

Circulations of Waste in Victorian London

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I, Naomi Hinds confirm that the work presented in my thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

Abstract

In mid-nineteenth century London, the concept of a unified sewage system was gaining traction. This involved standardising and ordering the circulatory routes that waste took through urban space, but it also sparked a proliferation of discourse in excremental economics. By this logic, waste could be made useful: transformed from the depleted leftovers of urban life to a valuable commodity. In short, waste was not simply understood as stagnant accumulations, but as matter moving in potentially perpetual cycles. Focusing on a broad spectrum of genres from the Blue Book to the juvenile penny serial, this thesis investigates how texts from the 1840s to the 1860s engage with, and struggle against, the logics of circulating waste.

The first chapter of this thesis delves into the sanitary rhetoric of the late 1840s and early 50s and its attempt to construct and convey a comprehensive sanitary system. The second chapter examines the unproductive circulations of Charles Dickens' *Little Dorrit*. In chapter three, the focus shifts to Henry Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor*'s descent into disorganisation through portrayals of transforming, mutating matter. The final chapter looks towards the juvenile penny serial *The Wild Boys of London* and the ways in which circulation disrupts its redemptive arcs. I argue that rather than showing the utopian potential of endlessly recyclable, renewable matter, these texts illustrate how the principles of circulating waste can infect narrative forms, work against organisational strategies and establish limits for progress and self-improvement.

Statement of Impact

This thesis centres around a vital period of sanitary reform in Victorian London and analyses the relationships between discourses of waste management and literary culture. It contributes to and builds from insights of the lively field of nineteenth-century waste studies and offers a meaningful framework for analysing texts in the latter half of the century.

This thesis offers fresh critical readings of culturally significant texts such as *London Labour and the London Poor* and *Little Dorrit*, but also does important work in bringing to light works which have been consigned to the archives or have not as yet received sustained critical attention. Understanding these texts as part of an important historical moment challenges the dominant historical narratives around sanitary reform and complicates what is often represented and conceptualised as century-long march toward progress. To this effect this thesis constructs a comprehensive biography of Frederick Oldfield Ward, a journalist and sanitarian of the period who embodied the opposition to Joseph Bazalgette's sewer system, which still persists today.

The exploration of waste and circularity in nineteenth-century Britain is all the more pertinent in light of the growing contemporary discourse on circular economies and sustainable waste management. Examining the historical contexts and development of these concepts is crucial in deepening our understanding of the interplay between culture, science and politics, and how they mutually inform and shape one another.

Aspects of this research have contributed to educational communities and contexts. As part of 'The Waste Collective', a small but active group of artists, designers and writers, I have formulated and delivered a workshop 'Talking Trash'. This workshop engages secondary school students in examining the intersections between historical and contemporary discourses around waste management. Bringing the insights of this thesis to educational contexts encourages young people to be thoughtful and critical in their approaches to contemporary conversations about waste.

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	7
Discovering the Circulating City: Sanitary Rhetoric in Mid-Nineteenth-Century London.....	28
Merdle!: Unproductive Circulation in Charles Dickens' <i>Little Dorrit</i> (1855 – 1857)	65
Raw Materials and Undigested Facts: Systematic Breakdown in Henry Mayhew's <i>London Labour and the London Poor</i> (1849 – 1861).....	98
The Recycled Narratives of <i>The Wild Boys of London</i> (1864 – 1866).....	139
Conclusion	178
Bibliography.....	180

Table of Figures

<i>Figure 1.1:</i> View of the Chincha Islands. From <i>The Illustrated News</i> , 21 February 1863	17
<i>Figure 2.1:</i> ‘London and its Environs’. Map produced for the Commission of Sewers c. 1850 ...	47
<i>Figure 2.2:</i> Illustration of an observation tower on Westminster Abbey. From the <i>Illustrated London News</i> , 22 April 1848	48
<i>Figure 2.3:</i> Pages from leveller’s workbook for the Subterranean Survey in the Westminster district. London Metropolitan Archives, MCS/498/003	51
<i>Figure 3.1:</i> Map of cases of cholera. From John Snow, <i>On the Mode of Communication of Cholera</i> (1854)	65
<i>Figure 3.2:</i> Original cover to the serial publication of <i>Little Dorrit</i> , Hablot Knight Browne (Phiz)	72
<i>Figure 3.3:</i> ‘The Night’, <i>Little Dorrit</i> , Hablot Knight Browne (Phiz)	97
<i>Figure 4.1:</i> Mayhew’s classification of workers as it appeared in <i>London Labour and the London Poor</i> , IV.....	105
<i>Figure 4.2:</i> Illustration of Raw Materials at the Great Exhibition. ‘The Exterior’ from, Louis Haghe, Joseph Nash and David Roberts, <i>Dickinson’s Comprehensive Pictures of the Great Exhibition of 1851</i> (London: Dickinson Brothers, 1854)	113
<i>Figure 4.3:</i> George Cruikshank, ‘All the World is Going to See the Great Exhibition of 1851’. Frontispiece from <i>Mr and Mrs Sandboys</i>	115
<i>Figure 4.4:</i> George Cruikshank, ‘Dispersion of the Works of All Nations’. From <i>Mr and Mrs Sandboys</i>	116
<i>Figure 4.5:</i> ‘View of a Dust Yard. (From a Sketch taken on the spot)’. From <i>London Labour and the London Poor</i> , II	123
<i>Figure 4.6:</i> Density map of the incidences of cholera in London. From <i>Report of the General Board of Health on the Epidemic Cholera of 1849 & 1849</i> (London: W. Clowes & Sons, 1850).....	125
<i>Figure 4.7:</i> Illustration demonstrating the contamination of drinking water from a faulty drain and cistern. From Thomas Pridgin Teale, <i>Dangers to Health: A Pictorial Guide to Domestic Sanitary Defects</i> (London: J & J. Churchill, 1878).....	126
<i>Figure 4.8:</i> Detail from the Board of Health’s Cholera Map showing Jacob’s Island	128
<i>Figure 5.1:</i> George Frederic Watts, <i>Found Drowned</i> , c. 1848 – 59, oil on canvas, 119 × 213 cm, Watts Gallery, Guildford	164
<i>Figure 5.2:</i> Harry Maguire, ‘The Discovery in the Sewer’, from <i>The Wild Boys of London</i>	165
<i>Figure 5.3:</i> Harry Maguire, ‘The Murder on the Thames’, from <i>The Wild Boys of London</i>	167

Introduction

‘Everywhere waste! Waste of manure, waste of land, waste of muscle, waste of brain, waste of population – and we call ourselves the workshop of the world!’¹ In Charles Kingsley’s 1851 novel *Yeast*, the sight of putrid black pools of manure-water spilling into the road provokes its protagonist to lamentation. Progressing through multiple iterations of waste, Kingsley stretches the term to its limits to encompass all the ills of Victorian society. For Kingsley, waste signalled an ungodly and broken system which could not preserve all it produced – an ecological and economic sin. Returning all waste to its natural place, making it useful once more meant to create systems where ends lead seamlessly to beginnings.

Rubbish, refuse, dust, detritus, excess, filth, and excrement all point to the end of biological, ecological, industrial or economic processes. To accept this is to acknowledge that waste is a symptom, or what Max Liboiron defines as the ‘material externalities of complex systems’.³ Waste invokes its past, and, as I want to argue, its future. From the 1840s to the 1870s, London’s sanitary reform saw attempts to turn endings into beginnings and create a circular system of waste management. As one writer put it in 1852, ‘*Continuous circulation* is the fundamental principle of English sanitary reformers.’⁴ In developing sanitary infrastructures, they saw an opportunity to control, contain and re-circulate the city’s waste.

Chief among these sanitary reformers was Edwin Chadwick (1800 – 1890), a trained lawyer turned governmental official who played a crucial role shaping public health in Britain. Operating from a distinctly utilitarian stance, he marshalled the controversial new Poor Law of 1834 and was a driving force behind the Public Health Act of 1848. This established a Central Board of Health which provided the framework for greater Parliamentary intervention into sanitary conditions and infrastructure in Britain’s urban centres. This was in part motivated by a document that was released under his name some years earlier in the midst of an alarming rise in epidemic disease across the capital: *Report on the Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Population of Great Britain* (1842). Despite its perfunctory title, it was a damning indictment of the poor sanitary conditions millions of people lived in across the country.

¹ Charles Kingsley, *Yeast: A Problem* (London: John W. Parker and Son, 1851), p. 195

³ Max Liboiron, ‘Why Discard Studies?’, *Discard Studies*, 5 July 2014 <<https://discardstudies.com/2014/05/07/why-discard-studies/>> [Accessed 2 December 2022]

⁴ Edwin Chadwick and Frederick Oldfield Ward, “*Circulation or Stagnation*”: *Being a Translation of a Paper by F. O. Ward* (London: Cassell & Company, 1880), p. 8.

Chadwick named sewage-recycling – a process in which human excrement could be transformed into fertiliser – as a potential means of addressing Britain’s sanitary ills. Explaining the concept to a friend in 1845 he theorised that:

We complete the circle and realize the Egyptian type of eternity by bringing, as it were, the serpent’s tail into the serpent’s mouth.⁵

Evoking the ancient image of the ouroboros, Chadwick implies the endless circulation of elements and nutrient tending towards eternal prosperity. But there is also an excremental perversity here – that what comes out of the ‘tail’ is directly inserted into the ‘mouth’.

Abstracting and truncating the cycles by eliminating the transformative process which are required to make excrement productive foregrounds anxieties that in using human waste as fertilising material amounts, essentially, to its consumption. Circulations of waste can be contaminative and corruptive.

In acknowledging nineteenth-century attempts to repurpose and reuse waste we have to accept the elasticity and instability of the term. What divides excrement and manure? Carelessly discarded junk and scavenged treasure? Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s ‘great unwashed’ and Dracula’s ‘teeming millions’? In scrutinising the means by which waste is recuperated, redeemed or made fit for consumption we can begin to understand the ouroboric, circular narratives that waste often sits within.

Chadwick’s ouroboros and the way in which he imagined waste moving in circulatory patterns through urban space emerged out of scientific treatises which understood circulation as both natural and correct. Richard Sennet identifies the physician William Harvey’s *De motu cordis* (1628) as a key text that first established circulation as a scientific fundamental in European thought. Previously, the dominant views dictated of the body that blood was created in the liver and consumed by the body’s processes. Harvey, however, observed that blood constantly recirculated through the veins and arteries, pumped by the heart – it was a matter of depletion and replenishment rather than of production and destruction. This discovery made reverberations in subsequent centuries, enabling circulatory movement to be seen in the natural sciences, economics, city planning and understandings of liberal subjectivity. Circulation did not just take place in the body: water could circulate from cloud to river to ocean and back again; capital could circulate in the free market and the urban subject could circulate through cities designed to

⁵ Edwin Chadwick, *Letter to Lord Francis Egerton, 1 October 1845*, quoted in S. E. Finer, *Life and Times of Sir Edwin Chadwick* (London: Methuen, 1952), p. 222.

prioritise efficient flow. Motion became ‘an end in itself’, while stagnation and stasis were signs of disease.⁶ Circulation meant health, wealth and efficiency.

Adam Smith first conceived of the concept of ‘circulating capital’: capital such as raw materials or fuel which was constantly on the move, consumed in the processes of production. Karl Marx expanded on this, applying it to the entire capitalist economy, writing that after the production of commodities they had to:

Be thrown back into the sphere of circulation. They must be solid, their value must be realized in money, this money must be transformed once again into capital, and so on, again and again. This cycle, in which the same phases are continually gone through in succession, forms the circulation of capital.⁷

For Marx at least, this kind of circulation was alienating: it dissolved the relationship between the labourer and their products and creating the magical object of the commodity in its stead.

Urban space was also shaped by the ideology of circulation. Richard Sennet argues that while ‘The Baroque planner emphasized progress towards a monumental destination, the Enlightened planner emphasized the journey itself.’ (Sennet, p. 264) Traffic or crowds, blockages in the streets (or veins) of the city, were indications of urban disorder. One Londoner visiting Paris in 1842 remarked that,

Paris strikes a stranger as still more bustling and noisy than London, as the streets being narrower and back vehicles more used in proportion, the circulation gets sooner choked up and the rattling over the stones of the carriages is still more deafening, being within so confined a space; hence also the confusion is greater.⁸

The new Paris which emerged between 1853 and 1870 after a radical design and re-construction by Georges-Eugène Haussmann prioritised the movement and circulation of the individual. Crowded medieval neighbourhoods with narrow streets and crowded dwellings were demolished, giving way to open squares, parks and grand avenues. In 1859, a parliamentary report announced that this had ‘brought air, light and healthiness and procured easier circulation in a labyrinth that was constantly blocked and impenetrable, where streets were winding, narrow

⁶ Richard Sennet, *Flesh and Stone: The Body and the City in Western Civilization* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1994), p. 264.

⁷ Karl Marx, *Capital Volume 1: A Critique of Political Economy*, trans. by Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin Books, 1976), p. 709.

⁸ Francis Hervé, *How to Enjoy Paris in 1842*, quoted in Stephanie Kirkland, *Paris Reborn: Napoléon III, Baron Haussmann, and the Quest to Build a Modern City* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2013), p. 23.

and dark.’⁹ In these cities, ‘undesirable’ bodies could be excluded from social and cultural participation through exclusion from the spatial sphere of circulation. To be a pedestrian was to be visible, ‘productively’ moving through state-authorised conduits.¹⁰

In the British sanitary landscape, circulation was not relegated to recycling of sewage or the movement of waste through sewers. It was a complete system of urban, economic and ecological organisation. Continuous circulation made sense of a city bloated with its own outputs.

The Need for Sanitary Reform

Although real incomes rose over the first half of the nineteenth century, there was a rapidly growing population of working people living in densely populated urban centres. In 1801 the population of London was 960,000, but this had climbed to nearly 2.4 million by 1851.

Overcrowded, cramped conditions were the norm, as was limited access to basic amenities – sanitation, clean water and regular street cleansing. Waste, excremental or otherwise, could not be easily disposed of. Though London had a what we would recognise as a sewerage system, this was originally intended to carry away surface rainwater from the streets to the Thames, not the accumulated waste of a populous. Sewage, therefore, was managed by a disjointed network of overflowing cesspools, putrid underground streams, drains that ran uncovered through thoroughfares and a decrepit system of pipes. Underground, sewers were of all sizes, shapes and levels. Larger sewers ran into smaller ones and they connected with each other at awkward junctions.¹¹ London’s sanitary system was characterised by sluggishness, stagnation and fragmentation. It was an affront to an ideology of swift and efficient movement.

Across Britain, this increase in urban density resulted in waves of deadly diseases. Typhoid and consumption were on the rise as was an alarming new disease: cholera. Between 1832 and 1866 it swept across the capital in several devastating epidemics claiming over 40,000 lives. Though we now understand cholera to be communicated by ingesting water contaminated with faeces, medical-thought of the day contended that it was spread by ‘miasmas’ – foul smelling infectious vapours released from decomposing excrement. It was (and still is) a devastating and frightening illness: beginning with diarrhoea, nausea and vomiting, and progressing to severe dehydration, lethargy, heart palpitations and, in a large proportion of cases, death.

⁹ Quoted in Patrice de Moncan, *Le Paris D’Haussmann* (Paris: Le Mencene, 2009), p. 64.

¹⁰ For more on the circulation of urban bodies, see *Images of the Streets: Planning, identity and control in public space*, ed. by Nicholas R. Fyfe and Robert J. Topinka, *Racing the Street*.

¹¹ Joseph Bazalgette, *On the Main Drainage of London and the Interception of the Sewage from the River Thames* (London: William Clowes and Sons, 1865), p. 6

Responding to this growing crisis, a movement in sanitation was gathering momentum. In the early-nineteenth century, the development of statistical analysis in Britain and France had led to a proliferation of epidemiological studies and vital statistics. Not only could these reveal trends on a larger, more global scale, but they also appealed to a rationality which saw truth in hard facts and data. This was in contrast to reports of the seventeenth century which instead relied on descriptive analysis. A growing number of formally educated medical practitioners were well placed to use this information to stir public outrage and sympathy for the conditions they saw in their own constituencies. Amongst them were James Phillip Kay (later James Kay-Shuttleworth), Thomas Southwood Smith and Neil Arnott, who all worked as Assistant Poor Law Commissioners. Kay in particular had produced an influential pamphlet named *The Moral and Physical Condition of the Working Classes in Manchester* (1832). In highly affective language Kay described the squalor, crime and moral depravity of the poor quarters of the city. A cure, he argued, lay in a move away from a laissez-faire approach towards education and sanitation. The poor required the guidance of the upper classes as well as parliamentary intervention into the removal of filth and waste in public space and private properties.

The stakes couldn't have been higher for Kay. Civilisation, he argued, was at risk of devolution. He imagined a future where if nothing were done:

A dense mass, impotent alike of great moral or physical efforts would accumulate; children would be born to parents incapable of obtaining the necessaries of life [...] Even war and pestilence, when regarded as affecting a population thus demoralized, and politically and physically debased, seem like storms which sweep from the atmosphere the noxious vapours whose stagnation threatens man with death.¹²

Although Chadwick himself was reluctant to admit it, the observations made by Kay, Southwood Smith and Arnott were inciting incidents for his 1842 report. As Assistant Poor Law Commissioners, they were lobbying parliament for the authorisation of wide-reaching inquiry into the sanitary conditions across Britain. In 1838, Chadwick took the helm of this new inquiry and, after four years of gathering and collating as mass of quantitative and qualitative data, the *Report* was released. Unlike other Parliamentary reports of the time, it was not simply an inward-facing internal document for Parliament and Government but was distributed to the public in a carefully orchestrated promotional campaign. Over 10,000 copies were given out free and

¹² James Phillips Kay, *The Moral and Physical Condition of the Working Classes in Manchester* (London: James Ridgway, 1832), pp. 81 – 82.

Chadwick took full advantage of his contacts in the literary, scientific and journalistic worlds, persuading them to join the cause.

Although Chadwick would characterise himself as the sole author of the *Report* (and of sanitary movement more broadly), his voice seems strangely absent in the *Report*. A large proportion of the text is dedicated to long testimonies from commissioners, physicians and local employers. It shocked its readers with vivid descriptions of filth and poverty but was, as Hamlin reads it, ‘a systematic attempt to dehumanize the poor’.¹³ It made them a helpless, pliable mass which required disciplining by a new system of sanitation. The primary and most practical measures for improving sanitary conditions, Chadwick argued, ‘are drainage, the removal of all refuse of habitations, streets, and roads, and the improvement of the supplies of water’.¹⁴ Although it was not entirely free of the doom-mongering of Kay’s 1832 pamphlet, it more energetically advocated for aggressive state intervention.

When it came to designing a new sanitary system, S. E. Finer contends that Chadwick’s central conception ‘was that of an articulated service where water supply, house drainage, street drainage, and the main sewerage and the cleansing of the streets [and sewage recycling] should form a circle’.¹⁵ ‘The metaphor of circulation’, Lynda Nead argues, ‘enabled health reformers to conceive of the city’ water supply, drains and sewers as its arteries and veins’.¹⁶ Like the circulating body or the circulating economy, matter had to be continually on the move in order for the city to be healthy. Waste would not stick around but would be put to good use.

Chadwick’s ideas were never fully realised and eventually gave way to Joseph Bazalgette’s ‘intercepting’ system of sewage which disposed of waste by dumping it out into the Thames Estuary. Beginning construction in 1859 and completed in 1870, his system carried waste out of sight and out of mind. Nevertheless, in the decades between 1840 and 1870, circulation was a potent symbol in the management of London’s excess. It provided new ways in which sanitarians and writers could imagine movements, mutations, variations and reclamations of matter and beings.

¹³ Christopher Hamlin, *Public Health and Social Justice in the Age of Chadwick* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 154.

¹⁴ Edwin Chadwick, *Report on the Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Population of Great Britain*, ed. by Michael W. Flinn (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1965), p. 423

¹⁵ S. E. Finer, *The Life and Times of Sir Edwin Chadwick* (London: Methuen & Company, 1952), p. 222.

¹⁶ Lynda Nead, *Victorian Babylon: People, Streets and Images in Nineteenth-Century London* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 16.

Sewage Recycling

Excrement lay at the heart of Chadwick's circulating system. This lowly matter is a pungent reminder of the internal processes of the body, our inevitable production of filth. Excrement demands purification. For Victorians, Night Soil was their euphemism of choice. This linguistic play was part of wider cultural practises which sought to keep excrement concealed and contained. However, these modes of suppression were never wholly successful. Waste could not simply be eradicated. It continually re-emerged as a disruptive and corruptive force. To put it another way, shit oozed through the cracked façade of Victorian society and upset established systems of power.¹⁷

The slippage between soil and excrement in the term 'Night Soil' is emblematic of the complex relationship between excrement and agriculture. Manure is one such example – it sheds most of the disgust associated with excrement, and instead becomes a symbol of fecundity, part of the life-giving process which turns waste into food. But what if these by-products are not animal in origin, but human? The 1840s and 50s saw a movement among sanitarians that sought to re-evaluate the place of excrement in society and make it useful: putting it to work as nourishing matter that, theoretically, would bring riches to the earth and prosperity to the country.

Repurposing Night Soil was not just a matter of recovering the forgotten value of excrement, but one of re-imagining, re-defining and re-constructing the meaning of waste itself; a process which revealed the fragility of the political, cultural and linguistic mechanisms which kept it in its place. In *Purity and Danger*, the anthropologist Mary Douglas made the widely quoted claim that dirt is simply 'matter out of place. Delineating the presuppositions of this claim she writes:

It implies two conditions: a set of ordered relations and a contravention of that order.

Dirt then, is never a unique, isolated event. Where there is dirt there is a system. Dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements.¹⁸

Imposing categories on the world could never create an absolute and totalising symbolic order. There were always objects, materials or people that would never fall completely into one category or another. It is important to note that according to Douglas' logic, excrement is not inherently 'dirty' but becomes so when it oozes out from the cracks between categories. It is in this case that it becomes deviant, incontinent, and uncontrollable matter. Excrement was 'naturally' in its

¹⁷ I here borrow from Kristeva theory of abjection: that the *abject* disturbs identity, system, and order.

¹⁸ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 36. Further references to this edition are included after quotations in the text.

place when enclosed in the bowels of the body, but urban sanitarians and agriculturalists in the nineteenth century envisaged waste as in harmony with the external world as fertiliser. However, the perfect and seamless passage of excrement from the body to the earth, though it had an irresistible potential, was in reality clogged and slowed by bureaucracy, political inertia, and the lack of technology needed to meet the challenge.

