

IN A LATHER: THE VICTORIAN DIRT CRISIS, 1848-1895

by

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IN A LATHER: THE VICTORIAN DIRT CRISIS, 1848-1895

Lindsay Mayo Fincher, Ph.D.

University of Nebraska, 2016

Adviser: Laura White

Victorians were worried about dirt. With the rise of industrialism in the first quarter of the century and billows of polluting smoke that complemented this growth, it was difficult to ignore the sheer amount of dirt amassing in the cities. Dirt had long been tied to conversations of progress and it is dirt in the cities that Victorians found highly disconcerting and inescapable. Competing with this anxiety about dirt was a nostalgic longing for the agrarian dirt of days of yore, forcefully articulated by the return to the pastoral in literature and the popularity of the brown, dirty, tones of the picturesque in art. Yet, beyond a troubled fantasy of the countryside with its fecund, life-giving dirt, Victorian nostalgia for a pre-industrial society was deepened and complicated by the actual unearthing of the past. Starting in 1848 and ending in 1895, my dissertation closely examines the complex and shifting definition of dirt in this roughly fifty-year time span, in order to argue the importance of dirt as a remarkably complex measure of England's view of its own progress and regress. Although it is nigh impossible to locate a fixed idea of dirt in the Victorian period—the vacillating moods of science, art, politics, literature, and popular culture render it a dynamic term—it seems apparent that one dichotomy held true: dirt was sacred and profane. It was sacred in that dirt provided a source for answers about the past and the imagined future. Dirt was profane by its bodily threat, the monstrous anxiety it generated about disease, and by its ability to diminish progress. To demonstrate these vacillations—between progress and regress, sacred and profane—as it concerns the Victorian regard for the term dirt, each chapter of my dissertation engages with representative texts from a given decade.

PREVIEW

DEDICATION

To Chad, for seeing the beauty in all my imaginings, even those left languishing in the mind's eye.

To Leif, for fitting me with the most beautiful lenses to see the world: a child's eyes.

PREVIEW

AUTHOR'S ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The most spectacular part of this project has been the encouragement and assistance I have received from all corners: expected and unexpected. In the past two years I have found myself in awe of the generosity shown, small and large, by people who I am fortunate to call colleagues, friends, or family. It is stunning how a project can turn strangers into friends and can expand the horizons of the heart in lovely ways. I am grateful for the heartfelt reassurance and encouragement from my colleagues at New Mexico Military Institute. I have been kept in the bubble, so to speak, of limited service responsibilities as I have completed this degree. To have the support of my department and the humanities division has meant more than I can say, and, truly, has made it possible to complete my work.

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gain came from conversations with Laura about John Ruskin while enjoying an amusing afternoon at the Modern Art Museum.

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Universe, which I have attended twice, was a fantastic learning experience and a place for making lifelong friends. In fact, at Dickens Universe I was able to enjoy conversations with some of the scholars I have cited in these very pages.

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PREVIEW

“The Song of the Dirt. [Not by Hood]”

“Dirt! Dirt! Dirt!
From basement up to roof,
And dirt, dirt, dirt,
Where sickness stands never aloof.
It’s oh! To dwell and toil
With the heathen Esquimaux,
To batten on filth and oil,
If Christians should live on so!
“Dirt! Dirt! Dirt!
On ceiling, wainscot, and floor,
And dirt, dirt, dirt,
On sidepost, lintel, and door.
Stench, and fever, and death,
Where huddle the young and old,
Where the beggar’s brat is rocked to sleep
By the side of the corpse just cold!”¹

¹ The Song of the Dirt, *Glasgow Herald*, Wednesday, May 27, 1857.

