthony Trollope, Thomas Hardy, Oscar Wilde, and Bram Stoker in the context of contemporary literary, postal, and sexual scandals, Thomas reveals how postal tropes could be used to imagine alternative models

of relationships – between lovers, sexes, social classes, races, and nations – models that are broader, more inclusive, and more diverse than those endorsed by Victorian literary convention. Provocative and persuasive, *Postal Pleasures* provides revisionary readings of these authors' work and makes a thoroughly convincing case for why we ought to pay attention to the letters that permeate Victorian literature.

Thomas's excellent introduction evaluates the impact of Hill's postal reforms on the late-Victorian cultural imagination. The penny post, Thomas demonstrates, was envisaged as a great equaliser (p. 17), an instrument for the construction of national – or imperial – community (p. 16), a technology that enabled corresponding subjects 'to go somewhere otherwise out of bounds' (p. 2), and an institution capable of redefining the boundaries between private and public life (p. 31). As a result, the function and representation of letters in contemporary culture and literature changed. 'Epistolary fiction gave way to postal plots', which were less interested in letters' contents than in their contexts: their circulation, the traces they accumulate on their journeys, and the connections they make, or fail to make, between correspondents (p. 2). Postal plots, Thomas explains, were shaped by the recognition that letters, and other types of mediated communication, separate messages from the correspondents' bodies and are, therefore, particularly susceptible to producing 'shifts, confusions, or cross-identification of gender and sexual desire' (p. 8). They subverted essentialist understandings of human identity, preferring to emphasise the shaping power of interaction, exchange, and intermediation.

Thomas begins her study with a compelling account of the 1885 Cleveland Street Scandal, which revealed that many telegraph boys were supplementing their income with prostitution, with public figures of the highest standing counting among their customers. The first chapter, 'Postal Digressions: Mail and Sexual Scandal', explains how the scandal's specifically 'postal implications', which have thus far 'gone unmarked', help illuminate its cultural significance and far-reaching political consequences (p. 35). Thomas teasingly explores 'the structurally erotic potential' of the postal service and of service for the post, observing that uniformed Post Office employees were perceived as both facilitators and potential objects of diverse – and possibly deviant – erotic exchanges (p. 40). 'The scandal', Thomas writes, 'derived its force from the disclosure that sexual deviance was not contained in a single residence or street, but rather circulated as widely and as easily as the post, and indeed, with the post' (p. 42). Moreover, stressing the importance of the fact that public actors and a public institution were at the centre of the scandal, Thomas interrogates how notions of privacy and publicity shaped Victorian thinking about sex and



sexuality. She raises the important point that the postal service could not only facilitate, but also allow for the policing of queer desire.

Chapter Two, “‘This Little Queen’s Head Can’t Be Untrue’: Trollope’s Postal Infidelities’” contemplates the reciprocal influence of Anthony Trollope’s postal and literary work. As Thomas explains, Trollope worked as a postal clerk from the age of nineteen, before becoming a postal surveyor, responsible for facilitating rural deliveries of mail in Ireland, in 1841. Encountering a large variety of human interactions in the Post Office, Thomas argues, endowed Trollope with a ‘queer kind of sympathy’ for ‘characters who have suffered sexual and gender stigmatization’ (pp. 82, 73). In a thorough close reading of the 1879 novel *John Caldigate*, Thomas explores how Trollope ‘stages the literal and metaphorical potential of the postal system to sustain queer and irregular structures of alliance’ (p. 82). The chapter clarifies why, in the potentially ‘queering’ postal plot, the outside of a letter becomes more significant than its inside. In *John Caldigate*, a postage stamp and postmark serve to clear the protagonist of charges of bigamy, whereas the letter inside the envelope, containing evidence of promiscuity and extramarital passion, is treated with indifference. For Thomas, Trollope’s sympathy with, and lack of moral judgment for, his characters’ transgressive desires and actions discloses an ‘understanding of the postal system as a discursive machinery that can be used to police human relations, but only through disclosing the ways in which [...] diversity and deviation are fundamental to human relations’ (p. 97).

The first two chapters of *Postal Pleasures* establish how the cultural imagination linked ‘postal exchanges and digressive sexual relations’ (p. 4). The third chapter contemplates how the queer relations engendered by the postal service, and by work with ‘postal technologies’, may have helped shape modern understanding of women’s civic and personal duties (p. 36). In “‘A Queer Job for a Girl’: The Communicative Touch in Trollope, Hardy, and Lynn Linton,” Thomas analyses narratives about women who work as telegraph operators, and who, through this work, become involved in quasi-marital same-sex relationships. Contextualising her readings within nineteenth-century debates about redundant women, marriage, and female employment, Thomas suggests that ‘[p]ostal routes allow these women access to alternate erotic and social routes’ (p. 101). With thorough attention to textual detail, she reveals that the texts under discussion ultimately conceptualise both the Post Office (the biggest employer of women in the nineteenth century) and homosexual bonds as ‘pedagogical space[s], through which the girls can pass, emerging unfallen and still marriageable’ (p. 128). Yet, Thomas convincingly suggests that all three writers (Hardy in particular) indicate how postal and queer experiences enable

their female characters to move beyond traditional, patriarchal understandings of marriage, towards a more progressive and egalitarian model for the organisation of heterosexual relations.