The origins of this adage are murky. Recently Philip Fardon has identified a version of this expression in an 1852 speech on fertiliser by the British Whig politician, and later Liberal Prime Minister Lord Palmerston (1784 – 1865). This, however, is complicated by Palmerston's admission that he had 'heard' the phrase from someplace else.¹⁹ Years later in 1870, one *Punch* writer asserted that 'Lord Palmerston was not the real author of this definition, though it owes its currency to his having first given it circulation by adoption into one of his speeches. The real authorship of this definition belongs to Mr. F. O. Ward'.²⁰ Frederick Oldfield Ward (1817 – 1877) was a sanitarian and ex-Sewer Commissioner who by the 1870s had slipped into obscurity. I deal with Ward's contribution to sanitary rhetoric specifically in the first chapter of this thesis. Despite the claims of *Punch*, Ward in fact not the originator of phrase. In one of his pamphlets he, like Fardon, referenced Palmerston as the author.²¹ Over the last century and a half, 'dirt is matter in the wrong place' has variously been attributed to a sundry of notable figures: the eighteenth-century Earl Philip Dormer Stanhope, the American philosopher William James, the English writer John Ruskin or even Sigmund Freud. The phrase has been consistently displaced from the mouth of one author and replaced in the mouth of another. It has proliferated, migrated.

Nevertheless, Palmerston's use of the phrase is enlightening in respect to Victorian sensibilities around the circulation and transformation of waste. The speech, originally given in Lewes for the Royal Agricultural Society's annual dinner, was reproduced in the *Times*:

I have heard it said that dirt is nothing but a thing in a wrong place. Now, the dirt of our towns precisely corresponds with that definition. It ought to be upon our fields, and if there could be such a reciprocal community of interests between the country and the towns that the country should purify the towns and the towns should fertilise the country

¹⁹ Richard Fardon, 'Citations out of place: Or, Lord Palmerston goes viral in the nineteenth century but gets lost in the twentieth', *Anthropology Today*, 29 (February 2013), 25 – 27.

²⁰ 'Sewage Farming in Both Sorts', *Punch*, 52 (1870), 19.

²¹ Frederick Oldfield Ward, *Memorandum by Mr. F. O. Ward on the data employed by Mr Bazalgette in determining the sizes and estimating the cost of the works designed for the main drainage of the metropolis* (London: James Truscott, 1855), p. 38. Further references to this edition are included after quotations in the text.

[...] Now, we all acknowledge that there are certain laws of nature, and that those who violate those laws invariably suffer for it. Well, it is a law of nature that nothing is destroyed. Matter is decomposed, but only for the purpose of again assuming some new form useful for the purposes of the human race. But we neglect the law. We allow decomposed substances in towns to pollute the atmosphere, to ruin the health, to produce premature misery, to be pestilent to life and destructive of existence. Well, gentlemen, if instead of that there could be a system devised by which those substances which are noxious where they now are should be transferred so as to fertilise the adjoining districts, I am persuaded that, not only would the health of town populations be thereby greatly improved, but the finances of the agricultural population would derive considerable benefit from the change.²²

This with much good-humoured laughter and ‘hear hear!’s’. The audience was particularly amused by the notion that town dirt could be spread on the fields.

Evidently, the phrase stuck. As Palmerston rightly pointed out, dirt or excrement could not ever truly be eliminated, but only transferred to other spaces, purified and transformed when it is reinstated to its ‘natural’ position. Excrement was incompatible with the urban environment, kept precariously in its place by sanitary and sewerage systems which were incomplete and incontinent. To put it another way, it was not enough for excrement to be concealed beneath the earth, put out of sight and out of mind or fraudulently ‘eradicated’. What excrement did possess though was an untapped potential energy which could propel Britain’s economic machine if it could be coerced to follow the ‘natural laws’ that supposedly gave order and balance to the natural and urban environment. Theoretically, if put in its proper place, excrement would no longer be the extraneous, redundant material which destabilised the systems of economic and political power, but transformed into a substance that would propel and sustain them instead.

As far back as 1842, Chadwick also bemoaned the reckless *wastage* of waste:

When we consider the immense value of night-soil as a manure, it is quite astounding that so little attention is paid to preserve it. The quantity is immense which is carried down by the drains in London to the river Thames, serving no other purpose than to pollute its waters. A substance which by its putrefaction generates miasmata may, by artificial means, be rendered totally inoffensive, inodorous, and transportable, and yet prejudice prevents these means be. (*Report*, p. 123)

²² [Anon.], ‘The Royal Agricultural Society’, *The Times*, 16 July 1852, p. 8.

Waste, and excrement specifically, had the potential to be transformed, renewed and redeemed. Rather than spilling into the city's water supply or stagnating and festering, producing poisonous miasmas that were believed to be vectors of disease, it could metamorphose into nourishing, life-giving matter.

Chadwick's sewage-recycling scheme was also significantly influenced by the writings of the German chemist Justus von Liebig (1803 – 1873), a pioneer in the fields of agricultural chemistry who laid the groundwork for the targeted use of nutrient-rich fertiliser to maximise crop yield. Liebig's natural chemistry assumed that there were circular processes embedded in creation that were in constant motion and balance. In these natural cycles, food could be endlessly renewed as if a machine of perpetual motion. In his 1840 book, *Die organische Chemie in ihrer Anwendung auf Agricultur und Physiologie* (*Organic Chemistry in its Application to Agriculture and Physiology*), Liebig contended that agriculture could be perfected by the careful study and application of chemical theory. It was quickly translated into English and French, and, although highly contentious, especially among farmers, became the foundation for the burgeoning fertiliser industry. According to him, the soil contained finite amounts of nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium which were depleted by plant growth. If these were not returned to the soil either by decomposing matter or artificial fertilisers, the soil would eventually become completely exhausted, no longer able to sustain plant life. At least at this early stage of Liebig's career, the form that this restoration would take was of little import: 'whether this restoration be effected by means of excrements, ashes or bones, is in great measure a matter of indifference.'²³

Chadwick was especially taken by Liebig's suggestion of human sewage, citing him in *Sanitary Report* as a proponent of such a method of nourishing the soil. There was a perverse poetry in human excrement being used as fertiliser. In essence it would close the cycle between the consumer and the producer. Cities and other urban centres were unhealthy bodies where the circular processes of nature had been disrupted. Alienated from the 'natural', or at least the agricultural world, it was endlessly consuming, growing fat on the labour of its environs without giving back. London, Chadwick envisioned, could be incorporated into cycles of nature and of the nutrient cycle by the network of pipes which would cart precious sewage into the city's fields rather than languishing in its sewers.

What was more, in mid-century England, agricultural industries were heavily dependent on imported fertilisers to grow their crops. The cycles of production, consumption and excretion

²³ Justus von Liebig, *Chemistry in its Applications to Agriculture and Physiology* (London: Taylor & Walton, 1842), p. 176.

were not firmly secured to the local environment, or even enclosed by the country's boundaries. Instead, they had become distended, incongruous, and fragmented in Britain's globalist and imperialist impulses to exploit resources which had now become available to them. In the words of Liebig:

Great Britain robs all countries of the conditions of their fertility [...] We may say to the world that she hangs like a vampire on the throat of Europe, and even the world and sucks out its life-blood, without any real necessity or permanent gain to herself.²⁴

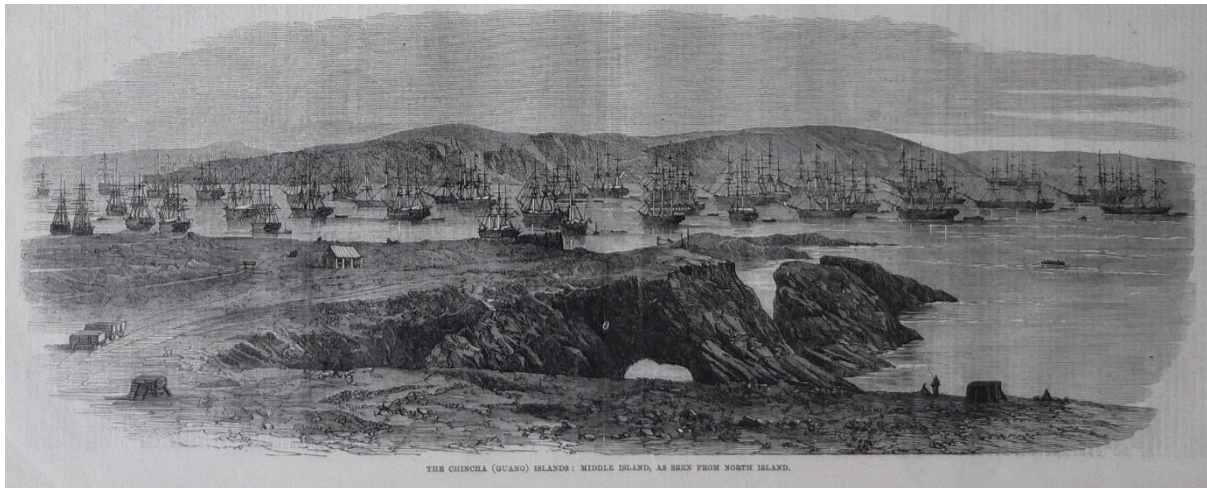


Figure 1.1: View of the Chincha Islands. From *The Illustrated News*, 21 February 1863

However, by the end of the 1840s, guano was hailed as a more effective and considerably more cost-effective way to increase annual crops yields. This was the excrement of seabirds and bats which over time had calcified into mineable deposits. Having higher concentrations of nitrogen and phosphate, it could be applied to a wider range of crops in contrast to bonemeal, which did well with the growth of turnips and grass but struggled with cereals. The introduction of this new fertilising material to British agriculturalists was spurred on by enthusiastic reports and positive results from experiments. A guano boom was imminent. The Chincha Islands, laying some thirteen miles off the Pacific coast of Peru were at the centre of this frenzy. These three small islands possessed massive deposits a guano which over centuries had accumulated into huge mountains hundreds of feet deep. Its fertilising properties had been known in Peru for millennia, but by the nineteenth century with the interest of foreign markets, guano mining became big business. Between 1840 and 1870, 12 million tons of guano was exported from Peru, with almost half of that amount finding its way to Britain's shores. The huge profits that resulted allowed

²⁴ Justus von Liebig, quoted in, Kohei Saito, *Karl Marx's Ecosocialism: Capital, Nature and the Unfinished Critique of Political Economy* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2017), pp. 198 – 199.

Peru to repay old debts to the British government. However, this was facilitated by an exploited workforce: mostly Chinese and Pacific Island labourers, coerced or kidnapped from their homelands worked in poor conditions, chipping away at the guano deposits for little or no pay.

By the mid-1850s, the initial enthusiasm of agriculturalists for this new ‘wonderful’ fertiliser was waning. At the outset of the guano boom, James Clark, a guano importer, had confidently declared that if ‘the consumption of *guano* were tenfold its present rate, the supply from the Pacific Islands alone is adequate to the demand of many generations to come.’²⁵ This proved untrue. The centuries-old deposits at the hand of Peru’s insatiable mining were depleting at an alarming rate. As a response, the Peruvian government raised the wholesale price of guano considerably. The price had remained stable at £9.5 a ton since 1849, but in 1854, the Peruvian government raised this price to £11.²⁶ Although some farmers continued begrudgingly to foot the extra bill, for many the costs proved too high. Due to this, the import of guano to Britain suffered a blow from which it never recovered. An 1857 article in the *Farmer’s Magazine* mourned the loss of a substance that once promised to be a miracle-cure for the agriculturalist’s woes. But it too had criticisms to lay at the feet of the farmer: ‘the farmer has not done enough for himself – he has learnt to rely far too much upon the use of guano, when many other materials would often have served him as well or better’. The article went on to suggest that guano could be replaced with a fertiliser altogether more ‘home-made’.²⁷ This meant bringing fertiliser manufacturing once again within Britain’s bounds, but also implies the potential for a fertiliser even closer to home: one excreted from the human body.

The response to this was not squeamishness, but scepticism. Politicians, agriculturalists and sanitarians accused it as being wildly utopian, expensive to implement, or grounded in bad chemistry. A letter sent to *The Journal of the Society of Arts* compared Chadwick’s obstinate devotion to his scheme to ‘the projectors of that last flying machine, the promoters of that terrible failure, the atmospheric railway and the devotees of a great man who put his faith in a steam coach for common roads.’²⁸ Another correspondent in *The Farmers Magazine* mockingly referred to Chadwick as the ‘Attorney-General of Liquid Manure’, pointing out that the dozen or

²⁵ James Clark, *practical Instructions for using Guano as Manure; Illustrated by Practical Results (Sixth Edition)* (London: James Clark, 1845), p. 8.

²⁶ W. M. Mathew, ‘Peru and the British Guano Market, 1840 – 1870’, *The Economic History Review*, 23 (1970), 112 – 138 (p. 117).

²⁷ ‘The Guano Crisis’, *The Farmer’s Magazine*, 11.3 (1847), 266 – 267, (p. 267).

²⁸ S. Sidney, ‘The Application of the Sewage of Towns to Agriculture’, *Journal of the Society of Arts and of the Institutions in Union*, 6 (1858), 108 – 110 (p. 110).

so liquid-sewage farms set up as trials by the Board of Health during the 1850s had all failed.²⁹ The correspondent went on to suggest that the Board of Health had printed ‘thousands of Blue Books at the expense of the nation’ propelling and dispelling its new agricultural theories. In the attempt to re-integrate excrement into a money-making and ‘put it in its proper place’, they had only produced pages and pages of waste.

The recycling of sewage was in line with the continuous contamination of Thames and London's drinking water in that it forced individuals to form new relationships with the economic and industrial systems of London. The mouth, like the mouths of the sewers which spilled into the Thames, was a sight of considerable anxiety, as the point where the individual body came into intimate contact with the excretions and by-products of London's populous. At the height of a cholera outbreak in 1849, *Punch* seized on these anxieties in a satirical poem which was a variant of the then-popular cumulative nursery rhyme *This is the House that Jack Built*:

The Water that John Drinks

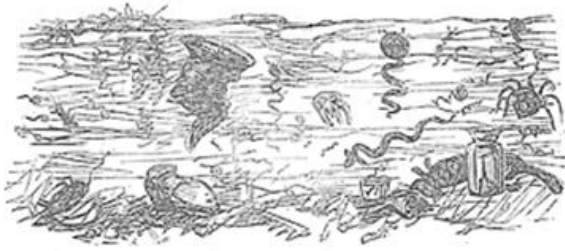


This is the
water that JOHN drinks.



This is the Thames with its cento of stink,
That supplies the water that JOHN drinks.

²⁹ ‘A Wednesday at the Royal Agricultural Society’s Room’, *The Farmers Magazine*, 19 (1861), 495 – 497, (p. 495)



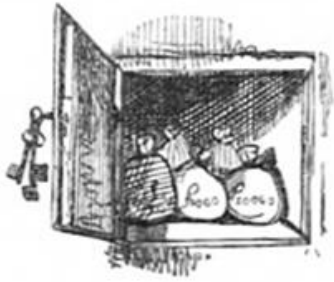
These are the fish that float in the ink-
y stream of the Thames with its cento of stink,
That supplies the water that JOHN drinks.



This is the sewer from cesspool and sink,
That feeds the dish that float in the ink-
y stream of the Thames with its cento of stink,
That supplies the water that JOHN drinks.



These are the vested int'rests, that fill to the brink,
The network of sewer from cesspool and sink,
That feeds the dish that float in the ink-
y stream of the Thames with its cento of stink,
That supplies the water that JOHN drinks.



This is the price we pay to wink,
 At the vested int'rests, that fill to the brink,
 The network of sewer from cesspool and sink,
 That feeds the dish that float in the ink-
 y stream of the Thames with its cento of stink,
 That supplies the water that JOHN drinks.³⁰

In tracing the origins of a simple cup of water, it no longer can be regarded as a neutral substance, but the end-product of various economic and industrial processes of the city. Through the cumulative style of this poem, 'the water that John drinks' is continually complicated, and placed at the end of a growing list of processes. In this way, through tracing the origins of a simple cup of water, it can no longer be considered a neutral substance but rather the end-product of various industrial and economic cycles. *The Water that John Drinks* concludes that the source of the city's contaminated drinking water is 'the vested intr'ests that full to the brink / The network of sewers from cesspool and sink'. It lays the blame with unscrupulous companies, which like incontinent bodies, spilt their excrement with little discretion. All cycles of production and consumption, the poem makes clear, can be reduced to the hidden and invisible movements of capital. The looping cycles of *The Water that John Drinks* represents cycles of waste as a progressive multiplication of contaminates which draws in and subsumes 'John' – a proxy for the urban populous. The ouroboros, the utopian never-ending cycle of production and consumption invoked alternative cycles of waste which in turn infected, complicated and disturbed nineteenth century literature.

³⁰ [Anon.], 'The Water that John Drinks', *Punch*, 17 (1849) 144 – 145.

Over the past several decades, Victorian studies have explored the moment of English (and particularly London-based) sanitary reform. If nineteenth-century London was preoccupied with the notion of dirt and the systemisation of dirt, these anxieties enter the literary and cultural imaginary in new and often surprising ways. The city is fertile ground for the broad and ever-expanding field of ‘waste studies’ which brings together

In *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (1986) Peter Stallybrass and Allon White have done vital work in laying out the moralities of sanitary reform, showing how the language of filth and the sewer re-affirm the physical segregation of the classes. The sewer was made one with the slum, the sex-worker, or more broadly, the Other. In this respect it functions as the lower-axis of the city’s body, its underbelly.³¹ More recently Sabine Schütang’s *Dirt in Victorian Literature and Culture* (2016) suggests that the seemingly ubiquitous presence of dirt is a literary tic or discursive effect – a reflection on the difficulty of containing and controlling London’s accumulations of waste.³² On the other hand, in *Cleansing the City* (2008), Michelle Allen focuses on how compulsive writings of filth can inform us about the resistance to the centralising project of sanitary reform.³³ Though my thesis pulls from this rich field of study, my analysis is less concerned less with dirt or the sewers themselves than with the productive space generated by an ideology of circulation.

In using the term ‘circulation’, I specifically want to invoke a recursive movement around a circuitous course. Though this may seem to obvious to be worth clarifying, Erik Swyngedouw has observed that in dispersion of the metaphor of circulation from Harvey’s circulatory body to the modern city, the term ‘became less and less identified with closed circular movement, and more with change, growth, and accumulation’.³⁴ Similarly, Stephanie Gänger calls for a more thoughtful use of the term ‘circulation’ in studies of globalisation and beyond, arguing that it has come describe ‘virtually any sort of passage’.³⁵ Goods, ideas, and people can all ‘circulate’ around the globe without any assumption that they make the passage back to where they began. In these muddy waters, circulations of waste can come to mean miasmatic or viral communication, contamination or contagion, the very crisis that Chadwick and others were attempting to allay

³¹ Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, ‘The City: the Sewer, the Gaze and the Contaminating Touch’, in *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (London: Methuen, 1986), pp. 125 – 148.

³² Sabine Schütang, *Dirt in Victorian Literature and Culture: Writing Materiality* (London: Routledge, 2016).

³³ Michelle Allen, *Cleansing the City: Sanitary Geographies in Victorian London* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2008).

³⁴ Erik Swyngedouw, ‘Metabolic urbanization: the making of cyborg cities’, in *In the Nature of Cities: Urban Political Ecology and the Politics of Urban Metabolism*, ed. by Nik Heynen and others (London: Routledge, 2006), pp. 21 – 40 (p. 31).

³⁵ Stephanie Gänger, ‘Circulation: Reflections on Circularity, Entity, and Liquidity in the Language of Global History’, *Journal of Global History*, 12 (2012), 303 – 318 (p. 303).

through his sanitary system. Where the circulation of *waste* is concerned, specifically that of sewage in the Victorian metropolis, recursive, recurring motion was a fundamental part of its scientific, political and aesthetic philosophy. It was recycling in its most literal sense – matter was depleted, transformed and returned to its point of origin, a looping, ouroboric cadence of perpetual motion.

As a concept, circulation can both close down and pre-determine meaning. This is in contrast to what Clare Pettitt calls the ‘endless form’ of seriality. Seriality suggests an open structure, and endless potentiality: ‘The form of the serial moves onwards through calendar time: by its dynamic forward trajectory it seems to unspool into the empty future’.³⁶ Arguing against circulation being used to model this kind of movement – the contagious spread of literature, ideas or political movements through time and space, Pettitt rightly points out that this kind of language suggests circumscription and restriction in transmission of political ideas: ‘Circulatory movement cycles around the circuit [...] circulation must depend on networks to some extent already established and bounded’. (Pettitt, p. 30) These ideas of closure and circumscription, the ways in which circulations and circulatory networks confine rather than unfurl, is vital to my readings of circulations in mid-nineteenth-century London. Focusing on the recursive and repetitive nature of these circulations offers new avenues to explore the way in which nineteenth-century aspirations for endless renewal contaminated narratives of progress, closure, systemisation and organisation.

Building from Tina Young Choi’s argument that a ‘Chadwickian vision of narrative and national closure’ is overlaid over *Our Mutual Friend*, where ‘nearly everything and everyone Dickens initially puts into circulation within the novelistic system returns to the narrative with the sureness of sewage in the Thames at high tide’, I consider how this ‘Chadwickian vision’ emerges in a broader range of texts across the mid-nineteenth century.³⁷ What does an end mean? What does fixed classification mean? What does growth mean when matter is constantly in flux, and doomed to return to the point at which it started?

The chapters that follow examine, explore how nineteenth-century authors engaged with the ideology of circulation from the sanitary rhetoric of the late 1840s and early 1850s to ‘trash’ juvenile literature of the penny dreadful in the late 1860s. Whilst they touch on and analyse on

³⁶ Clare Pettitt, *Serial Revolutions 1848: Writing, Politics, Form* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), p. 1. Further references to this edition are included after quotations in the text.

³⁷ Tina Young Choi, ‘Completing the Circle: The Victorian Sanitary Movement, *Our Mutual Friend*, and Narrative Closure’, *Our Mutual Friend: The Scholarly Pages*, <<https://omf.ucsc.edu/scholarship/article-archive/completing-the-circle.html>> [accessed 10 December 2021]

some of the waste critic's 'familiar textual landfills' as Susan Signe Morrison puts it – namely *London Labour and the London Poor* (1849 – 61) and *Our Mutual Friend* (1866 – 65), I consider how they deal with the destabilising effects of circulation rather than the materiality of waste.³⁸ But I also examine more ephemeral texts – those which escape the grand narratives of sanitary reform across the century.