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

Victorians were worried about dirt. With the rise of industrialism beginning in the first quarter of the century and billows of polluting smoke that complemented this growth, it was difficult to ignore the sheer amount of dirt amassing in the cities. Dirt was in the air, on the streets, on clothing, on hands and feet; it was piled high on city streets, and collected in dust heaps. In short, Victorian England was saturated in dirt. Dirt, dust-heaps, soiled bodies, and grimy neighborhoods became a fixture of conversations in the press, advertising, art, science, and among the general populace beginning in 1830 through the turn of the century. Endless newspaper articles were written on behalf of dirt, novels skimmed the fine dirt coating off newly-industrial England, and political figures railed against the dangers of dirt. Although it is nigh impossible to locate a fixed idea of dirt in the Victorian period—the vacillating moods of science, art, politics, literature, and popular culture render it a dynamic term—it seems apparent that one dichotomy held true: dirt was sacred and profane. It was sacred in that dirt provided a source for answers about the past and the imagined future. Dirt was profane by its bodily threat, the monstrous anxiety it generated about disease, and by its ability to diminish progress.

Dirt had long been tied to conversations of progress and it is dirt in the cities that Victorians found highly disconcerting and inescapable. “No man can estimate the amount of mischief grown in dirt,” Charles Dickens famously said in an 1851 speech to the Metropolitan Sanitary Association about the slums of St. Giles district in London. However, the celebrity writer’s statement is not simply a matter of geographical space—he speaks to a shift in attitudes towards cleanliness during the long nineteenth century. In the early decades of the century, dirt was defined as part of the land—organic and natural—but by mid-century, it was regarded as repulsive and, even criminal,

when found in urban spaces. How did such a drastic transition occur? As Dickens's aforementioned agricultural analogy suggests, dirt in an industrial society symbolized *growing* problems: polluting factories, squalid working-class neighborhoods, and disgruntled workers. As an externalization of mounting disorder, dirt became a subject of discussion and investigation by artists and legislators alike.

Competing with this anxiety about dirt was a nostalgic longing for the agrarian dirt of days of yore, forcefully articulated by the return to the pastoral in literature and the popularity of the brown, dirty, tones of the picturesque in art. Raymond Williams argues in *The Country and The City* that the Victorian embrace of the pastoral is not limited to obvious countryside motifs or the picturesque, but the term itself implies a return to past truth: "Pastoral' means, we are told, the simple matter in which general truths are embodied or implied: even a modern proletarian industrial novel can be pastoral in this sense!" (21). Many industrial novels feature a removal to the countryside as a symbolic return to the authentic ideals of English society, such as is seen in Benjamin Disraeli's *Sybil*. Other industrial novels feature the countryside as a place where truth can be gained: foul or fair. Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* is a fine example of truth being initially hidden by the beauty of pastoral dirt; Margaret Hale lingers on the abundance produced by the country, flowers in bountiful blossoms and fruit falling off the vine, before musing on her artistic rendering of a dilapidated cottage. It is only later that the foul truth of the countryside becomes apparent to Margaret as she connects the background sounds of those "toiling" in the dirt (heard while she sketched the cottage) to the starving parishioners she tends, and is able to see the picturesque cottage for its truth: it is a dusty den of disease, not a beautiful emblem of England's

past.² Examining the confluence of the sanitation and aesthetic movements, Eileen Cleere explains the changes in art, especially household architecture and design, as a direct result of sanitation discourse. Cleere writes: "Embrowned pictures, architectural ruins, and 'moving' scenes of poverty and distress could not remain aesthetic vehicles for reform-minded Victorians who saw dirt as a social embarrassment and a material danger, a sign of oppression, disease, and moral degradation" (133). Although Victorians embraced the dirty tones of picturesque painting, they began to question the troubled meanings of these same scenes starting in the 1850s and lasting into the 1880s.

Beyond a troubled fantasy of the countryside with its fecund, life-giving dirt, Victorian nostalgia for a pre-industrial society was deepened and complicated by the actual unearthing of the past. As Virginia Zimmerman explains in *Excavating Victorians*, geology and archeology became popular, and established, sciences during this time: "geology grew into a premier science in the first third of the nineteenth century. Like many sciences at this time, geology was accessible to everyone; there were no specialists, and many men and women from all strata of society read the texts published on geology and even participated in excavations" (3). Scientists explored the new meanings found in dirt, whether through fossil evidence or mineralogy. Tristram Hunt writes of the rapid establishment of archaeology prior to mid-century and its effect on the Victorian mind: "Between 1834 and 1849 an estimated twenty-nine national historical societies were established in England as archaeological associations began to dig up the ruins of Wessex, Essex and Mercia. The rich tapestry of Victorian civil society fell headlong for the new medieval enthusiasm" (198). The past revealed in the dirt became a site of longing, unleashing a past that was only partly restrained by