Discussing Hardy's *A Laodicean*, Thomas emphasises that 'the network of telegraph wires runs counter to the individuated lines of blood and title' (p 139). In 'All Red Routes: Blood Brotherhood and the Post in Doyle, Kipling, and Stoker', Thomas pursues the idea that the postal service may have been capable of promoting blood relations of a much broader and more inclusive kind than those accommodated by an individual family tree. Postal communication, Thomas explains, was supposed to play a crucial role in establishing peaceful relations between Britain and the United States, by helping to create a sense of universal brotherhood. In original readings of canonical texts, including Bram Stoker's *Dracula* and Rudyard Kipling's *The White Man's Burden*, Thomas argues that '[t]he homosocial and often homoerotic structures of imperial bureaucracy and postal networks came [...] to uphold and further the project of Anglo-Saxonism even more effectively than strained languages of heterosexual family structures' (p. 157). More importantly though, Thomas also acknowledges that, for these writers, 'racial fraternity trumps colonial collectivity' (p. 15); their work, she notes, shares the conviction that '[b]ad imperialism' results from circulation systems' that are 'overextended', or, in other words, too inclusive, comprehensive, and indiscriminate (p. 177). Thomas's analysis gradually exposes that the concept of universality which permeated nineteenth-century postal rhetoric is, in fact, highly problematic, since the unity forged by postal connections tended to imply the exclusion of anyone who was perceived as too radically 'other'.

In lieu of a conclusion, Thomas offers a brief but nuanced reading of Henry James's novella 'In the Cage'. For Thomas, this text is the 'apotheosis' of late-nineteenth-century postal literature – more interested in networks, technologies, and media of communication, as well as in the people and systems who mediate personal exchange, than in the contents of personal messages. Thomas ends her study by reminding us that postal plots were not only capable of evoking the diversity of human relations, but that they also permit diverse readings and interpretations. 'If the nineteenth-century network served to disclose and materialize social, geopolitical, racial, and sexual webs of interchange that were inherently plural', she writes, 'it similarly did not command a single ideological inflection: it was neither consistently liberationist nor was it resolutely repressive' (p. 223). Importantly, Thomas never loses sight of the fact that nineteenth-century literature bore witness to, and drew on, the postal system's 'capability to enable and engender connections between people,

and also to police them' (p. 223).

Thomas's study offers an extremely welcome contribution to the developing field of enquiry into the interaction between Victorian literature and Victorian media, technologies, and networks of communication. Thomas's book complements and adds to studies by Richard Menke, Elizabeth J. Golden, Laura Otis, and Jay Clayton.<sup>1</sup> What distinguishes *Postal Pleasures* is its unique focus on the ways in which nineteenth-century authors drew on postal tropes to formulate and disseminate alternative models for social and interpersonal relationships. Thomas effectively integrates postcolonial and queer theoretical frameworks in her striking analysis of letters in nineteenth-century literature and culture. Thomas's book is not only thoroughly informative; it is also elegant, engaging, and entertaining. Thomas relishes in wordplay, in teasing out sexual innuendos, and even in commenting on the 'implausibly diverting name[s]' of the boys involved in the Cleveland Street Scandal (p. 44). Her study maintains the perfect balance between wit and scholarly rigour. In fact, the subtle humour that runs throughout the study bears testimony to Thomas's close engagement with late-nineteenth-century postal rhetoric and literature, as she draws on, and thereby illuminates, the double meanings and imaginative possibilities that stimulated the Victorian imagination.

## Bibliography

Clayton, Jay, *Charles Dickens in Cyberspace: The Afterlife of the Nineteenth Century in Postmodern Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

Golden, Catherine J., *Posting It: The Victorian Revolution in Letter Writing* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2009).

Menke, Richard, *Telegraphic Realism: Victorian Fiction and Other Information Systems* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008).

Otis, Laura, *Networking: Communicating with Bodies and Machines in the Nineteenth Century* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001).

---

<sup>1</sup> See Richard Menke, *Telegraphic Realism: Victorian Fiction and Other Information Systems* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008); Laura Otis, *Networking: Communicating with Bodies and Machines in the Nineteenth Century* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001); Catherine J. Golden, *Posting It: The Victorian Revolution in Letter Writing* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2009); and Jay Clayton, *Charles Dickens in Cyberspace: The Afterlife of the Nineteenth Century in Postmodern Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).