In this way I investigate how nineteenth-century literature responded to the demands of Chadwick's conceptualisations of waste and the city. Though the texts I engage with are broadly arranged chronologically, this thesis doesn't claim to construct a history of Chadwick's ideas; rather, it is an exploration of the often-abstract iterations of the ideology of 'continuous circulation' adopted by the nineteenth-century sanitary movement.

For nineteenth-century sanitarians, the networks in which circulation took place were already well defined. In the old London it was an interlocking system of contaminated rivers, putrid underground streams and the routes of dustmen and nightmen; they imagined a London where these networks were instead controlled by governmental authorities – efficient sewers, pristine water-pipes and a regulated rural-urban sewage recycling scheme. For them, it was a system of control. Through Freudian analysis, Richard L. Schoenwald reads the sanitary reform as an exercise in discipline and training the urban individual: 'The sanitary demands increasingly made on dwellers in Victorian cities helped them to become conscious of having a self which needed and repaid watching and regulating.'³⁹ Similarly, H. J. Dyos has argued that the centralisation of sanitary systems in the mid-nineteenth century was a 'systematic and fundamental interference with the behaviour of the individual'.⁴⁰ Schoenwald and Dyos are quite right in pointing out the role the sewers had in governing in the Foucauldian sense of 'structur[ing] the possible field of action of others'.⁴¹ Defecation and the disposal of waste was to happen in a prescribed manner. As a network of underground pipes, the sewers disappeared (or attempted to disappear) human excrement from the cesspit of one's own home. Waste now became the property of central government.⁴²

³⁸ Susan Signe Morrison, *The Literature of Waste: Material Ecopoetics and Ethical Matter* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 5.

³⁹ Richard L. Schoenwald, 'Training Urban Man: A Hypothesis About the Sanitary Movement', in *The Victorian City: Images and Realities*, ed. by Jim Dyos and Michael Wolff, 2 vols (London: Routledge, 1973), I, pp. 669 – 692 (p. 669).

⁴⁰ H. J. Dyos, *Exploring the Urban Past: Essays in Urban History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 17.

⁴¹ Michel Foucault, 'The Subject and Power', *Critical Inquiry*, 8 (1982), 777 – 795 (p. 790).

⁴² For discussions on the disciplinary nature of the sewer also see: Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, 'The City: the Sewer, the Gaze and the Contaminating Touch', in *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (London: Methuen, 1986), pp. 125 – 148; Thomas Osborne, 'Security and Vitality: Drains, Liberalism and Power in the Nineteenth Century', in *Foucault and Political Reason: Liberalism, Neo-Liberalism and Rationalities of Government*, ed. by Andrew Barry and others

However, rather than analysing how sanitary reform as reflects an emerging political and disciplinary infrastructure, I ask how this tendency towards sanitary centralisation and governmental ‘interference’ in how waste should be recycled changed the ways in which authors and individuals determined their own narratives. Yielding to the systems of control installed and imagined by Victorian sanitarians could look like compulsive repetition, the degradation of one’s own attempts at systemisation or narrative passivity.

As Allen MacDuffie points out, the ‘recycling of wasted material energy forms is [...] a grotesque fantasy.’⁴³ It was impossible to create a closed system in which no energy was wasted. Instead, in alignment with the laws of thermodynamics, these systems could only tend towards entropy. This insight comes from an emerging field of research into the implications of thermodynamics and energy on Victorian literature. Others such as Sarah C. Marshall, Barri J. Gold and Tina Young Choi also analyse how this new science spoke to a burgeoning sense of modernity.⁴⁴ Young Choi in particular, finds the foundations for the primary concerns of thermodynamics embedded in mid-nineteenth-century discourses around recycling human waste. (Young Choi, p. 308) Though there are certainly shared questions about energy conservation between these two disciplines, thermodynamics puts pressure on the concept of circulating waste in that it more explicitly recognises that it always led to diminishing returns. Gillian Beer has argued that this rhetoric resulted in ‘the loss of faith in *recurrence*, the loss of any assurance of ‘eternal return’.⁴⁵ Whereas the texts I examine model recurrence and continuously evade closure, thermodynamic narratives barrel towards entropic ends – populational collapse, industrial wastelands or a dying sun.

‘To call something “waste”’ Suzanne Raitt argues, ‘is to invoke its history. Nuclear waste, bodily waste, and medical waste are all the result of specific processes: they gesture back to the productive economies that generated them.’⁴⁶ However, in imagining the productive circulations of waste through the city, Chadwick also invoked its future. Waste was not a stable category, but a temporary state: excrement, fertiliser and food were simply different iterations of the same base

(London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 99 – 122; Mark Usher, ‘Vein of Concrete, Cities of Flow: Reasserting the Centrality of Circulation in Foucault’s Analytics of Government’, *Mobilities*, 9 (2014), 550 – 569.

⁴³ Allen MacDuffie, *Victorian Literature, Energy, and the Ecological Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 134.

⁴⁴ See also: Sarah C. Alexander, *Victorian Literature and the Physics of the Imponderable* (Abington: Routledge, 2016); Barri J. Gold, *Energy, Ecocriticism, and Nineteenth-Century Fiction: Novel Ecologies* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021); Tina Young Choi, ‘Forms of Closure: The First Law of Thermodynamics and Victorian Narrative’, *ELH*, 74 (2007), 301 – 322.

⁴⁵ Gillian Beer, *Open Fields: Science in Cultural Encounter* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 225.

⁴⁶ Suzanne Raitt, ‘Psychic Waste: Freud, Fechner, and the Principle of Constancy’, in *Culture and Waste: The Creation and Destruction of Value*, ed. by Guy Hawkins and Stephen Muecke (Lanham, MA: Roman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003), pp. 73 – 83 (p. 73).

matter, all points on a circular continuum. Therefore, metamorphosis and mutation are key to understand the functions of waste in nineteenth-century literature. It complicated Victorian notions of progress, in which (white western) populations bettered themselves through a ‘linear movement of accretion, complexification and sophistication’ by counterbalancing it with decay and decomposition.⁴⁷ Transformed waste could return again to its original form. I consider how the categorisation of circulating people, objects or matter poses a challenge to the taxonomic traditions of the nineteenth century. This is not to reject Douglas’ assertion that ‘Dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter’. (Douglas, p. 36) Indeed, circulating waste imposed a new dynamic system on urban space which clashed with the categorisation of static and stable materials.

Structure of Thesis

The first chapter of this thesis, ‘Discovering the Circulating City’, serves as an investigation into how the ideology of circulation was reified in the sanitary rhetoric of the mid-nineteenth century. When it came to waste, circulation was constructed as an order embedded in nature. Focussing on the writings of Frederick Oldfield Ward (1817 – 1877), a journalist, sanitarian and close ally of Chadwick, I trace how the latter’s sanitary vision was reformulated as a circulating body. However, rather than a straight-forward analysis of rhetoric, I trace the conception, expansions, consolidation and eventual collapse of this kind of sanitary language in the political sphere in the late 1840s and 1850s. In Ward’s writings, the metaphor of the body helped to circumscribe and define the meanings of Chadwick’s sanitary system and the movements of waste through urban space. But ultimately, it came to inhibit the extent to which this system could be engaged with outside the ideology of circulation. Conceiving of sanitation in this particular way demanded an oblique and circumlocutory style of speech and writing.

The rhetoric of endless productive circulation was further explored in Charles Dickens’ *Little Dorrit* (1855 – 1857). Though a public supporter of Chadwickian sanitary reform, Dickens complicates its central tenets. In chapter 2, ‘Merdle! Unproductive Circulation in *Little Dorrit*’, I explore how endless circulation becomes a trap – an emblem of bureaucratic obfuscation, bogus economics, grinding labour and social infection. These cycles are fundamentally excremental – Mr Merdle, the shrinking figure at the centre of these systems is tellingly named after the French expletive *merde* – quite literally *shit*. Rather than the perpetual renewal of waste promising a tantalising vision of easy abundance, it points towards inescapable degenerative cycles.

⁴⁷ Sue Zemka, ‘Progress’, *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 46 (2018), 812 – 816 (p. 813).

The third chapter examines how the paradigm of circulation intersects with what has been called the ‘drive towards taxonomic categorisation’ of Mayhew’s encyclopaedia of London peoples, *London Labour and the London Poor* (1849 – 61).⁴⁸ Mayhew’s London was one where matter was continually metamorphosing, regenerating and degenerating. Everything was brimming with its potential forms. This dynamism clashed with Mayhew’s original ambition to produce a definitive taxonomic guide to the city’s people. Static categories obscured the ever-shifting definitions of peoples and object. I explore the ways in which *London Labour* is a text which undoes itself, a text which comes to represent the chaos of the city. One of Mayhew’s more unknown literary endeavours, a series of articles about the Great Exhibition in the *Edinburgh Times* is informative in this respect as it highlights the extent to which Mayhew was persistently concerned with the failures of categorisation in the face of cyclical patterns of production and degradation.

The last chapter turns to *The Wild Boys of London* (1864 – 1866), a notorious sprawling juvenile penny serial which follows the adventures of a troop of delinquent youths living in the city’s sewers. Although the text claimed to chart a narrative of moral and physical improvement of these boys and their rise to respectability and ‘usefulness’, they consistently return to the depths of the sewers. As such this chapter, explores the myriad meanings and meanings of recycling within the text. The form of the penny serial in which the text theoretically could continue in perpetuity, required its characters to tramp the same routes through the city or relive again and again a pre-determined set of scenarios. In this way, ‘usefulness’ – a loaded term both in sanitation and poor relief, clashed with one’s freedom linger to in the streets or indulge in a text deemed ‘poor innutritious stuff’.⁴⁹

In their own ways, these texts tell us something about how Victorian writers grappled with, and struggled against an ideology of circulation. They reveal the ambiguities and complexities of a system where circulation is an end in of itself and invite us to consider whether waste can indeed be renewed and redeemed.

⁴⁸ Grant H. Kester, *The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 156.

⁴⁹ Alexander Strahan, ‘Our very cheap literature’, *The Contemporary Review: Volume XIX April – July 1870* (London: Strahan & Co., 1870), pp. 439 – 460 (p. 459).

Discovering the Circulating City: Sanitary Rhetoric in Mid-Nineteenth-Century London

I had had an opportunity of inspecting the earthenware pipe drainage – I am bound to say, the very defective pipe drainage – of a house that once owned me as a landlord. I felt if the power had been granted me of opening a trap-door in my chest, to look upon the long-hidden machinery of my mysterious body.

John Hollingshead, *Underground London* (1860)

The London of the mid-nineteenth century was a city suffocating from the accumulation of poisonous wastes and mired in stagnating excrement. Things moved slowly – not only in the movement of waste, but in the bureaucracy of government too. London’s Metropolitan Commission of Sewers (MCS), a body established to manage the city’s current sanitation and plan out a new sewerage system had reached a deadlock. Behind the scenes Chadwick was vigorously advocating for what would become known as the ‘arterial-venous’ system: a wholly unified system which dealt with water supply, the removal of sewage and sewage recycling. Though a seemingly uncontroversial proposal, in the late 1840s and 1850s it sparked what Christopher Hamlin describes as a ‘doctrinal war’ amongst Civil Engineers, Sewer Commissioners and Chadwick’s allies.¹ Chadwick saw his opponents as blocks in the way of his dogma of continuous circulation. Though Chadwick ultimately lost this ideological battle, it altered the rhetorical landscape around sewers, sanitation and what London as a city could be and might mean.

This chapter focuses on Chadwick’s unofficial spokesperson, the now mostly unknown Frederick Oldfield Ward (1817 – 1877) and his part in formulating a lexicon which envisioned the sewage system as a circulating body of veins and arteries. In this framework the choleric body of the city could be completely transformed: waste could become blood, a life-giving fluid sustaining London’s vital function swiftly moving through the ‘arteries’ of the city’s body. Beyond this, the inaccessibility and darkness of the sewers could be exposed to the anatomical gaze. To put it another way, the sanitary system was *organised*. In one sense this meant that its sewers and pipes were systematically ordered and arranged. But in another older sense of the

¹ Christopher Hamlin, ‘Edwin Chadwick and the Engineers, 1842 – 1854: Systems and Antisystems in the Pipe-and-Brick Sewers War’, *Technology and Culture*, 33 (1992), 680 – 709 (p. 682). Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

word, the city's subterranea could be re-formulated into an organic living structure. Richard Smith reads this process as one where 'the city has not only been progressively dissected and differentiated into functional organ-ized zones but has also come to be represented and rationalised as a circulatory system of all kinds of flows'.² Rather than waste chaotically circulating around the city in unpredictable flows, it could instead be channelled into a rational body. Because waste was part of an organ-ised system, it could fit neatly into narratives of health and fecundity. For the city itself, even its dangerous unmappable subterranean spaces could become knowable, curable flesh.

Chadwick's System

Chadwick's solution to the sluggishness, stagnation and blockages of London's decrepit sanitary system were first articulated in his 1842 *Report on the Sanitary Condition of the Working Classes* and gradually began to take shape over the next three years. The city's existing, crumbling sewers would be replaced with a centrally controlled system where water supply, house drainage and street drainage would form an immense arterial-venous circulatory system propelled by hydraulic power. The cesspool and cistern, emblems of urban disorder and blockage, could be done away with entirely.³ Two interlocking systems of pipes were to be constructed: 'veins' for supplying fresh water from specially selected gathering grounds to London's thirsty population, and 'arteries' for carrying away sewage suspended in water. Because of Chadwick's fears concerning miasmas and putrefaction, this all would have to happen at great speed. Narrow tubular pipes made from glazed earthenware would concentrate flow, thereby increasing velocity. Another vital part of Chadwick's master plan was sewage recycling: instead of excrement going to waste by being dumped in putrid rivers, it would instead be distributed to sewage outfalls on the outskirts of London where it would be sold on to farmers as fertiliser. This created a symmetrical poetry in the system: not only would the sale of fertiliser fund the maintenance of the sewers, but it could be used to grow crops which would supply the city. 'So mutually necessitating were the system's components', Hamlin writes, 'one could start with any one and deduce the others.' ('Antisystems', pp. 684 – 685) This was a system so totalising and integrated that it required the management of street cleansing, water supply, sewers, household drains and even individual habits to be centrally controlled under one consolidated organisation. Chadwick understood this

² Richard G. Smith, 'Poststructuralism, power and the global city' in *Cities in Globalization: Practise, policies and theories*, ed. by Peter J. Taylor and others (Abington: Routledge, 2007) pp. 249 - 260 (p. 253).

³ In his 1842 *Report*, Chadwick had condemned cesspools as 'injurious to the health and often extremely dangerous'. (Chadwick, p. 117)

as a process of ‘sanitary consolidation’.⁴ The city had to come together as a perfectly harmonious circulating body.

Chadwick was clear of the first thing that ought to take place: the eight parish commissions which managed the sewers (dating back to the sixteenth century) would have to be superseded by a single centralised bureaucratic body. In Chadwick’s mind, these parish commissions were proponents of a dysfunctional and disorganised sanitary system; not only were they ‘corrupt and inefficient’, but the sewers built under their supervision were in his words ‘uncertain, erroneous and defection in their general principles of construction, injurious in their action, and unduly expensive’.⁵

This vision was partially realised. Sir James Graham, then Home Secretary, was reluctant to act of Chadwick’s suggestions without further investigation. Henceforth, barely nine months after the publication of Chadwick’s Sanitary Report, a Royal Commission into the Health of Towns was authorised. Although Chadwick was not officially a commissioner, he was deeply involved, determining the Commission’s direction and suppressing reports that were not amenable to his ‘sanitary idea’.⁶ Between 1843 and 1845 it published a series of reports exploring ‘the best mode of preserving the Public Health by an improved system of sewerage in large Cities, by a more abundant Supply of Water and by better construction of the dwellings of the Poor’.⁷ It produced copious amounts of data on everything involving sanitary nuisances in urban areas, the best method and construction of sewers, proposals for a hydraulically powered system, the viability of recycling sewage into manure, and the potential centralisation of the existing sewer commissions. The conclusions to these reports largely supported those in Chadwick’s original 1842 report.

Over the next couple of years, attempts were made to turn the recommendations into legislative action, but Bills in 1846 and 1847 failed owing to an atmosphere of political instability and lobbying from interest groups. Eventually, as London was in the morbid grip of deadly cholera and typhus epidemics, the government was compelled to act. In 1847, the Metropolitan Commission of Sewers was officially established, fulfilling Chadwick’s wish of replacing

⁴ S. E. Finer, *The Life and Times of Sir Edwin Chadwick* (London: Methuen & Co., 1952), p. 308. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

⁵ *First Report. Minutes of Evidence taken before the Commissioners appointed to inquire whether any and what special means may be requisite for the improvement of the Health of the Metropolis* (London: William Clowes and Sons, 1847), p. 49.

⁶ Christopher Hamlin, *Public Health and Social Justice in the Age of Chadwick: Britain, 1800 – 1854* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 221. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

⁷ Sir James Graham to Commissioners, 17 April 1843, quoted in Christopher Hamlin, *Public Health and Social Justice*, p. 219.

London's parish sewer commissions. Chadwick, of course, was one of its inaugural commissioners.

Such a rapid expansion of central government control inflamed anxieties among metropolitan vestries. The radical political theorist Joshua Toumlin Smith declared that the real aim of the new sewer commission was to:

forward the ceaseless attempts of a *liberal* government towards engrossing under one central patronage the actual control over all local institutions, works, and arrangements, small as well as great, to the destruction of those local representative institutions on which the security, independence, progress and welfare of every people must depend, and to the existence, heretofore, of which, above all things, the character of England is owing.⁸

Chadwick, according to an anonymous pamphlet was 'the great charlatan of Centralisation'.⁹ He had already shown proclivities towards this in the execution of the New Poor Law in 1834; now the tendrils of central government were spreading further. Though opposition was spirited, for now at least it was largely ignored. *Punch* directed its satirical ire on these so called 'vestrymen'. As cholera flourished these 'wiseacres stood by and said, "Nay, we know a spell to keep of Cholera:" and they spelled their spell, and it was, to repeat many times over "Self-Government, Self-Government, Self-Government!" And Cholera chuckled when he heard the spell – for he knew those wiseacres of old.'¹⁰

The new Sewer Commission had several daunting tasks to carry out. First, it was to survey and map out London's confusing underground landscape. The MCS were also given powers to manage the city's existing infrastructure and begin the immense task of planning a new unified system of sewerage. Almost immediately it set about ordering the closure of the city's 30,000 cesspools, diverted all house drainage into the sewers, and flushed hundreds of thousands of cubic yards of waste into the Thames. Unbeknownst to the commissioners, this last action actually exacerbated the cholera epidemic by further infusing the populous' drinking supply with excrement.

⁸ Joshua Toumlin Smith, *A Letter to the Metropolitan Sanitary Commissioners: containing an examination of allegations put forth in support of the proposition for superseding, under the name of sanitary improvement, all local representative self-government by a system of centralised patronage* (London: S. Sweet, 1849), p. iv.

⁹ *Engineers and Officials; An Historical Sketch of the Progress of "Health of Town Works" (Between 1838 and 1856) in London and the Provinces* (London: Edward Stanford, 1856), p. 161. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

¹⁰ 'Self-Government', *Punch*, 15 (1848), 78.

Only a year later, at the height of London's cholera epidemic, Chadwick's control of sanitary reform was further entrenched when he was made a commissioner of the newly formed General Board of Health. Because it was established to help execute the recommendations of the Public Health Act of 1848, their responsibilities, including removing sanitary 'nuisances' and managing drainage and water supply, overlapped rather messily with those of the MCS.

Despite this seeming monopoly on sanitary matters, Chadwick's influence was beginning a long process of decline. Though he had a hand in choosing the members of the original Sewer Commission, they did not prove to be as amenable to his plans as he would have hoped. The first 18 months of the MCS were characterised by political stagnation. Chadwick and his allies faced resistance from both the Commission and the press on nearly all the technicalities of his proposed system. By September of 1849, the situation in the MCS had become untenable. John Russell, the Prime Minister, and Charles Wood, the Chancellor, made the decision that the current Commission be reformed without Chadwick whom they regarded as one of the 'prominent parties in the late disputes and differences'.¹¹ The *Times* put things more plainly, declaring Chadwick 'the dictator or the Figaro of this new Commission of Sewers'.¹² In October 1849, the second iteration of the commission was issued in order to bring about a fresh start. It had an almost entirely new membership with only three of the forty-three former commissioners surviving the change.

After this unceremonious expulsion, Lord Morpeth, a fellow Commissioner on the Board of Health, wrote to Chadwick, warning him off any further interference in the MCS:

I must strongly advise you, as you value your peace, not to harass yourself about what goes on at the Sewers Commission and above all not to make yourself a centre of consultation and appeal from the officers of the Commission. This would be a direct violation of decorum, and bring them as well as yourself into trouble. It is plain, that for the present, even if your worst forebodings should be fulfilled, nothing can be done by interference with the Commission from without.¹³

This was a stern and unambiguous rebuke. Morpeth rightly anticipated that Chadwick would not walk away from his vision of urban drainage gracefully. As it was, Chadwick did not heed his advice. This marked the beginning of years of antagonistic exchanges between him and the MCS.

¹¹ Letter from Thomas Southwood Smith to Edwin Chadwick, 28 September 1849, quoted in *The Life and Times of Sir Edwin Chadwick*, p. 377.

¹² 'The Commissioners of Sewers', *The Times*, 22 August 1849, p. 4.

¹³ Letter from Lord Morpeth to Edwin Chadwick, 2 November 1849, quoted in *The Life and Times of Sir Edwin Chadwick*, p. 381.

He engaged in everything from political weaselling, dubious legal argumentation, vigorous campaigning and public defamations.

Making the City a Body

In 1852, as political obstacles continued to hinder the progression of sanitary reform, Chadwick proposed 'The Literary Supporters of Sanitary Reform', a group which could freshly disseminate his vision of sanitary reform to a public that was growing weary of tedious discussions of sewers and sewage. This group of energised individuals were required to keep the subject before the public's mind. In an address at the Metropolitan Sanitary Association he paid special notice to Charles Dickens and Frederick Oldfield Ward who he eulogised 'for the power and independence with which they had attacked the vested interest opposed to sanitary progress, and spread abroad not only in Europe, but also in America, the great sanitary principles of the preventability of disease, and of sanitary consolidation, which England had the honour of first originating'.¹⁴ Chadwick recognised that bringing his arterial-venous system to fruition not only required technical discussions in musty governmental organisations, but an explicitly literary rhetorical campaign. The language of sanitary reform had an infectious, circulatory potential.