² By the end of the novel, Margaret Hale's new understanding of country life upon returning to Helstone in *North and South* shows Gaskell's unwillingness to separate agrarian dirt from industrial dirt: both represent the cruelty suffered by laborers. Nonetheless, Gaskell was unique in finding country and city dirt to be equivalent, and *North and South* responded to other industrial writing, which set impure city life in opposition to the purity of country living.

attempts at historical accuracy and was largely reconstructed in literature and art as romanticized and inauthentic. Yet Victorians could not help but become self-reflexive in unearthing the past, burying themselves in the same dirt of antiquity by imagining how they would appear to future societies.

The public grew to see dirt for what it may contain: profound secrets or repulsive waste, England's glorious past or the polluted present. Moreover, the polluted present was subjected to its own excavations in a contest for cleanliness. As Hunt writes, a significant part of civilizing London meant the installation of sewers: "The polluted mire of London had to be cleansed, its fetid arteries opened up with new roads, drains, and sewers" (195). The excavations needed to build the sewer system were of a staggering extent: "Supported by a metropolitan army of contractors and labourers, [Joseph] Bazalgette excavated 3.5 million cubic yards of earth, used 318 million bricks and laid some eight-two miles of sewer. At a cost of over £4 million, the completed network was able to carry out fifty-two million gallons of sewage to a distance of some fourteen miles" (Hunt 194). Thereby, just as most Londoners were becoming aware of their bodily dirt, they found themselves surrounded by heaps of dirt. Adding to the irony, unused dirt became valuable in its own right since compacted dirt was used to create bricks; thereby, dirt was removed only to be replaced by bricks, which were made of compacted dirt. Lee Jackson explains that dirt management had been of concern since the 1830s, but that building projects had kept dirt as it could be turned for a profit (4). As Jackson explains, dirt was not simply waste, in the way it is conceived in the twenty-first century; rather it could be of utility, once removed and put in its proper place (4). Additionally, even while there was a market for dirt at times, dirt was a continual nuisance due to its significant daily accumulation.

Victorians anxiously sought to define the dirt that sifted into their daily life. Starting in 1848 and ending in 1895, my dissertation will closely examine the complex and shifting definition of dirt in this roughly fifty-year time span, in order to argue that dirt is important as a remarkably complex

measure of England's view of its own progress and regress. Of course, one of the primary difficulties that arise with such a study is selection; representative texts were selected at the expense of omissions. Dirt can be found in a range of Victorian prose, fiction and non-fiction, and so it was necessary to confine the study greatly in order to maintain any sense of clarity. Without the study being directed through a tightly controlled selection of materials, this project could have rapidly buried itself in the mountain of Victorian writing about dirt. In a less than complimentary comparison, I have acted as a Victorian dust-sifter, culling through the heaps of dirt writing, sorting by genre or by zeitgeist, and producing those texts that seemed most valuable as emblems of dirt discourse.

More to the point, dirt studies is a relatively new field and is thereby confined in terms of range of research. While the past ten years have seen an increase in scholarship, with several books coming out in the past two years, it is a limited field, nonetheless. Fascinatingly and frustratingly, scholarship within dirt studies is relatively confined to the same pattern. Studies of pollution tend to take Mary Douglas's locus classicus, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (1966), as a starting point because of her concise synopsis of dirt as "matter out of place." As my first chapter will show through a definition of dirt, over a hundred years prior to Douglas, Lord Palmerston actually coined the phrase "matter out of place" to describe dirt and he was credited with this definition by a number of Victorian writers. Yet, oddly enough, only one modern scholar, Victoria Kelley, has noticed that Douglas uses this exact nineteenth-century phrase, but even Kelley does not follow it back to the original source of Palmerston.³ In my mind, it would improve dirt

³ Kelley cites Phillis Browne as having used the phrase "dirt was only matter in the wrong place" in her "House Cleaning," an article published by a publication named *Our Homes and How to Make Them Healthy* in 1883. However, in the quotation Kelley provides, Browne does not claim that phrase as her own, but attributed it to a "great philosopher" (58).

scholarship to acknowledge this confused attribution since it shows, first, that Victorians were willing to concede that dirt is only foul in certain places, and, second, it aptly demonstrates how we have inherited the Victorians' view of dirt. In short, scholarship is articulating a concept of dirt which assumes Victorians were unaware of how they were defining dirt, yet newspaper articles, soap advertisements, and blue books tell a different story. Primary materials from the period make it entirely evident that Victorians knew that city dirt was becoming regarded differently than rural dirt, and street dirt was not as repulsive as the same street dirt tracked into a home on petticoats. In fact, it seems that studies of pollution are strangely reflexive in making moderns aware of their responses to dirt.

Given that *Purity and Danger* is an anthropological examination of the taboo of filth, Douglas can be forgiven for not tracing her quotation back to its nineteenth-century source. In part, because she produces the first scholarly evaluation of dirt, Douglas is referenced in every study of Victorian dirt or cleanliness. Douglas evaluates the troubled relationship between pollution and civilization, starting with basic human communities in the form of tribal and family relations. Her argument is that dirt is not negative in and of itself, but it is bothersome because it defies order:

As we know it, dirt is essentially disorder. There is no such thing as absolute dirt: it exists in the eye of the beholder. If we shun dirt, it is not because of craven fear, still less dread of holy terror. Nor do our ideas about disease account for the range of our behavior in cleaning or avoiding dirt. Dirt offends against order. Eliminating it is not a negative movement, but a positive effort to organize the environment. (Douglas 2)

Dirt, as Douglas explains, defies “absolute” definition it is never a particular matter that can be scientifically explained; instead, the term “dirt” seems to stand in metaphorically for that which must be made orderly, according to the culture bothered by the displacement of this “disorder[ly]” matter.

For Douglas, dirt is less about the tangible definition of a specific matter, but a definition of what is intangibly shown through its presence: our “systematic ordering” and our “symbolic systems of purity” (44). Adding to Douglas’s claim that dirt uncovers the symbolism present within a culture is her claim that dirt necessarily involved a contemplation of forms, bodies, and existence: “Reflection on dirt involves reflection on the relation of order to disorder, being to non-being, form to formlessness, life to death” (5). The metaphoric possibilities of dirt are certainly the object of Ruskin, Hardy and Wells’s critiques of nineteenth-century society, as I will show in later chapters, and is Douglas’s most applicable point in so far as it concerns the Victorians.

Anne McClintock's widely read and enormously influential *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (1995) relies upon this same supposition that dirt is socially defined. Like Douglas's text, McClintock states that “Nothing is inherently dirty,” a claim that she illustrates with the example of a broom: “A broom in a kitchen closet is not dirty, whereas lying on a bed it is” (152-53). A crucial distinction McClintock adds to the symbolic value of dirt is that she is the first to apply Douglas’s idea to the nineteenth century. Victorians viewed dirt as having “a relation to social value and social disorder” (152). Dirtiness becomes a marker of social class: “In Victorian culture, the bodily relation to dirt expressed a social relation to labor... Dirt was a Victorian scandal because it was the surplus evidence of manual work, the visible residue that stubbornly remained after the process of industrial rationality had done its work” (153). Showing that the working classes were marked by dirt, McClintock expounds upon the civilizing processes that society becomes inextricably caught up in to remove dirt. McClintock argues that the middle and aristocratic classes, by their desire to distance themselves from dirt, were an easy target market by soap companies. Furthermore, McClintock argues that it is through consumerism that assimilating power was enacted by forcing people to conform to a particular behavior. It is her study of soap commodity culture that

will be of interest to my argument and will be indispensable in establishing Victorian attitudes about bathing. Though I will use it only tangentially, McClintock performs a close analysis of soap advertising in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, and studies the imperial consequences of these advertisements.