By the 1850s Frederick Oldfield Ward was a prominent name in sanitation as a staunch ally of Chadwick. Through his life variously he worked as a surgeon, inventor, editor, journalist, sanitary advocate, Sewer Commissioner and fertiliser manufacturer. Chadwick had a reputation for being bullish, humourless, and most of all a bore. (Finer, p. 4) 'Chadwickian' had become a byword for speech that was verbose and pompous. Ward, on the other hand, was immersed in London's literary communities and had a knack for boiling down the dense subject of sanitation to snappy prose. John Chapman, the editor of the radical magazine *Westminster Review*, wrote upon meeting him that he was 'superior to the average of literary men as much in his moral tone as he is in literary power'.¹⁵ Even an unflattering sketch in a hostile pamphlet could not deny his command of words, describing him as an 'able writer, a persevering speaker, or rather reciter of his own pamphlets, with a special talent for claptrap phrases, and faculty of rapidly acquiring and employing, when addressing an uneducated audience, the technicalities or hard words of any science'. (*Engineers*, p. 85) Another article rather sneeringly referred to his 'parrot-like phrases'.¹⁶ These 'claptrap phrases' however had an important part to play in bringing the unwieldy subject of London's sanitation under authorial and political control.

¹⁴ 'Metropolitan Sanitary Association', *Leader*, 12 June 1852, p. 10.

¹⁵ Quoted in *The George Eliot Letters: Volume 1*, p. 366n.

¹⁶ 'Notes upon passing events', *Journal of Gas Lighting, Water Supply, and Sanitary Improvement*, 21 October 1862, pp. 649–651 (p. 650).

According to Hamlin, the 1850s and 60s were dominated by rhetoric which sought ‘to demonstrate that the laws of Nature were indeed consistent with the goals of Victorian civilization and the sanitary options available to Victorian cities’.¹⁷ Likewise, in the late 1840s and early 50s, Chadwick’s project was propelled by a rhetorical campaign which framed his sanitary vision as both natural and necessary. The arterial-venous system succinctly aligned the infrastructure of sewers with the human body. Thomas Osbourne writes that the ‘hydraulic infrastructure was itself conceived naturalistically [...] sewers, drains, privies and the water supply were also “organic”, in that they coupled themselves directly and literally to the vital economy of the body’.¹⁸ But who was involved in this coupling? What were the terms of this corporealization and organisation of urban space? In historical and literary analyses of London’s sanitary revolution, the basis of its rhetoric is often taken for granted. Erik Swyngedouw, for example, writes that:

Just as William Harvey redefined the body by postulating the circulation of the blood, so Chadwick redefined the city by “discovering” its needs to be constantly washed [...] The health of the body became the comparison against which the greatness of cities and states was to be measured. The “veins” and “arteries” of the new urban design were to be freed from all possible sources of blockage.¹⁹

In fact, Chadwick’s own reference to a ‘arterial-venous’ system, or even the idea that the sewers could be imagined as veins or arteries would only appear in writing as late as 1880 – some decades after this language had already been embedded in sanitary rhetoric as cliché. I want to suggest that the metaphorisation of London’s sanitary system as a circulating body, an expanding network of arteries and veins, was distilled by the literary and political works of Ward. He was engaged in a conscious effort to represent Chadwick’s sanitary system as a natural and indivisible whole. Tracking Ward’s writings on sanitation in the late 1840s and 1850s, we can see how this language developed, iterated, reproduced, and was used experimentally as a tool of political power.

¹⁷ Christopher Hamlin, ‘Providence and Putrefaction: Victorian Sanitarians and the Natural Theology of Health and Disease’, *Victorian Studies*, 28 (1985), 381 – 411 (p. 391).

¹⁸ Thomas Osbourne, ‘Security and vitality: drains, liberalism and power in the nineteenth century’, in *Foucault and political reason: Liberalism, neo-liberalism and rationalities of government*, ed. by Andrew Barry et al. (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 113 – 114.

¹⁹ Erik Swyngedouw, ‘Metabolic Urbanization: The Making of Cyborg Cities’, in *In the Nature of Cities: Urban Political Ecology and the Politics of Urban Metabolism*, ed. by Nikolas C. Heynen and others (Abington: Routledge, 2006), pp. 21 – 40 (p. 32).

Mary Poovey explains why the anthropomorphisation of the city was important in shaping the limits of political action: ‘it would be naïve to imagine that the conceptualization of urban space – especially by those powerful enough to implement solutions – did not affect the way that problems were identified and experienced’.²⁰ She goes on to argue that social reformers and social investigators of the 1830s and 40s read the city as a ‘social body’ which could be dissected and analysed with a degree of scientific disinterestedness. (Poovey, p. 75) Using James Phillips Kay’s 1832 *The Moral and Physical Condition of the Working Classes in Manchester* as an example, she states that the generalisation of the poor into the social body formalised a method of looking into the body through statistical analyses and minute inspection of public and private spaces by governmental authorities. (Poovey, pp. 82 – 83) But even through this approach, there were impediments to complete insight. Kay writes:

The disease of the body politic is not superficial, and cannot be cured, or even temporarily relieved, by any specific: its sources are unfortunately remote, and the measures necessary to the removal of its disorders include serious questions on which great difference of opinion prevails.²¹

Though Kay would conclude that education was the foremost remedy to the conditions of the poor, this was rooted in an ideology of individualism and self-betterment, where the poor are taught ‘that they are in great measure the architects of their own fortune; that what others can do for them is trifling indeed, compared to what they can do for themselves’. (Kay, p. 62) In this way, he placed responsibility onto the poor whilst simultaneously obscuring them within the aggregate of the ‘social body’. Poovey explains this conflict through Kay’s deployment of language of a science which could not yet provide guidelines for intervention: because the ‘operations of the organs were still imperfectly understood, the image of the social body could not help reformers address issues of when and how to interfere in a social process that seemed increasingly out of control’. (Poovey, p. 75)

By imagining the solutions to London’s sanitary problems as altering the architecture of the social body itself rather than as a medical intervention *in* the body, Ward sidestepped this issue entirely. In conceptualising the city as a circulating body, its maladies were narrowly defined as stagnation and the failure of the city to properly organ-ise. This put emphasis on the need for bureaucratic and sanitary consolidation – the city expressing itself in the terms of a ‘normative’

²⁰ Mary Poovey, *Making a Social Body: British Cultural Formation 1830 – 1864* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 74. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

²¹ James Phillips Kay, *The Moral and Physical Condition of the Working Classes in Manchester* (London: James Ridgway, 1832), p. 6. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

human body. However, it didn't allow space for solutions which dealt with treating specific populations, nor solutions which were not a totalising and harmonious system. Everything had to become integrated into the circulating city.

Circulation bound the disparate nodes of the city into one cohesive organism. What was once a disorganised mass of pipes, sewers and excrement could now express what Didier Gille describes as an 'urban unity'.²² Engaging with one of Ward's speeches he argues that the logic of the nineteenth-century hygienist movement can be boiled down to a simple opposition between circulation and stagnation. This fundamentally changed the way of conceptualising urban intervention: previous attempts at curing public health were characterised as dealing with 'potions, remedies, panaceas'. Now, it was instead all a matter of 'law, principle and structure'. (Gille, p. 235) Chadwick announced a similar shift in his 1842 report:

[...] the great preventives, drainage, street and house cleansing by means of supplies of water and improved sewerage, and especially the introduction of cheaper and more efficient modes of removing all noxious refuse from the towns, are operations for which aid must be sought from the science of the Civil Engineer, not from the physician, who has done his work when he had pointed out the disease that results from the neglect of proper administrative measures, and has alleviated the sufferings of the victims.²³

In private correspondence, he was yet more critical of the role of the physician, writing that public health required 'applications of science of engineering of which medical men know nothing'.²⁴ Chadwick saw the sources of urban malady as the absence of a sanitary structure, a structure which the Civil Engineer alone could install in the social organism. Instead of the physician treating the individual bodies that made up the city, the arterial-venous system could theoretically deal with death and disease in one fell swoop. Ironically, it was the body of London's Civil Engineers who had the most violent reaction against Chadwick's plans. Both he and Ward miscalculated how the high-flown rhetoric of laws, principles and structures clashed with their need for hard data and empirical observation.

²² Didier Gille, 'Maceration and Purification', trans. by Bruce Benderson, in *Zone 1/2: The Contemporary City*, ed. by Michel Feher and Sanford Kwinter (New York: Zone Books, 1986), pp. 226 – 281 (p. 231). Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

²³ Edwin Chadwick, *Report on The Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Population of Great Britain*, ed. by M. W. Flinn (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1965), p. 396.

²⁴ Quoted in Anthony Brundage, *England's "Prussian Minister": Edwin Chadwick and the Politics of Government Growth, 1832 – 1854* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1988), p. 84.

Parisian Sewers, Vile Bodies

Ward's unfolding image of the sewer as a body was preceded by a trend amongst French writers to corporealize the Parisian sewers. In *Les Misérables*, Victor Hugo famously depicted the sewers of the 1830s as a hideous mirror of the city above: 'Paris had underneath it another Paris, a Paris of sewers, which has streets, its crossroads, its squares, its blind alleys, its arteries and its circulation – of muck, that is – without the human dimension'.²⁵ It was the city's hidden underside: 'fetid, feral, fearsome, steeped in darkness, its flagstones and walls scarred and gashed, horrendous'. (Hugo, p. 1137) Here organicism was odious and irrational: a vomiting, belching, leaking diseased organ.²⁶

Although it is tempting to read the Parisian sewers in contrast to the altogether more wholesome circulatory body of the London sewers, David L. Pike reminds us of the reciprocal exchange of sanitary language over the Channel: 'Even within middle-class representations, it was common for Parisian writers to adapt London models to their city, and vice versa.'²⁷ Erin O' Connor's analysis of the representation of London's sewers reveals that British commentators were also inclined to read the sewers as a diseased digestive body leaking out pollutants and other putrid emanations.²⁸ 'The sewer', the physician William Budd wrote in 1856, 'may be looked upon [...] as a direct continuation of the diseased intestine.'²⁹ However, this kind of language was the exception rather than the rule in the 1850s, and a different kind of criticism was levied at hypothetical sewerage plans. In 1849, one *Times* columnist criticised Chadwick's plans on the basis that they simply shifted waste from one locality to another. They continued:

Conceive, if possible, a human being, provided with a stomach and the proper organs of digestion – only destitute of the usual channels by which the stomach is emptied and replenished! Such, and many similar comparisons force themselves upon the mind when listening to one of Mr. Chadwick's expositions of drainage. Active and restless as his

²⁵ Victor Hugo, *Les Misérables*, trans. by Christine Donougher (London: Penguin, 2013), p. 1128.

²⁶ For more detailed discussion of the corporeal language surrounding Parisian sewers see Donald Reid, *Paris Sewers and Severmen: Realities and Representations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991); David L. Pike, 'Charon's Bark' in *Subterranean Cities: The World beneath Paris and London 1800 – 1945* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), pp. 190 - 269; Matthew Gandy, 'The Paris Sewers and the Rationalization of Urban Space', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 24 (1999), 23 – 44 .

²⁷ David L. Pike, *Subterranean Cities: The World beneath Paris and London 1800 – 1945* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), pp. 246 – 247.

²⁸ Erin O' Connor, *Raw Material: Producing Pathology in Victorian Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), p. 40.

²⁹ William Budd, 'On the Fever at the Clergy Orphan Asylum', *Lancet*, 6 December 1856, pp. 617 – 619 (p. 618).

imagination appears to be, it never wanders beyond the sphere of blocks of 40 or 50 houses and four-inch pipes.³⁰

There was no blood moving through the city's veins, only filthy excrement accumulating within a perverse body. Because this was a body without mouth or anus it was a closed system in which waste could only shift between districts, ultimately widening the influence of its contamination. Vitality, Chadwick's system was not diseased as such, but *unnatural*. In this sense it highlighted how Chadwick's attempts at creating a system modelled on the human body failed. His plans collapsed into a jumble of confused images. Rather than an immense structure stretching from the city to the countryside - a cohesive bodily system - it was a collection of disjointed parts: a narrow pipe or a block of houses, a lone stomach suspended in urban space.

Ward's Literary Beginnings

Frederick Oldfield Ward was born in 1817 into a wealthy upper-middle class family residing in Camberwell. Aged 15, he went to study medicine at King's College Hospital. He excelled academically in this environment, but it also gave him space to indulge in an optimistic youthful spirit of invention and curiosity. One of his most successful creations at this time was a flexible-backed clothes brush, which he duly patented. (Years later, this led his critics to dismiss him as a simple 'brush-inventor'.)³¹ In 1838 came his first published work: *Outlines of Human Osteology*. This compact book was written as a revision-aid to other students, who in his words could inform themselves (or refresh their knowledge) on the structure of the human skeleton and its relation to the body's organs, muscles, nerves and arteries. This could have been a dry manual, but even at this early stage Ward's literary aptitude was evident. In this text, the skull became 'the very citadel [...] of life', the hand a 'powerful organ of expression' or 'minister of subtle volitions'.³² One review in the *British Medical Journal* praised its 'clearness of description, beauty of language and philosophical thought'.³³ The text was popular enough that by 1876 it was in its third print edition.

Ward practised for a short while as a surgeon in Surrey, but his varied interests soon took him elsewhere. Reportedly, his private wealth gifted him the privilege to 'devote his time and talents to literature and science, and to sanitary reform'.³⁴ Ward's first flirtation with literary writing was

³⁰ 'The report of yesterday's proceedings', *The Times*, 21 September 1849, p. 4.

³¹ 'Sanitary Reform and Sanitary Reformers', *Journal of Gas Lighting, Water Supply, and Sanitary Reform*, 10 December 1855, pp. 265 – 267 (p. 267).

³² Frederick Oldfield Ward, *Outlines of Human Osteology* (London: Henry Renshaw, 1838), p. 158; p. 353.

³³ 'Review of *Outlines of Human Osteology*', *The British Medical Journal*, 126 (1859), p. 430.

³⁴ 'An Anonymous Pamphleteer v. Mr. F. O. Ward', *Morning Chronicle* (1801), 10 December 1855, p. 5.

through his good friend Thomas Hood and *Hood's Magazine and Comic Miscellany*. Ward contributed a number of whimsical, though unremarkable articles to the journal, and later acted as its editor during Hood's ultimately fatal illness.³⁵ It is probably through his editorship that he first came into contact with prominent figures in London's literary community. This included Charles Dickens, Robert Browning and Richard Moncton Milnes, all of whom he persuaded to contribute to the magazine.³⁶ Though Hood was initially grateful for Ward's help, he was somewhat irked by his attempts to further his own literary career (that of a 'chick in Authorship') through the magazine. He became even more furious when Ward made one of his own articles the leader to one issue, above more established writers. (*Hood's Letters*, p. 642) The two were eventually reconciled on Hood's deathbed, and after his death in 1845, Ward acted on behalf of his family in making funeral arrangements and worked to raise funds for his widow and children.³⁷ The American humourist Artemus Ward would later joke that when visiting Hood on his deathbed, Ward would amuse him with 'his adventures in low parts of the metropolis as his capacity as a sanitary commissioner', causing him to reply "Pray desist [...] your anecdotes give me the *back-slum-bago*".³⁸ Though Artemus' editor reported this humorous anecdote as truthful fact, Frederick Oldfield Ward would not become a commissioner until some years after Hood's death.³⁹

Whilst moonlighting as a magazine editor, Ward was also supporting himself by working as a private secretary for the Radical MP Joseph Hume. Hume and Chadwick were both part of a political group pushing for public health reform, so it seems more than likely that Hume effected their first meeting. In 1844, Ward tentatively approached Chadwick by letter, informing him of some of his sanitary inventions: a 'new kind of water closet' and a 'jungle-respirator' for British troops in India.⁴⁰ Though nothing came of these projects, the two struck up a friendship, with Ward becoming increasingly useful to Chadwick as his journalistic career blossomed.

³⁵ Thomas Hood, *The Letter of Thomas Hood*, ed. by Peter F. Morgan (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973), p. 613. Further references to this edition are included after quotations in the text.

³⁶ Ward wrote to a mutual friend of he and Hood's in 1844 admitting that 'I have little experience & connection in the literary world, never having written in a magazine – much less edited one, till I began in March to help Mr Hood'. Quoted in *The Letters of Thomas Hood*, p. 598.

³⁷ Thomas Wemyss Reid, *The Life, Letters, and Friendships of Richard Monckton Milnes, First Lord Houghton, Volume 1* (London: Cassell & Company, 1890), pp. 348 – 390.

³⁸ *Back-slum-bago* was a favourite term of Hood's. *Back slum* was Victorian slang for a 'back alley, or street of poor people', while *lumbago* was a term for rheumatic back pain.

³⁹ Charles F. Browne, *Artemus Ward in London comprising the Letters to "Punch"*, ed. by Edward Peron Hingston (London: John Camden Hotten, 1870), p. 88.

⁴⁰ Frederick Oldfield Ward, 'Letter to Edwin Chadwick, 11 September 1844', London, University College London, Chadwick Papers, CHADWICK/2055/1.

In 1848, Ward found himself caught up in the frenzy of post-revolutionary France. Clare Pettitt tracks how Ward and others visited France with the expectation of witnessing, and performing in, the theatrical spectacle of revolution. Along with a collection of other young middle- and upper-class men including the poet Arthur Hugh Clough, American transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson, industrialist William Forster and his good friend Milnes, he rambled around tumultuous Parisian streets with a reckless energy: pushing his way, sometimes quite literally, to the centre of the action.⁴¹ Returning to England, Ward was both energised and troubled by the turbulence he witnessed in Paris and by the trend towards further disharmony in Europe more broadly. All this he expressed in an article in *Fraser's Magazine*. After describing the 'great vital energy' and 'painful thrilling' exerted by the body in response to injury, he argued that:

A similar defensive, reparative, and corrective faculty, exists in the human race, considered as a collective being. Accidents and errors bring about a concentration of instinctive forces – social fever and inflammation – by which breaches of the social organism are repaired, vitiated parts purified, those which are gangrened thrown off. These efforts of the social *vis medicatrix* [healing power] are called rebellions and revolutions.⁴²

Revolutions were an inevitable part of the health and growth of the social organism. The concept of the 'social organism' found its roots in the pre-eminent French sociologist Auguste Comte (1798 – 1857). According to his writings, society could be defined as a collective organism, a body of distinct, but co-operating elements or 'organs'. In its most radical sense, this meant that the universe, the human body and society followed innate natural laws which, if violated, would cause disorder. His reflections on the 'revolutionary times' of France clearly foreshadowed Ward's own words: 'These disturbances [i.e. revolutions] are, in the social body, exactly analogous to diseases in the individual organism'.⁴³ But there is something too neat and slick in Ward's reading of 1848: the direct application of bodily function onto political discord, the easy consolidation of disparate European nations into one 'social organism', and his attempt to resolve the revolutions into a simple 'spasmodic disorder'. ('Vestigia Veri', p. 357) In many ways, this article prefigured the approach that Ward was to take towards sanitary reform and the

⁴¹ Clare Pettitt, 'Revolutionary Tourists', in *Serial Revolutions 1848: Writing, Politics, Form* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), pp. 39 – 69.

⁴² Frederick Oldfield Ward, 'Vestigia Veri: Evolution and Revolution', *Fraser's Magazine*, 39 (1849), 355 – 357 (p. 357).

⁴³ Auguste Comte, *The Positive Philosophy of Auguste Comte*, ed. and trans. by Harriet Martineau, 2 vols (New York: D. Appleton & Company, 1854), II, p. 100.

sewers. Later, it would be the city and its infrastructure which became a ‘social organism’ and London’s old sewers the gangrened parts to be excised and discarded.

Although it is difficult to put an exact date on Ward’s first journalistic endeavours, he had begun to write lead articles for the *Times* in 1847.⁴⁴ These were largely pieces on issues of sanitation which incited outrage against Chadwick’s enemies – namely private water companies and supporters of ‘vestryism’. Behind the scenes, Chadwick was aiding Ward by supplying him with information. Ward was adamant that his journalism maintained the momentum of Chadwick’s vision for sanitary reform, writing in a letter ‘We must try to keep alive fears of a recurrence of pestilence, for when this subsides people fall into their old apathy, and begin to attend to other things’.⁴⁵ Chadwick himself was taking a more subtle approach. He had made it clear to Ward that his name should be withheld from his articles to prevent ‘the opportunity of attack on the principle by attacks on the person propounding it’.⁴⁶ Given his expulsion from the MCS, Chadwick was well aware of his current unpopularity in sanitary circles.

Ward was full of righteous anger in the *Times*: ‘We have lately with shame and indignation oppressing us as we wrote, probed to the bottom, as we will probe again and again till they be healed the hideous plague-spots that disgrace the city.’⁴⁷ Ward’s off-hand reference to ‘probing’ unveils a trend towards the medicalisation of urban exploration and restoration. In strictly medical terms, the probe was a long metal instrument with a rounded tip – one among an array of tools available for surgical intervention. The probe would be inserted into the body in the search for subcutaneous abnormalities that would otherwise be inaccessible and undetectable. For the surgeon it was an essential tool for locating illness and reading the body’s interior. Although the probe had long been used by surgeons to search wounds, it became indispensable during the late-eighteenth century when the way medicine was understood and practised underwent a rapid transformation. According to Jean-Charles Sournia, ‘In several decades,

⁴⁴ The earliest *Times* article that I can trace with some certainty back to Ward is ‘One of the most dangerous nuisances’, *The Times*, 20 March 1847, p. 5.

⁴⁵ Frederick Oldfield Ward, ‘Letter to Edwin Chadwick, 28 September 1849’, London, University College London, Chadwick Papers, CHADWICK/2055/10.

⁴⁶ Frederick Oldfield Ward and Edwin Chadwick, *Circulation or Stagnation: being a translation of a paper by F. O. Ward read at the sanitary congress held in Brussels in 1856 on the Arterial and Venous System for the Sanitation of Towns, with a statement of the progress for its completion made since then* (London: Cassell & Company, 1881), p. 8. Further references to this edition are included after quotations in the text.

Though the title suggests that this is a translation of a speech made in 1856. Ward did indeed address the International Congress of Hygiene in 1856 with a paper on the same subject, the untranslated version of Chadwick’s publication was published in 1852.

⁴⁷ Frederick Oldfield Ward, ‘Of all the appalling and terrible facts ...’, *The Times*, 11 October 1849, p. 4. Further references to this article are included after quotations in the text.