Kelley's *Soap and Water: Cleanliness, Dirt and the Working Classes in Victorian and Edwardian Britain* (2010) continues McClintock's inquiry about Victorians' relationship to cleanliness. Kelley conducts her research by examining the day-to-day life of Victorian women by using diaries and letters as evidence. She examines the relationships between women as it concerns cleaning and, later in the century, soap advertising as having shaped attitudes and knowledge of hygiene. Her chapter on soap advertising effects on housekeeping practices and social behaviors is invaluable by charting the use of soap marketing phrases in writing between women. In this sense, both McClintock and Kelley are invested in demonstrating the power enacted by social class and consumerism in transforming daily behavior. Kelley is indebted to Mary Poovey's main premise in *Making a Social Body* (1995), that reform measures in Victorian England privileged the middle class family as normative and insisted that all classes conform to the practices of one social class.⁴ Namely, Poovey cites that as a result of Chadwick's skewed ideas about hygiene reform, the working classes became subjected to sanitary measures which were simply not possible to fulfill.

Written six years before Kelley's *Soap and Water*, Seth Koven's *Slumming: Sexual and Social Politics in Victorian London* (2004) also uses an intimate study of Victorians to comprehend their complex relationship to slumming. Indeed, Koven admits his need to become personally involved in reconstructing the history of slumming. As an enlightening elaboration on the intentions of those

⁴ For Poovey, it is Chadwickian reform which set a dangerous precedent for interpreting health and hygiene by Chadwick's understanding of data in terms of middle-class normativity, which simply could not and did not apply to the working classes.

Victorians who visited the slums, Koven enlarges and corrects ideas posited by scholars like Poovey. Koven writes: “I attend to individuals’ particularities. I portray slum reformers and workers not as mere tools of social and discursive forces outside their control—though such forces did influence their agendas—but as human beings who confronted ethical dilemmas and made difficult choices” (Koven 4). He anticipates the impulse that Kelley will similarly feel, which is to separate the people of the period from these sweeping scholarly claims about sanitation which seems to typecast Victorians into emblems of ideology. Koven articulates this flaw of scholarship: “I attempt to save them from the misguided goodwill of those who would make them into saints and the smugness of those who would dismiss them as marginal cranks, or worse yet, as hypocrites. They were none of these. Instead, I try to recapture the altogether messier mingling of good intentions, and blinkered prejudices that informed their vision of the poor and of themselves” (4) Koven demonstrates the muddled relationship between Victorians and their dirt by exhibiting the disorder of slum neighborhoods. Koven’s study operates as a slum tour for the modern reader by using diary entries, newspaper articles, and other historical documents to capture the actual conditions of the East End.

Importantly, while dirt studies have typically followed the same well-worn path of applying Douglas’s and McClintock’s ideas to a new view of dirt, increasingly scholarship is becoming interested in another pathway that developed right alongside Douglas in the 1970s. Douglas’s text evaluates the anthropological concept of pollution of which she discusses the human responses of rejection and categorization. Two other relevant studies: Dominique Laporte’s *The History of Shit* (1978) and Michael Thompson’s *Rubbish Theory: The Creation and Destruction of Value* (1979) expand on categorization of dirt, or filth, by discussing it within the realm of semiotics.⁵ Laporte’s *The History of*

⁵ Douglas’s concept of pollution as it concerns dirt was “the reaction which condemns any object or idea likely to confuse or contradict cherished classifications...Defined in this way it [dirt] appears as

Shit is both an eccentrically absurd and sincere study of the role of waste in civilization.⁶ He interprets a 1539 French law forbidding the casting of excrement into the street and requiring that shit must be contained within the home, as having two powerful ramifications: the conflation of private acts with public acts and the attribution of value onto waste. Laporte argues that boundaries are created by civilization in order to classify waste and to properly order it: “we witness the *domestication* of waste, as a result of which the subject sees the object assigned to its ‘true’ place; that is to say, to his home, *in domus*” (28). His assertion that waste is domesticated is a perfect articulation of the midcentury focus on defining and placing dirt.