Like most articles in the *Times*, this article did not disclose its author. However, several phrases such as ‘their jaws hanging open, their glassy eyes unclosed’ and ‘grasping water company’ appear in Ward’s other writings.

disease became something different, it was no longer a subject of discussion, but of material observation'.⁴⁸ Disease was no longer identified and defined by a collection of symptoms expressed on the body's surface (rashes, fever, lesions), but morbid events *within* the body. The French physician Xavier Bichat (1771 – 1802) visualised the body and its organs as a collage of tissues which could exhibit disorder. Consequently, the body was a text which could be read, interpreted and excavated to reveal a subtext which spoke plainly of the body's illnesses.

A new form of looking was therefore required to diagnose the body. Foucault defines this as the 'medical gaze'. This, he writes, 'must see the illness spread before it, horizontally and vertically in graded depth, as it penetrates into the body, as it advances into its bulk, as it circumvents or lifts its masses, as it descends into its depths.'⁴⁹ Lifting, descending, plunging and penetrating, this gaze did not simply narrate the body, but formed and shaped meaning *in* the body. The revolution in medical diagnosis was followed in the mid-nineteenth century by a similar recalibration of social investigation. This produced a genre Poovey calls 'anatomical realism', which was predicated on an epistemology that 'located truth in dark recesses'. (Poovey, p. 74) Particular emphasis was placed on empirical observation of the social body, which in turn impelled the social investigator to penetrate the underbelly of the city, just as surgeons cut through the flesh of the body to reach its interior. Poovey argues that eyewitness reports and statistical tables were two key representational strategies of the genre. Adapted from the science of anatomy, they stabilised the relationship between the social investigator and the investigated, and validated the curative measures they deemed necessary to bring the city back to a state of health.

Ward took a more literal approach to this kind of anatomical realism. If the surgeon was impelled to seek out the interior of the body, Ward passed over the symptoms of urban disease expressed on the city's surface to seek out their underlying causes. Why focus on the 'hideous plague spots that disgrace the city': the 'squalid occupants of the city courts', the 'infected poor' and the corpses found piled up like 'so many dead dogs on a dunghill' when one could turn one's gaze to the failing sewerage beneath the streets? 'Chelsea Water Company', Ward wrote with disgust, 'pumps from the river Thames *hard by the mouth of Ranelagh sewer*, and which (to call a spade a spade) is really little better than diluted excrement.' (*The Times*, 11 Oct 1849) Like a patient under the scalpel, the city was a passive subject who was in dire need of radical surgery. But here Ward deftly slides between the act of writing and medical intervention. Probing here

⁴⁸ Jean-Charles Sournia, *Histoire de la médecine* (Paris: Editions La Découverte, 1992), p. 219.

⁴⁹ Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic*, trans. by A. M. Sheridan (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 136.

was an insistent, recursive type of description which opened up the city's dark and hidden subterranea. As we will see however, this sleight of hand could only take him so far.

Making the Sewers a Body

Ward was fired up by the responses garnered by his articles in the *Times*. 'I hope you will not think me proud or wrong for mentioning this further fact', he wrote to the *Times*' manager Mowbray Morris, 'but I was assured (and I think not for flattery's sake but *bona fide*) that our sanitary articles have attracted special notice and are producing an extension of the sanitary power'.⁵⁰ Ward would later use this as evidence that he deserved more than the (he thought pitiful) five guineas he received for each article. His journalism was refuelling interest and support for the ideas and plans of the lately expelled Chadwick. In his letter to Morris, Ward gave himself permission to envisage the sanitary development of the city:

The vast subject of the arterial organisation of the metropolis is shaping itself in my mind. I seem to see the intricate subterranean tubes – the heart-like engines – the inward flowing water – the outward *caput mortuum* [worthless remains] – mapping itself underground and beginning to palpitate and live – as when incipient vitality first stirs the sleeping germ within the egg. ('Letter to Mowbray Morris', 16 Oct 1849')

For the first time, Chadwick's sewage system was imagined in bodily terms; it was here that it became an arterial-venous system. Ward represented this, quite literally, as a moment of conception. The dashes signalled an impatient enthusiasm, as they string together the system's components and assembled them into one cohesive body. The sewers radiated out beneath London's streets by their own vitality. The sewage system gestated and matured on its own, conveniently eliding the tedious and difficult work of planning and construction. Embedded in the construction of this metaphor was a mystification and erasure of its origins. This was a new way of conceptualising sewers, of making them a self-enclosed system existing outside of human intervention. It was necessary that the planned sewage system appear to be self-evident, natural, justified: disconnected from the dirty business of hubristic Chadwickian enterprise. In imagining London's subterranean through the theatre of discovery, it could be made to serve the ideological and political needs of the sanitarian movement. London's chaotic subterranean landscape could become organ-ised.

⁵⁰ Letter to Mowbray Morris, October 16, 1849, quoted in 'Pioneers of Osteology: Frederick Oldfield Ward' in *Journal of Bone and Joint Surgery*, Nov 1949, Volume 31-B, Issue 4. Further references are included after quotations in the text.

The arterial-venous system came into maturity in a two-part series of articles written for the Tory journal the *Quarterly Review*: ‘Metropolitan Water Supply’, published in September 1850, and ‘Sanitary Consolidation’ which followed soon after in March 1851. Despite their admittedly drab titles, these articles performed an important literary function in codifying a way of analysing, mapping and re-imagining the city as a unified whole. They were an immense project which included everything from evidence from governmental reports, scientific experimental findings, vivid descriptions of London’s failing sanitary system and attempts at Comtian reasoning. Over 93 dense pages Ward vigorously argued for the centralisation of London’s water suppliers and sewer commissions – two projects which would be necessary for the application of the arterial-venous system. Buzzing with enthusiasm, Ward sent a draft to Dickens to proof-read. Dickens promptly replied giving some suggestions on the flow of its prose: ‘I think it would be infinitely better thus ...’⁵¹. Notably, none of Dickens’ suggestions made their way into the final printed article.

The latter article ‘Sanitary Consolidation’ was particularly well received. John Chapman, impressed by its literary approach and political tone went to call on him at his home in Mayfair with the aim of persuading him to write for the *Leader*. Chapman found Ward ‘a young handsome man’ though he was ‘complaining of feeble health and exhaustion the result of his labors’.⁵² Ward politely rebuffed Chapman’s request on account of him putting all of his energies into the ‘improvement of the physical condition of the people’. George Eliot on the other hand, who presumably met Ward through Chapman, slyly referred to him as a ‘man of the Sewers’.⁵³

‘Water Supply’ and ‘Sanitary Consolidation’ were intended to coincide with the publication of yet another hefty Chadwick-led Blue Book from the Board of Health: *Report on the Supply of Water to the Metropolis* (1850). This made the familiar arguments for consolidation, but rather than the Sewer Commissions, now it was for London’s Water Companies. Chadwick proposed that they should be bought out and brought under the control of centralised government. In addition, instead of being drawn from the Thames, new fresh water sources would be found to supply filtered and purified soft water to the urban population. This was another vital step in unifying

⁵¹ Charles Dickens, *The British Academy / Pilgrim Editions of the Letters of Charles Dickens, Volume 6: 1850 – 1852*, ed. by Nina Burgis and others (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 338.

Dickens wrote had suggested Ward change; or a hand to straighten their cramp-gnarled limbs; or decently to close, when dead, their staring eyes’ (‘Sanitary Consolidation’, p. 453) to “or a hand to straighten their cramp-gnarled limbs, or decently to close their staring eyes when they are dead.”

⁵² Gordon S. Haight, *George Eliot & John Chapman with Chapman’s Diaries* (North Haven: Archon Books, 1969), pp. 206 – 207.

⁵³ George Eliot, *The George Eliot Letters*, ed. by Gordon Sherman Haight (New Haven: Yale University Press), p. 366.

the metropolis and laying the groundwork for a unified, harmonious arterial-venous system.⁵⁴ Chadwick anticipated that this report would set off a political storm and put the arrangements of the struggle against the water companies into Ward's hands. (Lewis, pp. 393 – 394)

Ward was mindful about his approach to this issue. In March 1851 he had written to Chadwick, 'We must, I think, take care not to let Consolidation slip from our grasp, by raising too violent an opposition from local government' [his emphasis].⁵⁵ Supporters of the old parish sewer commissions were still smarting from their sudden dissolution only three years earlier. Ward was well aware that calls for centralisation could appear to advocate stripping the individuals of autonomy. Toumlin Smith had recently published *Local Self-Government and Centralisation* (1851), which had called centralisation 'that system of Government under which the smallest number of minds, and those knowing the least, and having the fewest opportunities of knowing it, about the special matter in hand, and having the smallest interest in its well-working, have the management of it, or control over it.'⁵⁶ In 'Water Supply' and 'Sanitary Consolidation', Ward appealed to a naturalist paternalism and Comtian rationality. Consolidation of the Water Companies and Parish Sewer Commissions was logical because it enabled the city (and by extension its sewage system) to be embedded in a pattern of concentric circulations which ran from the slow movements of the 'great kosmos' to the circulatory systems of the smallest animal. This analogy, he wrote, could assimilate 'the water-service of a modern town to the arterial and venous circulation of the human body'.⁵⁷

The loping, cumulative cadences of Ward's arguments speaks to the self-enclosing philosophy of Chadwick's arterial-venous system. So interconnected were the issues of water supply, sanitary consolidation, sewerage construction and sewage removal that one could 'start with any one [of its components] and deduce the others'. (*Chadwick and the Engineers*, p. 685) As such, it is difficult to draw a single thesis out of these articles. Ward initially asserts that he intends to address the critics of the 'sanitary consolidation', but this leads to an unravelling network of interconnected issues. For Ward it was impossible to think about water-supply without thinking about centralisation. Centralisation was intrinsically bound to the natural laws on which it was supposedly based. It was impossible to think about the parochial boards without considering the disorganised sewers built under their purview. It was impossible, too, to think about those same

⁵⁴ R. A. Lewis, *Edwin Chadwick & the Public Health Movement* (London: Longman's Green & Company, 1952), p. 258. Further references to this edition are included after quotations in the text.

⁵⁵ Frederick Oldfield Ward, 'Letter to Edwin Chadwick, 16 March 1850', London, University College London, Chadwick Papers, CHADWICK/2055/93.

⁵⁶ Joshua Toumlin Smith, *Local Self-Government and Centralization* (London: John Chapman, 1851), p. 12.

⁵⁷ Frederick Oldfield Ward, 'Metropolitan Water Supply', *Quarterly Review*, 87 (1850), 468 – 488 (p. 487).

sewers without seeing them as an emblem of London's diseased body. It was impossible to see this diseased body and not suggest a cleaner more perfect circulating arterial-venous system in its stead. The article operates under a fundamentally circulatory logic. Ward slickly slides between subjects, to the extent that it is difficult to know when one begins or ends. Each one of its points is both a point of departure and a conclusion. The end of 'Sanitary Consolidation' only arrives, it seems, by the arbitrary intervention of the author: 'Here we are content to stop'.⁵⁸ But have we indeed stopped? As a conclusion, Ward still has to take us through a dry recapitulation of each one of his points, complete with laboured attempts to demonstrate their connection to one another. It is a piece of writing which didn't know how or when to stop.

Accessing the Body

If the city was indeed a circulating body, then London was sick. Its urban body was diseased, full of canker, and choked with stagnant blood. It was 'what Naturalists would call a monstrosity'. ('Consolidation', p. 467) The choleric body, with all of its disorderliness and disorganisation, was transposed onto the city. This laid the groundwork for an essentially organic solution. 'Sanitary Consolidation' culminates at the point where Ward declares himself a 'sanitary surgeon' and draws a scalpel through the surface of the city's streets, laying it bare for analysis and criticism. It was the natural progression from the 'probing' of his 1849 *Times* article. Here, he didn't just claim to produce knowledge about London's hidden spaces but proposed a complete reorganisation of the city's subterranea.

As we will see, there was a political impetus to see the city through the anatomical gaze in its three-dimensional depth and breadth. In 'Sanitary Consolidation', as in his *Times* article, Ward quickly passes over superficial signs of disease (this time in a slum of St. Giles): 'It does not fall within our present scope to dwell on the obscenity and crime engendered by this brutal herding of a promiscuous and fluctuating multitude, comprising males and females and adults, the innocent and the depraved, pressed together, by night, in a way which renders privacy impossible, and breaks down every barrier to lust'. Fused into one ugly mass, an *unsanitary* consolidation, the poor were nothing but a 'plague-spot' staining the skin of the city. Ward continues, 'Our business lies, not with the palpable outgrowth of this misery, but with its deeply-planted roots; and for these roots we must grope underground.' ('Consolidation', p. 478) Unlike Kay's uncertain and equivocal approach to curing the social body, for Ward the sewers functioned as easily identifiable anatomical features which could be diagnosed and treated. They

⁵⁸ Frederick Oldfield Ward, 'Sanitary Consolidation', *Quarterly Review*, 88 (1851), 435 – 492 (p. 490). Further references to this article are included after quotations in the text.

held to key to urban health. If the sewers were set in order then these plague-spots, naturally, would be eradicated.

Though the turn to the sewers promised a concrete and scientifically based plan for sanitary bodies to follow and execute, Ward's exploration of London's subterranean landscape posed an epistemological challenge. The metropolis' sewage system, concealed beneath streets, buildings and layers of earth could only be accessed by dangerous expeditions into the sewers or destructive and disruptive excavations from above. The old sewers remained a mystery – even to those who were working towards their reconstruction. Information about them was scant. In 'Sanitary Consolidation', Ward cited and relied heavily on the patchy data compiled in the MCS's 1849 *Report on the Subterranean Condition of the Westminster District* as a basis for his surgical exploration of the sewers. However, because the lack of empirical data prohibited a more conventional type of social investigation, one leaning on eyewitness reports and statistics, Ward turned to the theatrical display of social investigation which fused the role of the surveyor, surgeon, social investigator and writer.



Figure 2.1: 'London and its Environs'. Map produced for the Commission of Sewers c. 1850

The MCS subterranean survey attempted to trace the course of the city's sewers and empirically analyse their conditions.

However, the project was marred by failure. The small workforce and the difficult conditions meant that progress was slow. Even by 1855, seven years after it had begun, only Westminster had been mapped. The survey was quietly abandoned when the MCS was superseded by the Board of Works. The hostile environment

and unruliness of the sewers had prevailed. However, in 'Sanitary Consolidation', the MCS's failure to map the sewers was corrected by Ward's attempts to bring London's subterranean under surgical and authorial control.

This survey came at the height of the cartographic boom of the mid-nineteenth century which sought to bring the landscape under the power of an objective and scientific gaze.⁵⁹ 1842 saw the beginning of the Ordnance Survey mapping towns and cities across England and Wales in a new larger scale of six inches to the mile. The Ordnance Survey Commission was granted considerable resources and powers to bring the project to completion. Thousands of surveyors were discharged with explicit parliamentary permission to enter private properties, even those of disgruntled landowners. Individual houses, roads, private fences and even trees were reproduced in a flattened miniature form.

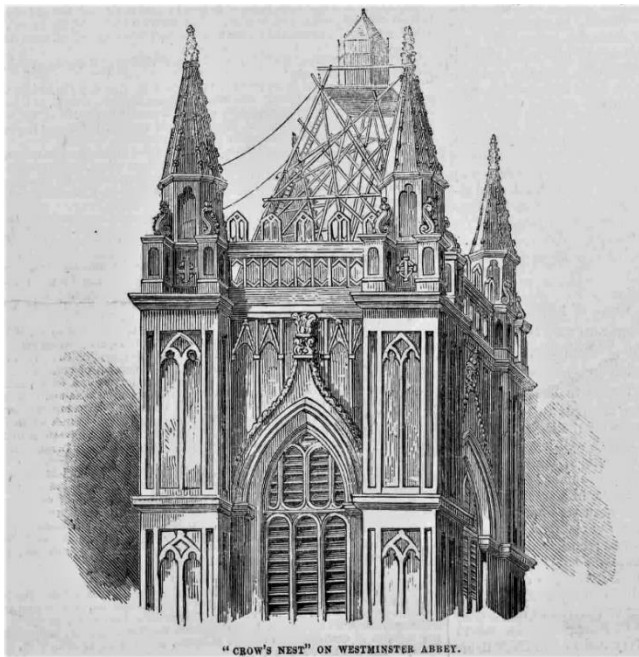


Figure 2.2: Illustration of an observation tower on Westminster Abbey. From the *Illustrated London News*, 22 April 1848

In 1847, Chadwick declared that the Ordnance Commission should produce another map of London, but this time in the extraordinarily large scale of five foot to the mile. The city's alleys, streets and levels were to be rendered in painstaking detail. 'The importance of system in laying down drains at proper levels cannot be too strongly enforced' he told the press.⁶⁰ This kind of scientific mapping created a rational surface on which the planning of the sewage system could be built. It was initially met with resistance from members of Parliament and even members of the

MCS. Surveys of London already existed (albeit in piecemeal) and another map would be a costly and unnecessary expense. Nevertheless, in September 1848, a Public General Act was passed which authorised the MCS to proceed with their plans.⁶¹ In triangulating London for the Commission, huge observation towers were erected on tall buildings around the city. Dubbed 'crow's nests', they were objects of curious interest for many Londoners (figure 2.2). Their presence, the *Illustrated London News* wrote, was a harbinger of 'great and glorious changes from which must spring much physical, and moral improvement of the people'.⁶² From the vantage point of these towers, the Ordnance surveyors could claim the wide expanse of the city around

⁵⁹ Pamela K. Gilbert, *Mapping the Victorian Social Body* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), p. 10.

⁶⁰ Quoted in John Timbs, *The Year-Book of Facts, in Science and Art* (London: David Bogue, 1848), p. 7.

⁶¹ *A Compendious Abstract of the Public General Acts of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland: 11 Victoria, 1847 – 1848* (London: E. B. Ince, 1848), p. 227.

⁶² 'Survey of the Metropolis', *Illustrated London News*, 22 April 1848, p. 259.

them as territory for the British Government. The maps flattened and sanitised the city, reducing grand streets and slums alike to neat rows of uniform rectangles.

The same year Chadwick also proposed his intention that the London Survey would have an underground counterpart. It would plot the positions of existing sewers, examine their conditions and eventually generate comprehensive maps detailing drainage under streets and the narrow capillary-like drains leading from individual homes. The Westminster Commission of Sewers already had plans showing the mains sewers running through the parish but these were sparse on information. Smaller sewers were not mapped at all and vital information such as the sewer's levels and their direction of flow was provided inconsistently. For other London parishes, no accurate maps existed at all. The problem was especially bad south of the river, where in the wake of flooding in 1849 surveyors had to blindly dig up roads in search of the sewers beneath.⁶³ Therefore, a new subterranean survey was a requisite step in gaining control over London's unclaimed subterranean territory, allowing it to be overwritten by a new sewage system. Though this was the intention, Paul Dobraszczyk rightly notes that 'Unlike the view from above, which placed the city's substratum at a safe and clean distance, the view from below positively revelled in the dirt and chaos of subterranean space'.⁶⁴ Underground, the scientific disinterestedness of the Ordnance Survey collapsed under the repugnant nature of the task.

A small team of ten men were appointed to undertake the surveying of the sewers, which included two levellers, two labourers and two marksmen. They were led by Joseph Smith, the chief surveyor of the MCS and Henry Austin, the Commission's consulting engineer. The investigation of the sewers would begin with identifying a point of entry, usually a manhole. The leveller would then descend from here into the darkness below, armed with a lamp and theodolite, an instrument which precisely measured the horizontal and vertical angles of the surrounding area. In the leveller's workbooks, the readings from the theodolites would be recorded along with sketches of sewers, comments about their conditions and sketches of the streets above.

This was not easy work, as Austin made sure to highlight in the introduction to the survey's initial report:

⁶³ London, London Metropolitan Archives, MCS/497, *Metropolitan Commission of Sewers: Subterranean Survey of Sewers 1848 – 1842*.

⁶⁴ Paul Dobraszczyk, 'Mapping Sewer Spaces in mid-Victorian London', in *Dirt: New Geographies of Cleanliness and Contamination*, ed. by Ben Campkin and Rosie Cox (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2007), pp. 123 – 136 (p. 131).

The Surveyors find great difficulty in levelling the sewers of this district; for in the first place the deposit is usually about two feet in depth, and in some cases it amounts to nearly five feet of putrid matter. The smell is usually of the most horrible description, the air being so foul that explosions and choke damp are very frequent. On the 12th January we were very nearly losing a whole party by choke damp, the last man being dragged out on his back (through two feet of black foetid deposit) in a state of insensibility. Another explosion took place on the 12th February, in the Peckham and Camberwell Road Sewer; in both cases the men had the skin peeled off their faces and their hair singed. Two men of one party also had a narrow escape from drowning in the Alscot Road Sewer, Rotherhithe, of the 24th instant, but fortunately none of the foregoing cases have been attended with serious damage.⁶⁵

Although the Ordnance Survey surveyors faced disgruntled landowners, difficult terrain or uncertain boundaries between properties, the subterranean surveyors had to traverse an inherently hostile landscape. With choke damp (accumulations of asphyxiating gases) rendering the air thick and smothering, excremental sludge slowing progress to a crawl and eruptions of gas frequent, the old sewers epitomised the deadly consequences of stagnation. The body of the underground explorer could easily be overwhelmed and submerged in the city's feculence. Austin depicted the descent into the sewers as a descent into the underworld, a submersion in Stygian mud. The surveyor's perilous infiltration of London's subterranea was like the painful incision of a surgeon's scalpel preceding the social body's restoration to health.

The report that followed this introduction was unremittingly bleak, though it took a more methodological approach in describing the conditions of the sewers. One sewer under Upper Brook Street was described thus:

Sewer is in a crumbling state, having several breaches (one to the extent of feet in length from the crown to the invers), the rubbish of which half fills up the sewer. The bricklayer expresses his astonishment that it stands. (*Survey*, p. 15)

In another sewer under Gray's Inn Court, the report state that they were 'too small, too filthy, and decayed to be traversed'. (*Survey*, p. 11) This was only one example of many sewers which were impossible to survey. Even more sewers did not appear in the report at all. A note preceding the report warned readers that 'a great number of sewers cannot yet be levelled in consequence of the great depth of deposit'. (*Survey*, p. 3) If the British government sought to

⁶⁵ London, London Metropolitan Archives, MCS/477/031, *Subterranean Survey of the Westminster District*, p. 1.