Thompson’s *Rubbish Theory*, published one year after LaPorte’s study, considers at length the often fluid boundaries of waste and value as it concerns objects. I say, fluid, even though Thompson locates three categories of “possessable object”: “valuable, valueless, and negatively valued” (2). His main argument is that we assign meaning to objects and, later, assume that meaning to be innate—thereby we naturalize what is constructed (Thompson 2). Thompson claims that we must first recognize that objects are assigned places:

This is perhaps the first stumbling block in presenting rubbish theory, for we all tend to think that objects are the way they are as a result of their intrinsic physical properties...We have to recognize that the qualities objects have are conferred upon them by society itself

a residual category, rejected from our normal scheme of classifications...(45). Of course, as an anthropologist, Douglas aimed to cleanse dirt of its associations with “pathogenicity and hygiene” in order to study human behavior (44).

⁶ To clarify the disparate tones of his book, consider the following quotation which is part comedy and part cultural analysis: “The proposition ‘civilization is the spoils’ only holds if amended by a second: ‘the State is the sewer.’ Civilization is the purview of the conqueror. The barbarian craps where he pleases; the conqueror emblazons his trails with a primordial prohibition: ‘No shitting allowed’” (LaPorte 57).

and that nature (as opposed to our idea of nature) plays on the supporting and negative role of rejecting those qualities that happen to be physically impossible. (8-9)

Objects are thus imbedded with cultural value that can shift as the culture shifts, and an object is either “durable” or “transient” depending on its likelihood of maintaining value or losing value.

However, Thompson claims that rubbish “constitutes a covert category” in that it is outside of these two categories and is of a “zero and unchanging value” (9). Rubbish is “socially defined” according to Thompson and he proves his point by having the reader experience repulsion through several examples, too vile to include here, which prove rubbish as not fitting within “cognitive frameworks” of object classification. Nonetheless, the notion of objects as being assigned values and rubbish, filth, or dirt as refusing categorization and thus requiring a forcible ordering comes to define the nature of dirt studies.

Following in the LaPorte and Thompson line of critical thought is *Filth: Dirt, Disgust, and Modern Life* (2005), edited by William Cohen and Ryan Johnson, and *Dirt: New Geographies of Cleanliness and Contamination* (2013), edited by Ben Campkin and Rosie Cox. *Filth* is a collection of dirt articles, almost all of which concern Victorian studies, and Cohen situates the overarching argument firmly within the same evaluation of filth as Thompson. Like Thompson, Cohen writes that filth is defined within constructed categories that are variable: “filth, in both its literal and figurative senses, covers two radically different imaginary categories, which I designate as *polluting* and *reusable*” (x). Cohen writes that filth necessarily creates a subjective relationship between the viewer and the object:

Actions, behaviors, and ideas are filthy when they partake of the immoral, the inappropriate, the obscene, or the unaccountable—assessments that, while often experienced viscerally, are culturally constrained. All of these versions of filth have one thing in common: from the

point of view of the one making the judgment, they serve to establish distinctions –‘That is not me.’ For this very reason, however, filth is frequently so disturbing that it endangers the subjective integrity of the one who confronts it. By the time one has encountered and repudiated filth, it is too late—the subject is already besmirched by it. In this way, filth challenges the very dichotomy between subject and object. It does so according to a psychoanalytic logic, whereby repulsion and attraction unconsciously converge, and phenomenological as well: the filth of the object defiles the subject who, identifying it as such, has had to rub up against it. (x)

Cohen’s definition of the relationship between the viewer and filth as one of attraction and repulsion does seem owing to Douglas’s use of the same response categories. Yet, Cohen creates the valuable distinction that the subject, the viewer, always becomes subjected to filth, even in attempting to use categorization to create distance.

Ben Campkin and Rosie Cox also locate the semantic difficulty of the term dirt in their introduction to *Dirt: New Geographies of Cleanliness and Contamination*. Campkin and Cox write that “Dirt...slips easily between concept, matter, experience, and metaphor” (1). Like Thompson’s and LaPorte’s arguments, Campkin and Cox draw upon repulsion and disgust in trying to explain the concept of dirt:

All of us conceive of ‘dirt,’ and attempt to avoid or eliminate it on a daily basis. The word has a broad range of associations, yet we seldom question what precisely we mean by it, or why exactly dirt needs to be cleaned. Materially, it refers at once to the mundane matter under our finger nails, down our toilets, on and under our streets—hardly the reified substance of conventional academic inquiry, one might think. However, it is the everyday