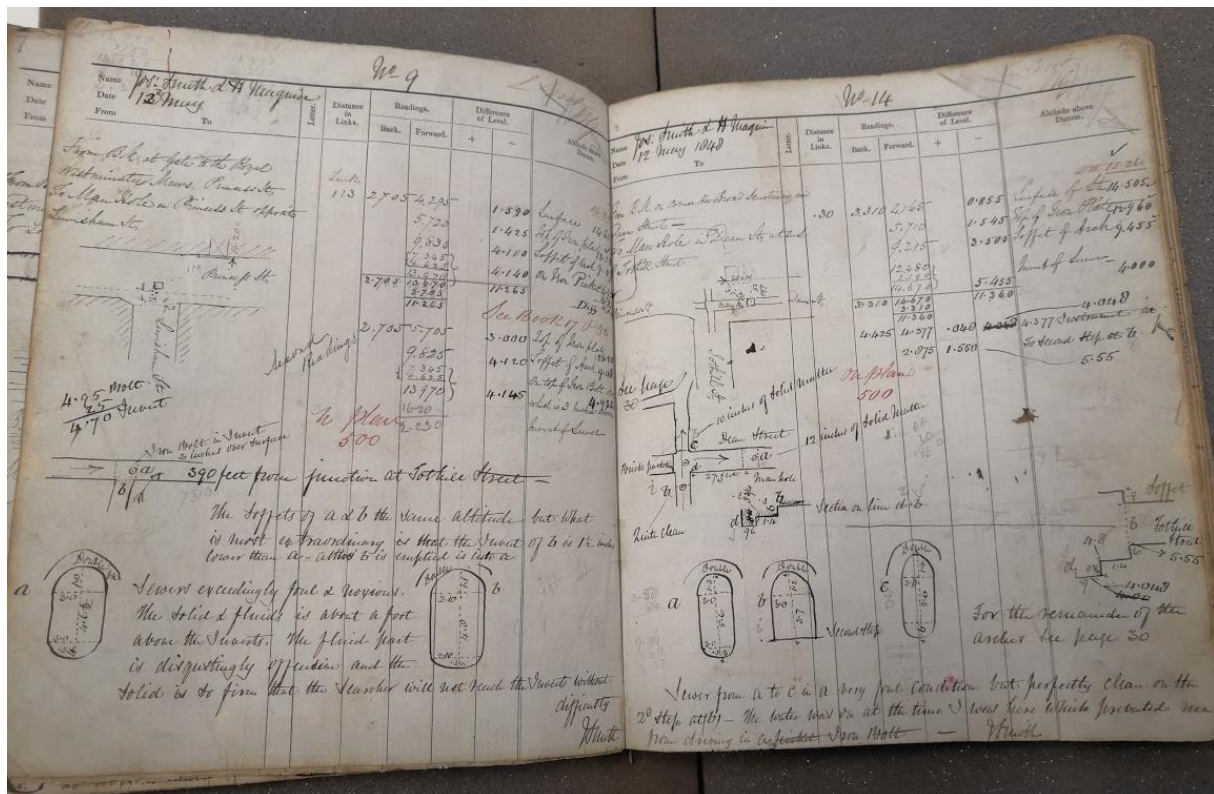


Figure 2.3: Pages from leveller's workbook for the Subterranean Survey in the Westminster district. London Metropolitan Archives, MCS/498/003

make the social organism legible, this process broke down when opening up its underbelly. Reading through the report meant lurching from the scene of one sordid sewer to another rather than following the route of the surveyors through the city's pipes. In highlighting its own omissions, its points of failure, the report constructed an image of a subterranean London which was an ensemble of parts that could not be resolved into a coherent and legible whole. The urban body fractured right at the moment of representation and re-interpretation.

In 1852, at a meeting of the General Board of Health, one of the matters of the day was a suggestion that workers could be set into the sewer to cleanse them of their deposits. Chadwick opposed this plan on the basis that it contradicted his idea of a continually circulating self-cleansing sewers. The very idea of human intervention was an indictment of the self-enclosed system he had created. He asserted that this kind of labour would be 'improper for human beings to perform [...] Putting men to crawl or creep through channels filled with foul ordure, and to breath noxious gases is one example of such labour'.⁶⁶ To bolster this claim, he turned back to Austin's shocking characterisation of the danger of subterranean exploration. He added:

⁶⁶ 'Minutes of Information collected in respect to the drainage of the land, forming the sites of towns, to road drainage, and the facilitation of the drainage of suburban lands', in *Reports from Commissioners: Ten Volumes. Board of Health, Vol. 19* (London: George E. Eyre and William Spottiswoode, 1852), pp. 1 – 132 (p. 28).

Instances occur of the death of men from the mephitic vapours encountered in this disgusting labour, which are made known to the public, but instances are numerous which are not heard of, where men are rescued in a state of insensibility, and sustain severe and permanent injuries. (*Reports from Commissioners*, p. 28)

The phrase ‘disgusting labour’ exemplifies the struggle to make the sewers a productive space. Slogging through its thick mire, putting oneself at risk of becoming absorbed by the sewers was indicative of its resistance to interpretation. The rational gaze imposed on the city’s surface by the fine black lines of the Ordnance Survey maps could not penetrate the inaccessible underground city. To map the sewers the surveyor could not raise themselves up on crow’s nests looking from a distance onto the city. Rather they had to undergo a process of violent embodiment. ‘Disgusting labour’ isn’t simply a matter of the one’s repulsion to the sewers, but the sewer’s repulsion of those who dared to venture into and civilise its untouched and unclaimed territories. As Winfried Mennighaus states, disgust is a response to the exposure of an interior normally hidden from view: ‘In the realm of the ideally beautiful, when not only the body’s excretions, but literally its inner organs become visible on the outside, what is at play can only be the disgusting in the service of the monstrous or ridiculous.’⁶⁷ The endeavour of making the interior of the city known was subversive in the sense that it demanded one engage with the waste which after leaving the body has been conveniently concealed underground. If the surgeon’s hands must be stained with blood in exposing the interior of the body, the subterranean investigator’s hands must be stained with excrement.

Surgical Intervention

Ward’s attempts at investigating and diagnosing the city’s sewerage were to meet the same epistemological blockages. Just as the subterranean surveyor trudged through the city’s pipes only to be obstructed by untraversable terrain, Ward faced an impasse when tracing the route of London’s water from the pumps of a waterworks (which he likened to a ‘colossal Heart’) to its final destination:

Follow, now, this pulsating current – the life’s blood of the social organism – in its subterranean course through the diminishing branches of the distributary ducts, till at last it flows through a half-inch capillary into the consumer’s house. What becomes of it here? How is it stored for use? What channels are provided for its efflux, when done with, out of the house, and of town? (*Consolidation*, p. 468)

⁶⁷ Winfried Mennighaus, *Disgust: Theory and History of a Strong Sensation*, trans. by Howard Eiland and Jowl Golb (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), p. 55.

The examination of the course of London's water is ultimately frustrated, ending in a cluster of questions. By Ward's logic, because of the city's 'fragmentary regime' of sanitation, these must remain unanswered. ('Consolidation', p. 468) The former parish sewer commissions not only meant that the collection of data was discontinuous and inconsistent but that the representational image of the city was shattered into pieces. Blood did not freely flow through a cohesive system, a single knowable body, but spilled into spaces beyond cartographic control. In delineating the threshold between interior and exterior, surface and subterranea, skin and viscera, this passage plays out the epistemological problem of social investigation: that there are some areas which repel the investigator and resist empirical observation or intervention. Though Ward reflects Austin's complaints in the difficulty of surveying the sewers, his account of London's subterranea bears little resemblance to the latter's fractured report, with all of its omissions and accounts of failure. Rather, in determining the limits of subterranean investigation, Ward sets the stage for a radical method of intervention where the inaccessible and impenetrable parts of the city can be forcibly infiltrated so further analysis can take place.

Only a few lines after his thwarted investigation, Ward declares himself a 'sanitary surgeon' and, brandishing his scalpel, advances into London's depths:

If, indeed, engaging in a new sort of Comparative Anatomy, and practising dissection on a colossal scale, we could with some great scalpel cut across a London street, and bring the severed extremity into direct comparison with the corresponding surface of an amputated arm or leg, two things would chiefly strike us; first, namely, the general structural analogy of the two limbs, individual and social; and secondly the extreme deformity of the latter. ('Consolidation', pp. 468 – 469)

In appropriating the role of the surgeon, Ward puts himself in a position of authority over the body. The hard earth and stone of the city are here transformed into soft vulnerable flesh, material which can be fixed as an object which can be unveiled, dissected and plundered for hidden knowledge. The quick procession from analogy to diagnosis however is telling. In the mode of comparative analysis, the city is made a body so that its disorderliness can be recontextualised as disease. With the city, as it were, laid out in an operating theatre, vague symptoms on the body's surface are revealed as tangible signs of illness within the body.

Specifically, the disordered interior of the choleraic body were superimposed on the city's sewers. Erin O' Connor argues that 'In the minds of physicians and social commentators alike, the choleraic body and the city were coextensive, system of ducts and drains that were run together by the turbid diarrhoea of the cholera victim himself. Shooting out gallons of fluid that, like the

London water supply, was clouded with foreign matter, the choleraic body in turn became a signifier for faulty sewerage.’ (O’ Connor, p. 40) Beyond the external symptoms of vomiting, diarrhoea and cramps however, Victorian physicians characterised cholera as a disease of disordered circulation. The *Lancet* recorded its essential symptoms as the ‘derangement of the nervous and respiratory systems; the pulse failed, animal heat was no longer generated, voluntary strength as exhausted, the venous circulation laboured, and its channels became clogged with black, thickened, and stagnant blood’.⁶⁸ Autopsies revealed a body which was inflamed, distended and congested.

Cutting into London’s streets, Ward found the same morbid signs. Sewers had become ‘monstrously dilated’ and the ‘main veins and arteries of London’ were ‘at present [...] absurdly incongruous’ (‘Consolidation’, p. 470, p. 471) Carrying ‘the scalpel through the house itself, and lay[ing] open with a widened gash the ultimate capillaries of the urban circulating system’ a whole series of new disorders and deformities were revealed. (‘Consolidation’, p. 471) House drains embodied the ‘abnormal dilation of the venous capillary’ and were ‘choked with a pitchy coagulum – like stagnant blood in a cholera-patient’s veins.’ Similarly, Cisterns and cesspools were ‘companion forms of one great evil ... Stagnancy – parent of sanitary ills. [...] They are a sort of abscesses [*sic*] in our social system and their evacuation and removal is the most pressing duty of the sanitary surgeon’. (‘Consolidation’, p. 472). After a dramatic pause, Ward reveals to his readers that stagnancy stands at the heart of London’s ills. After all the articles’ expositions, expansions and extensions of Chadwick’s central idea, it was suddenly reduced to the incantation of that one dogma - circulation.

Compressing the Body

In 1852, Chadwick’s campaign was gathering steam. Under his purview, the Board of Health had sanctioned the construction of pipe sewers in neighbourhoods around London. Seeing this as a threat, civil engineers and members of the MCS mobilised to oppose what they deemed as a flagrant encroachment on their territory and an obstinate adherence to unscientific doctrine. (*Public Health*, p. 320) Ward spent the year frenetically organising and canvassing. Influential figures were invited to breakfasts and dinner parties at his apartment in Cork Street, which was a site of friendly, and sometimes heated, debate and discussion. Herbert Spencer, who had met Ward in 1851, remarked that at these occasions the latter ‘soon found occasion to bring up his favourite topic. The form his talk took was an unstinted laudation of his friend Edwin

⁶⁸ ‘History of the Rise, Progress, Ravages, &c. of the Blue Cholera of India’, *The Lancet MDCCCXXI – XXXII in two volumes. Volume 1*, ed. by Thomas Wakley (London: Mills, Jowett, and Mills, 1832), pp. 241 – 284 (p. 242).

Chadwick'.⁶⁹ Spencer was not entirely convinced by Chadwick's tendency to discard data which did not support his conclusion. This led to an unpleasant experience at another one of these events: 'I foolishly allowed myself to be persuaded to dine last night with Ward, one of the chief sanitary men, to meet Owen and Chadwick, and Rawlinson (late sanitary commissioner in the Crimea), Simon, the sanitary officer of the City of London, and other notables. I had the audacity (to the immense amusement of Owen and other unconcerned guests) to make an attack upon all these sanitary leaders – charging them with garbling evidence, misleading the public, &c. &c. The fight lasted the whole evening, and on two or three occasions I raised an immense laugh at their expense'.⁷⁰

Ward took a similar model *alfresco* in a number of sanitary outings which were remembered as 'amongst the most brilliant and agreeable of the year'.⁷¹ One of these events in the summer of 1852 gathered a 'slew of prominent literary and scientific figures' to Farnham, a small market town on the outskirts of Surrey.⁷² The guest list certainly was diverse: among the group were Robert Browning, Charles Babbage, Herbert Spencer, George Henry Lewes, Charles Kingsley and Richard Monckton Milnes – all friends and acquaintances of Ward. They had been invited for a picnic on the green grounds surrounding the town. But they were there for more than pleasure. They were made players in a performance that was duly reported in all of its theatrical detail across several papers: the *Illustrated News*, the *Morning Chronicle* and the *Leader* but to name a few. Farnham was home to fresh-water springs and was being seriously considered by the Board of Health as a source for London's water. Ward had a sanitary ideology to sell them. First, he performed an experiment before his audience. He mixed water collected from a nearby valley with soap and other chemicals upon which it turned a chalky white, much to the disgust of those present. As a contrast he completed the same trick with hilltop water which remained 'brilliantly pellucid'. After the troop tasted this cool fresh hilltop water for themselves, they took a 'most picturesque and romantic drive' to the ruins of Waverly Abbey where a dinner was spread for them. The centrepiece each table was emphatically described by one newspaper as 'a large "bright water jug" sparkling symbolically in the midst, surrounded by vessels of the same element in the state of ice, from which certain slim, silver-crowned bottles, protruding

⁶⁹ Herbert Spencer, *Facts and Comments* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1901), p. 216.

⁷⁰ Herbert Spencer, *An Autobiography: Volume 1* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1904), p. 545. Spencer was presumably referring to Richard Owen, a biologist and palaeontologist who was involved with London's sanitary reform.

⁷¹ Thomas Archer, *William Ewart Gladstone and his Contemporaries: Fifty Years of Social and Sanitary Progress. Volume 3* (London: Blackie & Son, 1883), p. 2.

⁷² 'Mr. F. O. Ward's Picnic on the Proposed Metropolitan Gathering Grounds.' *The Leader* 28 Aug 1852, p. 818 <https://ncse.ac.uk/periodicals/1/issues/vm2-ncseproduct1949/page/6/articles/ar00601/> [accessed 19 March 2019]

pleasantly'. As entertainment, Ward recounted tales of ancient monks of the Abbey who allegedly had their own waterworks. Ward concluded that he hoped that 'such a bright water jug as then embellished in their repast might sparkle at no distant period on every table in London – from that of our Gracious Queen, who amidst all the luxuries at her disposal, cannot yet command a draught of pure water – down to that of her humblest subject in the meanest alley of the metropolis'. ('Ward's Picnic', p. 818)

This last remark erred on self-plagiarism. In 'Consolidation' Ward observed that 'Nor is our gracious Queen herself, in her sumptuous palaces, exempt from the pressure of these universal evils, not less directly interested than the meanest of her subjects in the question of Structural Consolidation'. ('Consolidation', p. 476) Notably, the script had been subtly altered from a call for the reconstruction of sewers to the provision of fresh water. It is impossible know exactly how much of Ward's speeches on the sanitary circuit made their way into these articles, or indeed how much of the articles would be used in Ward's later works. They were part of a mutating, reiterative dialogue.

That same year Ward, along with Lord Ebrington (a British peer and member of the Metropolitan Sanitary Association) travelled to Brussels to represent Britain at the International Congress of Hygiene. Here sanitarians from around the world gathered to share and debate ideas. Lewes, who was borrowing Ward's apartment whilst he was abroad slyly suggested that his trip involved more than just sanitary matters: 'Of all your public doings in Labassecour I have heard. Your private adventures I hope to hear over snug cigarettes in Cork St. Profitez en, mon ami!' ^{73 74}

At the Congress Ward delivered a speech suggestively titled *Circulation or Stagnation?* Acting under Chadwick's direction back at home, he advocated for his radically new way of managing the city's sanitation. A preface by the editor announced "*Circulation or stagnation?* Such is the neat and concise form in which Mr. F. O. Ward and his colleagues have just put the sanitary question before the Congress of General Hygiene at Brussels'. (*Circulation*, p. 11) The speech was indeed 'neat and concise' in that it sketched out the essence of Chadwick's system in ten short minutes. Ward, rather sheepishly, apologised for the necessary brevity: 'I shall not be able to treat the whole of the subject in one discourse, no even in the sub-sections of the four sections in which we carry on our deliberations'. (*Circulation*, p. 11) The economy of Ward's language meant that all

⁷³ 'Labassecour' was a fictional country based on Belgium in Bronte's *Villette*.

⁷⁴ George Henry Lewes, *The Letters of George Henry Lewes: Volume 1*, ed. by William Baker (Victoria: University of Victoria Press, 1995), p. 227.

technicalities and complexities were supplanted by ‘rapid glance[s]’, generalities and analogy. (*Circulation*, p. 15) The arterial-venous system was compressed and consolidated into a single image. Any loose ends or uncertainties were tidied away.

The structure of the arterial-venous system was already evident in the natural world. Ward made the bold claim that:

the discovery by the immortal Harvey of the circulation which goes on in the individual body has prepared us for the reception of the strictly analogous and fruitful discovery of the circulation of the social body. (*Circulation*, p. 8)

Here, Ward was invoking William Harvey, an early-modern anatomist and royal physician. In his 1628 treatise *de Motu Cordis*, Harvey revealed the discovery that blood circulated around the body in ceaseless and uninterrupted motion. This flew against the long-held theory that blood was produced and consumed by the heart. According to Harvey, the motif of circulation replicated itself through nature – from the cosmic to the microscopic. The circulatory system found its perfect analogical replica in the movement of planetary bodies, the approach and recession of the sun, the process of the evaporation of vapour and the falling of the rain. Now the sewage system was also part of this system of order, its manmade structures fully integrated into the natural world. Vitally, after the conception of the sewers had to be *discovered* in the urban body. The arterial-venous system already lay beneath the surface of the city, and simply needed to be excised and exposed.

Analysing this speech, Gille exposes Ward’s central logic: ‘Health is not being promoted in this text, rather “circulation” is: sanitary welfare is merely a bonus which inevitably results from it: [...] Stagnation is not the cause of disorders, it is disorder by the very fact that it presupposes stasis’. (Gille, p. 239) When the overlapping arguments and overrunning prose of Ward’s *Quarterly* articles are compressed, what emerges is a simple opposition between circulation and stagnation – its title suggests as much. Aligning the sewage system with the circulation of the blood too made motion an end in itself. Keeping matter in a state of movement was a prerequisite for health, and health was evidenced by the circulation of matter. Ironically, the arguments for circulation could only be expressed tautologically. Each point inevitably led back to Ward’s ‘fundamental principle – circulation instead of stagnation.’ (*Circulation*, p. 15) Ward’s speech at Brussels was received warmly, though congress reporters were left slightly perplexed,

writing that it was ‘too new’ to be judged properly.⁷⁵ Ward stayed on at Brussels for some months afterwards, observing and studying the construction of their own sewage system.

The Body Collapses

In 1854, Ward was elected as Commissioner to yet another iteration of the MCS. Critics in the *Journal of Gas Lighting, Water Supply and Sanitary Improvement* speculated that this was a result of the influence of his powerful friends: the now-retired Chadwick, Lord Ebrington and Lord Palmerston. Reportedly, these individuals had ‘thrust Mr. Ward forward’ into this role specifically to act as an advocated and defender of the ‘arterial-venous’ system.⁷⁶

However, his short stint as a commissioner would largely be defined by his embroilment in a querulous debate known as the “pipe-and-brick” sewers war which spread from the MCS onto the pages of the press. According to one article ‘the disputants have accordingly ranged themselves under two different banners, which might not very unfitly be termed the “whole-hoggites,” and the “half-hoggites:” – (*i.e.*) the whole-hoggites, Bazalgettes, or big-drain men, and the half-hoggites, Wardites, or pipe-men’. (*Gas Lighting*, 10 Dec 1855, p. 266) In the press it was characterised as a disagreement about the size of sewers – a choice between Ward’s small earthenware pipes or Bazalgette’s large oviform sewers.

Though this would seem to be a row over minor technical differences, as Hamlin rightly notes, the disagreement was not so much between two different systems, but Chadwick and Ward’s totalising system of waste disposal and the ‘anti-systems’ of orthodox engineers like Bazalgette. (*Antisystems*, p. 682) Ward saw sanitation through the grand metaphor of the circulating body, while others called for ‘appropriate’ situation-specific solutions. Bazalgette (who at this time was the Chief Engineer for the MCS) and other prominent members of the Institution of Civil Engineers on the other hand were sceptical of a single, systemic solution.⁷⁷ George R. Burnell, an English architect and engineer, addressed Ward’s misconceptions with some care: ‘Mr. F. O. Ward, and the numerous class of amiable philanthropists who follow his guidance’, he wrote in the *Daily News*, ‘do not sufficiently understand that engineering is essentially a profession which, although founded on strict philosophical principles, requires that modifying circumstances should always be taken into account. Emphatically, the merit of an engineer depends upon the

⁷⁵ Quoted in Ananda Kohlbrenner, ‘From fertiliser to waste, land to river: a history of excrement in Brussels’, *Brussels Studies [Online]*, 78 (2014) <<https://journals.openedition.org/brussels/1227>> [accessed 18 March 2019]

⁷⁶ ‘The Metropolitan Commission of Sewers’, *Journal of Gas Lighting, Water Supply, and Sanitary Improvement*, 10 November 1855, p. 237.

⁷⁷ For further discussions of engineer’s philosophy in designing a London-wide drainage system see Thomas Wicksteed, *Croydon drainage. Copy of the report of Thomas Wicksteed, Civil engineer, on the State of the Works Drainage and Sewerage in the Town of Croydon*, Parliamentary Papers, 1854, vol. 61 (450), p. 5.

adaptation of the means he employs to the ends he desires to attain. Under such circumstances it is dangerous to lay down any absolute laws'.⁷⁸ Absolute laws were the very foundation of Chadwick's arterial-venous system. Because its components were so well integrated, excising one of its parts – be it sewage recycling, tubular pipes, or control of London's water supply – would mean that the whole system would collapse. Everything was in a fine balance and worked to reaffirm and reify the law of constant circulation

Bazalgette's cool immovability on his position and the more indignant protestations of other civil engineers were an attack on the dogma of circulation. In their minds, not only were narrow pipes cheap to produce (Ward estimated his system would cost a mere £753,000 to Bazalgette's £1,627,000), but their narrow design concentrated the flow and thus increased the velocity of sewage.⁷⁹ Theoretically this meant that they could be essentially self-cleansing, completely eliminating the need for flushing or manual cleaning. These pipes would be an integral part of a finely-tuned, self-regulating and seamless system – a body which circulated its blood without interference. Those who stood in the way of its realisation were themselves waste products, obstructions which needed to be swiftly swept away by the pressure of progress. Surely, Ward wrote, larger sewers would be no more than 'long lines of putrid filth, stretching in dry weather, across the town'. ('Drainage Question') There was something grotesque, even monstrous, about Bazalgette's sewers. They were a symbol of bloated excess; 'stretching' here seemed to be the languid movements of indulgence and waste. Such waste would be foisted onto ratepayers. The arterial-venous system by contrast was svelte, nimble and economic.

Sewers of the tubular variety had been built experimentally under the Board of Health's management in Croydon, Rugby and Tottenham. The results, much to Chadwick's frustration, did not help vindicate his vision. Within weeks of the completion of Croydon's new sewers and drains, problems were reported. There were breakages and blockages from objects and materials diverse as 'flannels, hay shavings, paper, hair, pieces of stick, kittens, a nightcap, a dead cat, pig's entrails, [and] a bullock's heart'.⁸⁰ What was more, typhoid had broken out, and was widely attributed to deficiencies in the new system. Ward had answers for all of these issues: firstly, the drains were built too narrowly causing them to collapse under the pressure of the earth above them; secondly they were carelessly built by 'jobbing builders'; finally, the Croydon population

⁷⁸ George R. Burnell, 'London Sewerage and Drainage', *Daily News*, 27 December 1855, p. 2. Further references to this article are included after quotations in the text.

⁷⁹ Frederick Oldfield Ward, 'The Main Drainage Question and the Elections', *Daily News*, 12 December 1855, p. 5.

⁸⁰ *Reports by Neil Arnott, Esq., M.D. and Thomas Page, Esq., C.E. on An Inquiry Ordered by the Secretary of State, relative to the Prevalence of Disease at Croydon, and the Plan of Sewerage* (London: George Edward Eyre and William Spottiswoode, 1853), p. 59.

was accustomed to using cesspools as receptacles for general rubbish, so had carried this behaviour over to the new sewers. This, Ward asserted, could easily be remedied by an educational campaign. According to him, there were many drains and sewers that were working perfectly well but were conveniently overlooked by his opponents.⁸¹

As the chief engineer of the MCS, Bazalgette had spent years in determining the appropriate shape and size of sewers according to the principles of hydraulics, a science of the movement of fluids that was widely regarded as difficult and abstruse. In early 1855, Ward, unconvinced by the mathematical underpinnings of Bazalgette's system, put a motion into the Court of Sewer Commissioners demanding that he publicly publish his calculations. To this Bazalgette duly complied.⁸² This still left Ward unsatisfied. In response he produced his own pamphlet charging Bazalgette with bungling his calculations. (*Memorandum*, p. 3) The matter was again brought before the other Sewer Commissioners. The *Times*, normally a neutral bystander in terms of MCS politics, reported with some exasperation that "The paper handed in by Mr. Ward consisted of 17 paragraphs, purporting to contain a series of distinct charges, and yet among the whole of them there were only four instances of engineering errors pretended to be given. The rest of the paper consisted of the charges of "mystification," "concealment," the "unfair treatment of a rival," and the like charges, all of which [Bazalgette] was prepared to meet."⁸³ The *Journal of Gas Lighting, Water Supply and Sanitary Improvement* was less kind, accusing Ward of being 'profoundly ignorant of hydraulics', subjecting Bazalgette to a spurious 'personal attack' and a being one of the 'blind guides lately attempted to be foisted upon [the public]'. (*Gas Lighting*, 10 November 1855, p. 236) With this still unresolved after one meeting, Ward's objections ran over into yet another Court of Sewer Commissioners. After seven hours of debate (including a two-hour speech from Ward), the issue was firmly put to rest. There was no reason, it was decided, to bring any charges against Bazalgette, or to doubt his calculations. One commissioner, 'in a rich vein of irony, ridiculed the attempts of Mr. Ward, who had described himself as an apprentice in the art of engineering, to upset the conclusions arrived at by some of the first engineers of the day'.⁸⁴

Robert Stephenson, a civil engineer working alongside Bazalgette, was particularly enraged by Ward's behaviour in the MCS. Ward, he asserted, concealed inaccurate calculations and bad science behind a façade of flashy rhetoric. The former's objections to Bazalgette's plans were, in

⁸¹ 'Letter from F. O. Ward to Lord Palmerston, 17th February 1854', *Report to Viscount Palmerston upon the System of Drainage Pursued in the Metropolis*, ed. by Richard Jebb (London: James Truscott, 1854), pp. 19 – 21.

⁸² Joseph Bazalgette, *Data, Employed in Determining the Sizes and Estimating the Cost of the Works Designed for the Main Drainage of the Metropolis* (London: James Truscott, 1855).

⁸³ 'Metropolitan Commission of Sewers', *The Times*, 9 November 1855, p. 10.

⁸⁴ 'Metropolitan Commission of Sewers', *Standard*, 9 November 1855, p. 1.

Stephenson's words 'puerile'.⁸⁵ This acrimony reached a head in 1856 when one of Bazalgette's supporters published an anonymous 200-page pamphlet entitled *Sanitary Reform and Sanitary Reformers*. Though it masqueraded as an official document 'for the information of metropolitan vestries and local boards of health', it was in reality a deeply personal attack on Chadwick, and particularly on Ward's character. It scathingly branded Ward as an amateur and a charlatan who no61usinesss being a commissioner.⁸⁶ Even for those who objected to Chadwick and Ward's plans, this proved to be taking the matter too far. The *Westminster Review* determined that "Sanitary Reform and Sanitary Reformers" contains some valuable information, but it also contains so much abuse of individuals, that we forbear to do more than mention it.'⁸⁷

But perhaps the most perceptive criticism of Ward's tactics came from an off-hand comment from the consistently hostile *Journal of Gas Lighting*: Ward, it argued in one article, 'has given currency to the substitution of convenient verbal formulae for the study of natural laws'. His sanitary advocacy amounted to no more than rhetorical trickery. (*Gas Lighting*, 10 November 1855, p. 237) In spite of the writer's obvious contempt, the distance between Ward's metaphorical representation of the arterial-venous system and its engineering reality of the arterial-venous system had become so close they were completely interchangeable. Where one began and the other end was indistinct. Thus, when Ward proposed 'catheter drainage' as a remedy to London's sanitation, the *Journal of Gas Lighting* replied:

Ex-surgeon Ward is an ass. Men naturally turn to those resources with which, from experience, they are best acquainted; and hence it is quite natural in Mr. Ward to think of "drawing off" the sewage water of London by a "small-pipe" project; and, far from becoming what is called a "dilettanti engineer" by so doing, we content that he remains strictly within the limits of his own profession. (*Gas Lighting*, 10 Dec 1855, p. 267)

The writer scoffed at Ward's attempt to medicalise the body of the city, to bring it under surgical control. The absurdity of his work as a commissioner was not only that he consistently advocated for easily blocked pipes, but that he overlaid the logic of the human body onto a problem that was strictly one of civil engineering. For Bazalgette and others Ward's rhetoric was just that – rhetoric. It could propose easy 'natural' solutions to London's sanitary crisis, but it

⁸⁵ Robert Stephenson, 'Mr. F. O. Ward and London Drainage', *Morning Post*, 5 November 1855, p. 3.

⁸⁶ *Sanitary Reform and Sanitary Reformers; for the information of Metropolitan Vestries and Local Boards of Health. With an appendix of the Metropolitan Local Management Act Abridged* (London: Edward Stanford, 1856), pp. 97 – 105. Later in 1856, after Ward had lost his position as a commissioner, an updated and expanded version of this was published called *Engineers and Officials: An Historical Sketch of Progress of "Health of Towns Works"*

⁸⁷ 'Contemporary Literature', *The Westminster Review*, n.s., 9 (1856), 563 - 650 (pp. 590 – 591).

could not do the hard work of translating those solutions to reality. The arterial-venous system only worked as a beautiful image or elegant theory. The slippage of writing and urban intervention Ward used to his advantage in his *Times* articles collapsed back into a shallow monologue. Moreover, the self-enclosing rhetoric which was used to articulate the unification and circularity of the system ultimately prevented its individual components from being integrated into competing plans, leaving it isolated, irrelevant and obsolete.

In any case, the perception that Ward was ‘in Chadwick’s pay’, was ultimately damaging to him and his arterial-venous system.⁸⁸ In the press at least, Ward had lost the argument. On the 1st January 1856 he eventually lost his position on the when the MCS was absorbed by the Board of Works. Reflecting on the course of events on the eve of this change of hands, the civil engineer Burnell felt that:

The worst part of the business, [...] has been that the so-called scientific information spread about broadcast (at the expense of the nation unfortunately) by the General Board of Health is nearly all worthless. The public assumes, as it is justified in doing, that the government would not publish as facts things which did not exist; that it would not circulate documents in which incorrect observations are cited as discoveries of hitherto unobserved natural laws; that it would not recommend works which could never succeed, or compel the adoption in all cases of works which are often objectionable.
(*Daily News*, 27 Dec 1855, p. 2)

For all their talk about controlling the circulations of waste around the city, the greatest irony was that Ward and the Board of Health had become disseminators of ‘worthless’ information which in turn infected sanitary discourse. Stripping away the language of public health and ‘natural laws’, Burnell was left with unvarnished sophistry, falsehoods, wishful thinking and a system doomed to failure – in a word, waste.

Bazalgette, on the other hand, was promoted as the Board of Work’s chief engineer, a position he would hold until 1889. It was his system of sewerage which eventually began construction in 1859. Ward later attempted to gain a position on the Board of Health, but this proved unsuccessful. His influence on sanitary reform had slipped. Years later, *The Journal of Gas Lighting* could not resist one final dig: ‘We do not even know in what temple (to Cloacina?) F. O. Ward

⁸⁸ ‘Letter from Ward to Chadwick, 7th August 1851’, quoted in *The Life and Times of Sir Edwin Chadwick*, p. 411.

has hung his now useless weapon – the 1-inch sewer-pipe – the contents and combatants alike forgotten'.⁸⁹

Though Chadwick remained inflexible in his sanitary ideology, he was now a retired man and recognised that, for the present, there was little he could do. Ward, on the other hand, shifted his focus to the manufacturing of fertiliser, and fell out of the public eye. In subsequent decades he becomes increasingly difficult to trace; his name appears here and there – in an article about manure, in a piece about Parisian bread-making, a warm thanks from a German Chemistry professor on Justus von Liebig. For the most part, however, he is an elusive figure. Towards the end of his life, he suffered from general paresis – a neuropsychiatric disorder caused by untreated syphilis. In 1877 he was admitted to St. George's Asylum in Ditchling and died only a few months later after a 'long enfeeblement'.⁹⁰ He was buried in a small graveyard nearby and today lies under a modest headstone.

Sanitary Afterlives

Though Ward's entanglement with the politics of sanitation was brief in the grand scale of things, he left a ghostly trace upon the landscape and language of sanitary reform. One of his favourite aphorisms was the pithy phrase: 'The whole of the rainfall due to the river, the whole of the sewage due to the soil', which soon got shortened to 'rain to the river, sewage to the soil'.

⁹¹ Though this was branded by *Engineers and Officials* as one of Ward's trademark 'claptrap' phrases which he 'ingeniously introduces on every possible occasion', it was a simple and rational code in an increasingly confusing sanitary landscape. (*Engineers*, p. 92) It had all the elements for virality - and go viral it did. *Punch* took it up with aplomb, converting it into a snappy jingle:

Rate-payers, up! 'Tis now or never;
 "Sewage to the soil and rain the river";
 Be this your battle-shout:
 Be "Pipes and profit" your demand,
 Not millions spent on tunnels grand,
 To clean – your pockets out!⁹²

⁸⁹ 'Notes upon passing events', *Journal of Gas Lighting, Water Supply, and Sanitary Improvement*, 22 October 1861, pp. (715 – 717) p. 715. Cloacina was the Roman goddess of the Cloaca Maxima (literally the 'Greatest Sewer'), Rome's sewage system

⁹⁰ John Simon, *Personal Recollections of Sir John Simon, K.C.B* (London: The Wiltons, 1894), p. 17.

⁹¹ Quoted in J. B. Lawes, 'On the Sewage of London', *Journal of the Society of Arts*, 120 (1855), 263 – 284 (p. 283).

⁹² 'Slow but Sewer', *Punch*, 35 (1858), 71.

It made waves into the next century too. As late as 1907, the English politician John Burns (1858 – 1943) said that the phrase was a ‘guiding principle’ in his efforts to cleanse the Thames.⁹³

Though Ward was occasionally referenced in some of its uses, more often than not, it was left authorless, or (as it sometimes still is now) misattributed to Chadwick or others who handled the phrase in subsequent years. It circulated, mutated, shed its old authors and took up new ones.

In 1881, some years after his death, one of Ward’s works found a new lease of life. Chadwick, now a spry 80 years old, translated Ward’s speech *Circulation or Stagnation* from the original French for an English audience. The principles of the arterial system were still so little understood, he wrote, ‘that it is important to take occasion to republish his popular exposition of it’. (*Circulation*, p. 5) Chadwick, it seems, was conscious of shoring up his legacy. The original text was supplemented by a rather self-congratulatory preface, an accompanying letter from Lord Ebrington, and a long addendum covering the ‘subsequent progress of the principle of circulation’. (*Circulation*, p. 18) The formally slender pamphlet of only twelve pages had become a somewhat bloated document. This perhaps betrays a slight nerviness on Chadwick’s part about the brevity of the original speech. More detail was needed, more recapitulations of Ward’s arguments, more material – to make his arterial-venous system appear as undebatable, undeniable truth. Ebrington argued that the ideas expounded by Ward ‘require constantly reiterating, and their practical influence upon the weal as well as wealth of the community again and again brought home to the public mind’. (*Circulation*, p. 7) This was wishful thinking on the part of Ebrington and Chadwick, given that Bazalgette’s sewage system had long been completed. But for them, they recognised that repetition was a key part of circulation. By returning ‘again and again’ to the same points they maintained the dizzying momentum of the circulating organism.

⁹³ ‘Rivers And Streams’, *The Times*, 26 November 1907, p. 14.

Merdle!: Unproductive Circulation in Charles Dickens' *Little Dorrit* (1855 – 1857)

To produce is literally to shit. “Do you in fact produce anything with all your riches?” Leroux demands of Malthus. “No, it is nature that produces everything, and when you get to the bottom of all your means of production, industry sends you back to agriculture and in the end, to your manure.”

Dominique Laporte, *History of Shit* (1978)

‘A world of balderdash’: Dickens and Sanitary Reform

1854 was the year of the infamous Broad Street cholera outbreak. Unbeknownst to the poor

inhabitants of Soho, the water they had been drawing from their local pump was poisoned with

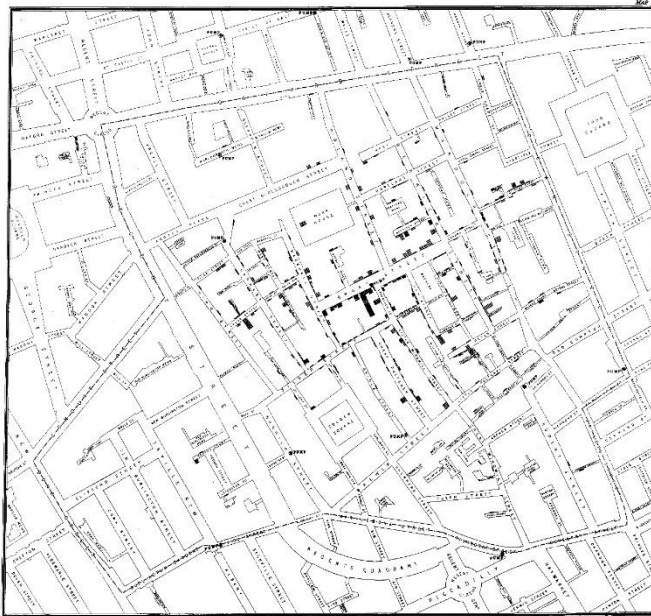


Figure 3.1: Map of cases of cholera. From John Snow, *On the Mode of Communication of Cholera* (1854)

human excrement, rotting blood from abattoirs, animal droppings and the putrid leftovers from London's factories. These contaminants had seeped into the water pipes or were outright dumped into the Thames where water companies were sourcing drinking water to distribute to the metropolis. 616 people died as a result, adding to the growing number in London who had succumbed to the cholera pandemic. These cholera cases were later mapped by John Snow as a rash-like cluster around the Broad Street pump and formed the basis of his theory

that cholera was in fact communicated through contaminated water, rather than miasmas or 'bad air'. (Figure 3.1)

The Broad Street outbreak caused a media stink. In the *Times*, blame was laid at the feet of individual householders' foul cisterns and Chadwick's system of pipe sewers rather than the water companies. Dickens, who was deeply enmeshed in the struggle for Chadwickian sanitary reform and who had struck up a professional but cordial relationship with him some years earlier, rejected these claims entirely. As a response, he planned to publish an article in *Household Words* which attacked the water companies' laissez-faire attitude and called for real structural

change: the abolition of cesspool and sewer-poison; the proper construction of dwellings; the removal of nuisances to health; and a constant supply of fresh, untainted water. In October 1854, Dickens wrote to W.H. Wills, a sub-editor of *Household Words* urging him ‘to keep his eye on those Sewers Commissioners, who in a World of balderdash, really talk more rotten filth, and let their Engineer write more and sit on all manner of dregs and hear more read, than all the Sewers of London’.¹ (This engineer was none other than Bazalgette, who was strident in his opposition to Chadwick’s ‘arterial-venous’ system of sanitation.) ‘Balderdash’ suggested more than a jumble of senseless speech; in the late 1840s, the term had taken on more obscene implication of filthy and impure language. Thus, the common feature of the waste produced by the incessant talk and correspondence of the Metropolitan Commission of Sewers (MCS) and the excrement festering in the bowels of London was its superfluity. Without an audience, the endless talk of the Sewer Commissioners accumulated, festered and putrefied. More perversely, Dickens insinuated that these excretions, with nowhere to go, were consumed by and digested by the Commissioners themselves. Extracted of all worth, they were initiated into a profane economy in which shit is spoken, heard, and regurgitated.

This was a new form of bureaucracy that unnerved Dickens. Writing on Britain’s supposed ‘progress’ following the 1832 Reform Bill, Jerome Meckier states that ‘Stagnant old England – rotten boroughs, unearned privilege, callousness toward the poor – had simply been replaced by a brave new world of bankers, bureaucrats, scientists, and industrialists, a confederacy with a Utilitarian bias that Dickens mistrusted’.² Stagnancy had given way to furious circulation. Chadwick – bureaucrat and utilitarian in chief – was an emblem of this shift. Consequently, though Dickens was an outspoken supporter of sanitary reform throughout his life, his relationship with the Chadwickian project of sanitary reform was complicated. His critique of the MCS represents his growing ambivalence about a project based on centralisation and the enlargement the bureaucratic state.

Dickens was originally drawn into the sanitary cause through his brother-in-law and long-time friend Henry Austin (c. 1812 – 1861). Austin was an architect and civil engineer who, along with Frederick Oldfield Ward, faithfully worked alongside Chadwick in their shared sanitary mission. In the wake of the publication of Chadwick’s 1842 *Report on the Sanitary Condition of the Labouring*

¹ Charles Dickens, *The British Academy / The Pilgrim Edition of the Letters of Charles Dickens*, ed. by Graham Storey and others, 12 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965 - 2002), VII (1993), p. 436. Further references to these editions are included after quotations in the text.

² Jerome Meckier, *Dickens’s Great Expectations: Misnar’s Pavillion versus Cinderella* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2002), p. 120.

Population, the former asked Austin to send a copy to Dickens with the hope that he could help broadcast his ideas. Writing back to Austin, Dickens expressed interest in the subject but already had some serious misgivings about Chadwick: 'I do differ from him, to the death, on his crack topic – the new Poor Law.' (*Letters*, iii, pp. 330 – 331) The New Poor Law, or Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834, was one of Chadwick's chief achievements. Put simply, it centralised the administration of poor relief from individual parishes to workhouses – institutions purposefully designed to be as unattractive and punitive as possible to potential paupers. Famously, Dickens had pilloried the inhumanity of the workhouse in *Oliver Twist* (1837 – 1839). Despite these reservations, he ended his 1842 travelogue *American Notes* with the words that 'There is no local Legislature in America which may not study Mr. Chadwick's excellent Report [...] with immense advantage.'³

Dickens' public advocacy for sanitary reform wasn't to come until some years later. In January 1849 cholera broke out in Mr Drouet's Establishment for Pauper Children in Tooting. Originally opened as a school in 1804, when Bartholomew Drouet took ownership in 1825, he transformed it into a so-called 'baby-farm'. These institutions provided a modicum of education, but also required children to work menial jobs out of school hours. In 1846 it housed 723 children up to 14 years old; only two years later this number rose to 1400. It had already aroused the attention of the Poor Law Commission some years earlier. Visiting in 1837, Assistant Commissioner James Phillips Kay found two boys who had been chained to a log for periods of up to a week as punishment.⁴ Food, clean water and warm clothing were scarce and the accommodations were hopelessly overcrowded. The buildings were built in close proximity to two putrid ditches used as open sewers and this had likely contaminated the water supply. Such conditions made the institution an ideal breeding ground for disease. When cholera finally visited, the sick children were confined three or four to beds soaked in excrement and older boarders, some still themselves recovering, were compelled to act as nurses. By the time the outbreak subsided 180 children had died. An inspector from the Board of Health damned Drouet's Establishment as guilty of 'inexcusable neglect'.⁵

The images of needless suffering that subsequently made their way to the papers aroused Dickens' sympathy and anger. In the *Examiner* he wrote four blisteringly scathing articles. Drouet was to blame of course, but Dickens claimed there was 'blame elsewhere [...] great blame

³ Charles Dickens, *American Notes*, ed. by Patricia Ingham (London: Penguin Books, 2000), p. 274

⁴ Alexander M. Ross, 'Kay-Shuttleworth and the Training of Teachers for Pauper Schools', *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 15 (1967), 275 – 283 (pp. 276 – 277).

⁵ 'Inquest on the children removed from the Tooting Infant Pauper Asylum', *Northern Star*, 10 January 1849, p. 7

elsewhere'.⁶ Blame was also to be found in uncaring parish authorities, inattentive Poor Law inspectors and impotent Poor Law commissioners – the whole system of diffused responsibility was rotten. Norris Pope argues that 'More than any other single incident, this example of callous neglect brought Dickens out as a powerful proponent of sanitary reform, allying him closely with Austin, Chadwick, and Southwood Smith in favour of a centralized public-health authority, capable of overriding petty local interest and red tape'.⁷

By 1851 Dickens was fully immersed in the political struggle for sanitary reform. Speaking at the first public fundraising dinner of the Metropolitan Sanitary Association he declared:

That no man can estimate the amount of mischief grown in dirt; that no man can say the evil stops here or stops there, either in its moral or physical effects, or can deny that it begins in the cradle and is not at rest in the miserable grave [*bear, bear*], is as certain as it is that the air from Gin Lane will be carried, when the wind is Easterly, into May Fair, and that if you once have a vigorous pestilence raging furiously in Saint Giles's, no mortal list of Lady Patronesses can keep it out of Almack's.⁸

The miasmatic 'evil' of dirt was linked both poor and rich, old and young alike. Even death itself, the city's overcrowded graveyards, were another point of infection. It moved in perpetual, volatile and deadly circulations through the metropolis. The only way to stay this physical and moral malady, Dickens added, was through 'Searching Sanitary Reform' which had to 'precede all other social remedies.' (*Speeches*, p. 129) In echoing the sentiments of Chadwick and Ward, Dickens asserted that to remove dirt was to remedy all social ills.

Janis McClarren Caldwell states that these beliefs bled into Dickens writings: 'Especially in his later fiction and journalism, Dickens insistently prioritises sanitation above any other kind of reform'. Caldwell adds that he displayed a 'growing interest in a strong central authority'.⁹ In 1850, Dickens told Austin, 'I hope to be able to do the Sanatory [*sic*] cause good service, in my new periodical [*Household Words*] – by pressing *facts* upon the many-headed.' (*Letters*, vi, pp. 18 – 19) However, I suggest that the sanitary articles published in *Household Words* and the 1855 – 57

⁶ Charles Dickens, 'The Paradise at Tooting', *Examiner*, 20 January 1849, p. 1. Dickens' other *Examiner* articles on this subject were 'The Tooting Farm' (27 January 1849), 'A Recorder's Charge' (3 March 1849) and 'The Verdict for Drouet' (21 April 1849).

⁷ Norris Pope, 'Public Health, Sanitation and Housing', in *Oxford Reader's Companion to Dickens*, ed. by Paul Schlicke (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 477 – 482 (p. 478).

⁸ Charles Dickens, *The Speeches of Charles Dickens*, ed. by K. J. Fielding (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960), p. 128. Further references to this edition are included after quotations in the text.

⁹ Janis McClarren Caldwell, 'Illness, disease and social hygiene', in *Charles Dickens in Context* (ed. by Sally Ledger and Holly Furneaux (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 343 – 349 (p. 346).

novel *Little Dorrit* complicates the panacea of circulation and demonstrates how it serves the capitalist and bureaucratic state. Ralph F. Smith points out that Dickens's journalism often departed from or showed discomfort with the fundamental tenets of the sanitarian narrative.¹⁰

This was most clear in articles he oversaw and published in *Household Words*. In 1850, Dickens commissioned the ex-physician and journalist Henry Morley (1822 – 1894) to write a selection of sanitary articles for the magazine. One of these was 'The Water Drops', a satirical fairy tale featuring the adventures of a band of water droplets through the city. Austin had sent Dickens his and Chadwick's notes for the arterial-venous system to Morley. Morley duly included them in his narrative, but his scepticism couldn't help but show through. The following extract follows a conversation between Nephelo, a light hearted vapour, and a 'very dirty' Thames water-drop:

"[...] I've come from Upper George Street through a twelve-inch pipe four or five times faster than one travels over an old sewer-bed; travelled express, no stoppage."

"Indeed!"

"Yes. Impermeable, earthenware, tubular pipes, accurately dove-tailed. [...] the pipes run into a larger tube of earthenware that is to be laid at the backs of all the houses; these tubes run into larger ones, but none of them very monstrous; and so that there is a constant flow, like the circulation of the blood; and all the pipes are to run at last into one large conduit, which is to run out of town with all the sewage matter and discharge so far down the Thames, that no return tide ever can bring it back to London. Some is to go branching off into the field to be manure."

"Humph!" said Nephelo. "You profess to be very clever. How do you know all this?"

"Know? Bless you, I'm a regular old Thames Drop. I've been in the cisterns, in the tumblers, down the sewer, in the river, up the pipe, in the reservoirs, in the cisterns, in the teapots, down the sewer, in the river, up the pipes, in the reservoirs, in the teapots, down the sewer, in the river, up the pipes, in the reservoirs, in the cisterns, in the saucepans, down the sewers, in the Thames –" [...]

"The catalogue was never ended, for the busy Drop was suddenly entangled among hair upon the corpse of a dead cat, which fate also the fairy narrowly escaped, to be in the next minute sucked up as Nubis had been sucked, through pipes into a reservoir. Weary

¹⁰ Ralph F. Smith, 'Narratives of Public Health in Dickens's Journalism: The Trouble with Sanitary Reform', *Literature and Medicine*, 33 (2015), 157 – 183 (p. 159).

with the incessant chattering of his conceited friend, whose pride he trusted that a night with puss might humble, Nephelo now lurked in a silent corner.¹¹

Here, it seems, the principle of ‘no stoppage’ applies to the seemingly endless stream of Chadwickian rhetoric, which spills from the Thames water-drop’s mouth. His narration of his routes through the city is both dizzying and disorientating. The return again and again to the sewer, cistern and reservoir represents a circuit which will go on perpetually, without end. This garrulous effusion is only interrupted by a dead cat which, Morley implies, goes on to corrupt the reservoir.¹² This, Morley suggests, was one of the nauseating consequences of circulation. By the same logic, the ‘very dirty’ water that was in the sewer makes its way back to the teapot, the saucepan or the tumbler. After being made subject to such ‘incessant chatter’, to lurk in a corner, as Nephelo does, to stop instead of continually being on move, is sweet relief. This chimed with the criticisms of the MCS Dickens was later to make to Wills. They were an institution which simulated progress, change and movement through incessant talk. Like the Circumlocution Office of *Little Dorrit*, the dogma of circulation became another means of delay, obfuscation deflection.

Imagery of Waste in *Our Mutual Friend* and *Little Dorrit*

The image of the Engineer, presiding over a pile of dregs foreshadows the dust-heaps of Dickens’ 1864 – 65 novel *Our Mutual Friend*. The dustman, the deceased misanthropic Mr Harmon,

Lived in a hollow in a hilly country entirely composed of Dust. On his own small estate the growling old vagabond threw up his own mountain range, like an old volcano, and its geological formation was Dust. Coal-dust, vegetable-dust, bone-dust, crockery dust, rough dust and sifted dust,—all manner of Dust.’¹³

These piles of rubbish are the nebulous source of the old Mr Harmon’s great wealth; sifted through and sorted, the items within them repurposed and sold are the source of a great fortune. However, the aggregation of dust on Mr Harmon’s property suggested a stagnation in this process. Like the ‘piles of dregs’ hoarded by the Commissioner, its presence signals the failure of an economic system where commodities and ideas can freely flow and be distributed.

¹¹ Henry Morely, ‘The Water-Drops: A Fairy Tale’, *Household Words*, 1 (1850), 482 – 489 (pp. 487 – 489).

¹² Notably, dead cats were one of the objects that were reported to have cause blockages in the Board of Health’s experimental tubular drainage. (See chapter 1).

¹³ Charles Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend*, ed. by Michael Cotsell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 13. Further references to this edition are included after quotations in the text.

Of all of Dickens' works, *Our Mutual Friend* has by far received the most critical attention in regard to its engagement with themes of waste and its circulations through urban space. As Sarah Alexander has written of the novel, money in its abstract form of paper currency is dematerialised to the point of ghostliness, drifting around London's streets as litter. It exists as the residue of the conversion of capital into commodity.¹⁴ Unable to be processed, and doomed to perpetually roam and accumulate, capital, like waste, is trapped in an impermeable system with no means of escape. Tina Young Choi extends this metaphor to the very structure of the novel:

Dickens overlays an almost Chadwickian vision of narrative and national closure with a pervading narrative thematic of sanitation, waste and recovery [...] The London imagined by Dickens in *Our Mutual Friend* is a closed space, in which nothing and no one can ever disappear; instead, early everything and everyone Dickens initially puts into circulation within the novelistic system returns to the narrative with the sureness of sewage in the Thames at high tide.¹⁵

In this limited and claustrophobic narrative economy, the bodies, resources and geographies of the novel can only endlessly circulate with the hope that they may eventually become productive. Choi argues that the narrative structure of *Our Mutual Friend* differentiates it from earlier 'adventure' or bildungsroman Dickens novels; not being characterised a linear journey or development, but by circularity and re-emergence. Characters such as John Harmon are carried off, literally as it turns out, to the tides of the Thames, only to re-emerge baptised from its murky waters: renamed and renewed. Although the shift in Dickens' narrative experimentation is undeniable over the course of his career, the circularity that Choi identifies in *Our Mutual Friend* was explored years earlier in *Little Dorrit*, with its story following the journey of the Dorrit family from rags to riches to rags once again. If *Our Mutual Friend* suggests the possibility of rebirth through its circularity, in *Little Dorrit* literal and metaphorical waste is trapped in and by its narrative structure, swirling in ever greater entropic rhythms and eventually driving the novel's explosive narrative collapse.

¹⁴ Sarah C. Alexander, 'Dickensian Physics: *Bleak House*, *Our Mutual Friend* and the Luminiferous Ether', in *Victorian Literature and the Physics of the Imponderable* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), pp. 19 – 50.

¹⁵ Tina Young Choi, 'Completing the Circle: The Victorian Sanitary Movement, *Our Mutual Friend*, and Narrative Closure', in *Our Mutual Friend: The Scholarly Pages* <<http://omf.ucsc.edu/index.html>> [accessed 22 June 2016].

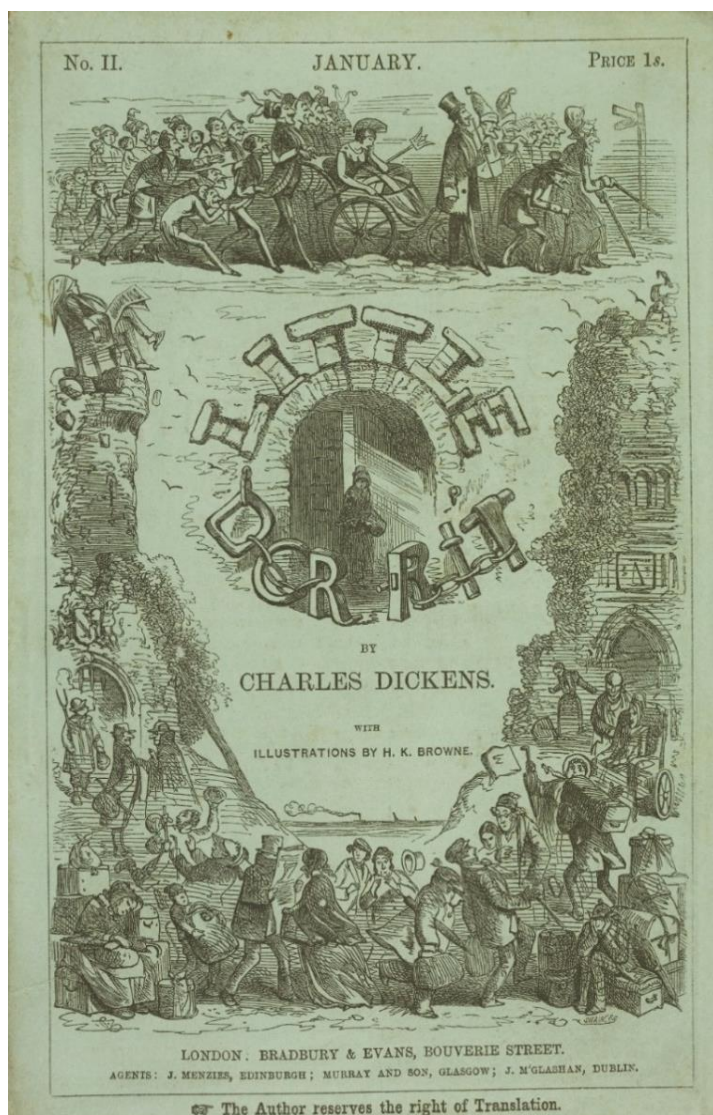


Figure 3.2: Original cover to the serial publication of *Little Dorrit* by Hablot Knight Browne (Phiz)

The original cover of the serial publication of *Little Dorrit*, illustrated by Dickens' long-term collaborator Hablot Knight Browne (known by his nom de plume Phiz) announces the unstable and nefarious cycles at work within the novel. (Figure 3.2) On the right is a crumbling church preyed upon by crows and a boy leaping over crooked gravestones. Beneath sits Mrs Clennam guarding, it seems this ominous emblem of her religion. On the right is another site of decay – a dilapidated castle infested with rats and adorned by a blissfully unaware sleeping man, a newspaper on his knee. At the bottom of the illustration is a disorganised crowd of the London street, and at the top the leaders of society: two elderly, hunch-backed and blind individuals followed by jesters, a fatigued Britannia, and a band of cringing

men dragging their families along. All these images swirl around Amy Dorrit, hesitantly moving out of the Marshalsea prison and illuminated by a shaft of light. It does not bode well for her that her name is written in stone and chains. Read as a whole, the London of *Little Dorrit* is a tumultuous circus tending towards decline and disintegration, a wreckage comprised of the helpless, the incompetent and the corrupt.

As George Levine succinctly puts it, '*Little Dorrit's* prose is energetically preoccupied with disorder and loss of energy'.¹⁶ He reads narrative collapse as the result of a failed attempt to escape from system into moral freedom. As he points out, *Little Dorrit's* characters enact the

¹⁶ George Levine, '*Little Dorrit* and Three Kinds of Science', in *Darwin and the Novelists: Patterns of Science in Victorian Fiction* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991), pp. 153 – 176 (p. 156).

diminution of energy through their lack of will. For protagonists of a novel, they are curiously passive: instead of driving the narrative forward Mr Clennam and Mr Dorrit are pushed from one situation to another like paper carried on the wind, or litter skidding through London's streets. Levine roots this in a thematic tension between the divine order of natural theology and the inevitable degenerative decline into disorder of thermodynamics. The laws of this burgeoning science stated that energy could not be created nor destroyed. However, in the closed system of the universe, this energy inevitably became more disorganised, unavailable, and irretrievable as it dissipated into heat. It established a tragic narrative where the Earth was progressing to a cooler and more disorganised state, unable to sustain human life. Levine himself recognises the potential anachronisms in this approach, acknowledging that 'it would be absurd to claim that Dickens had in mind the developments in thermodynamics of the 1840s and 1850s', when the science was in its infancy. (Levine, p. 156)

Though *Little Dorrit* certainly explores the key anxieties of thermodynamics, the novel also engages with contemporary conversations about sewage and recycling. These were ultimately concerned with the finite resources offered by the environment that were indiscriminately plundered by ever-growing urban centres. To remedy this, sanitarians and agriculturalists looked towards energy conversion by means of putting waste to work. Excremental imagery is diffused throughout the novel, from the name of the financier and fraudster Merdle, which recalls the French expletive *merde*, to the 'deadly sewer' that runs through Dickens' gloomy and noxious London.¹⁷ The Circumlocution Office, the unproductive entropic force at the heart of the novel, generally accepted as a parody of the bureaucratic bodies of the British government, also recalls Dickens' criticism of the fruitless cycles of the MCS in his letter to Wills, which only preceded the start of *Little Dorrit's* composition by a few months. In this chapter I argue that the Circumlocution Office also serves a symbol of the overabundance of excretory dregs which were then, quite literally, clogging up the city.

The continuous cycles of manure and agricultural prosperity promised by sanitary and health reformers to sustain the growing population of the city seemed to solve the Malthusian problem of an ever-expanding population gradually depleting the Earth's resources. In *Little Dorrit*, this cycle of perpetual prosperity finds its symbolic double in the ever-expanding wealth of Mr Merdle. David Trotter has written that Dickens 'was for circulation and against stoppage [...] He was sickened by physical blockage, by enclosed congested spaces in the centre of the city, like

¹⁷ Charles Dickens, *Little Dorrit*, ed. by Harvey Peter Sucksmith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 42. Further references to this edition are included after quotations in the text.

Smithfield Market, or urban burial grounds'.¹⁸ Elsewhere, Michael Steig has located stagnation or constipation in Dickens' writing as an explicitly scatological characteristic. He writes that Dickens' novels are full of 'the imagery of anality, and its structural ramifications in the multiple progressions from blockage to actual explosion', arguing that his characters experience a moral constipation where, mired in filth, they are unable to transcend the institutions they are a part of, except through the catastrophic.¹⁹ This is certainly the case in *Bleak House* (1852 – 1853), with Dickens' scathing criticism of social, legal and moral deadlock, but reducing Dickens' politics and writing to this simple dichotomy overlooks Dickens' scepticism of Chadwick's dogma of circulation, and the potential for circulation to be fatiguing, or even destructive.

This unproductive circulation was dissimilar to stagnation in that it embodied cycles that were unproductive or volatile. In these cycles, the meaning of waste was unstable: as it continually metamorphosed it contaminated within in its vicinity. *Little Dorrit* plays out the failures and foibles of these circulations: the transformative processes necessary for waste to be made productive breaks down. Furthermore, the potential of waste to be transformed destabilised its relationship to the Victorian economy. Not merely the leftovers of economic, industrial or digestive process, waste pointed towards a moral corruption and moral stagnancy which poisoned the individual's capacity to be a useful subject of society.

The utopian ideal of self-perpetuating circulating systems which transformed waste into nutrition or capital held within it the potential of this transformation becoming corrupted. *Little Dorrit* displays an inherent scepticism of the very notion of perpetual motion. Though promising the constant regeneration of London's waste matter or drained population, the novel's circulations grind them into insubstantial, or even ghostly, figurations.

Nobody's Fault: Setting up a Hollow Economy

Like many of Dickens' novels, the composition of *Little Dorrit* was a fraught and sometimes difficult affair. Dickens characterised the agitation accompanying the first stages of writing to his former love Maria Winter (née Beadnell) as a 'ghostly unrest', writing to another correspondent that, 'I am in the first stage of a new book, which consists in going round and round the idea, as you see a bird in his cage go about and about his sugar before he touches it'. (*Letters*, vii, p. 562, pp. 571 – 572) Even as his writing progressed, he described himself 'turning upon the same wheel round and round and over and over again until it may begin to roll me towards my end',

¹⁸ David Trotter, *Circulation: Defoe, Dickens, and the Economics of the Novel* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1988), p. 103.

¹⁹ Michael Steig, 'Dickens' Excremental Vision', *Victorian Studies*, 13 (1970), 339 – 354 (p. 351).

and again in a state of restlessness ‘going through the whole routine, over and over and over again’. (*Letters*, vii, p. 609, pp. 613 – 614) Writing was a repetitious labour, a grind in which Dickens himself was sent into a vicious cycle in which seemed in the midst of it unproductive and unforgiving. It is perhaps not far-fetched to see the hard work of writing echoed in the lament of ‘fag and grind!’ which resonates throughout the novel.

But eventually, in sketching out a rough plan of his novel, Dickens lighted upon a name and theme: ‘Nobody’s Fault’, which according to his notebooks would centre on ‘The people who lay all their sins negligences and ignorances, on Providence’. The idea was that there would be a protagonist who, beset by calamities, would shirk all responsibility and say ‘Well, it’s a mercy, however, nobody was to blame you know!’²⁰ The same sentiment can be traced in an 1856 *Household Words* article named ‘Nobody, Somebody, and Everybody’ which critiqued the government’s bungled handling of the Crimean War. ‘The power of Nobody’, Dickens wrote, ‘is becoming so enormous in England, and he alone is responsible for so many proceedings, both in the way of commission and omission; he has so much to answer for, and is so constantly called to account, that a few remarks upon him may not be ill timed.’²¹ ‘Nobody’ was a convenient anonymous void in which all responsibility and blame could be placed. However, as his writing progressed, Dickens was faced with an increasing uncertainty as to the efficacy of this theme. Sucksmith puts it thus: ‘Dickens must have realized that the notion of one man’s responsibility for all the mischief in the story clashed with his awareness that the condition of England must be blamed on a whole social, economic, and political scheme of things’.²² Like his criticism of Drouet’s role in the Tooting Disaster years earlier, (‘there is blame elsewhere [...] there is great blame elsewhere’) Dickens could not ignore that ineffective parliamentary bodies, uninterested bureaucrats – the whole structure of society in fact – were also to blame for the ills of those subject to it. (‘The Paradise at Tooting’)

Five months into writing, and upon completion of the eleventh chapter, the novel was renamed *Little Dorrit* - a novel which was thematically opposed to *Nobody’s Fault*. Instead of a protagonist driving his own misfortune, the main characters of *Little Dorrit* were to be caught up in the circus of society: a villainous network of unscrupulous landlords, impotent government offices, upper-class sycophants and a whole economy which facilitated the circulation of dirty capital, or capital

²⁰ John Forster, *The Life of Charles Dickens*, 3 vols, (London: Chapman and Hall, 1872 – 74), III (1874), p. 132. Further references to these editions are included after quotations in the text.

²¹ Charles Dickens, ‘Nobody, Somebody and Everybody’, *Household Words*, 30 (1856), 145 – 147 (p. 145).

²² Harvey Peter Sucksmith, ‘Introduction’ in, *The Clarendon Dickens*, ed. by Harvey Peter Sucksmith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. xx (pp. xiii – xlix).

which had disintegrated to mere dust. The shapeshifting theatrical villain Rigaud, it must be noted, does not so much drive the downward spiral of the novel's narrative by his own evil actions, as exploits weaknesses already existent within the system underpinning the distribution and circulation of wealth.

Still, the 'nobody' of *Nobody's Fault* haunts *Little Dorrit*. In the introduction to the Oxford World Classics edition of the novel, Sucksmith concedes that the integration of all the narrative and thematic elements into a coherent story were not wholly successful. This can be seen in his treatment of the mysterious and closeted Miss Wade, who most clearly represents the repudiation of responsibility originally intended for *Nobody's Fault*. Mr Pancks notably describes her as 'somebody's child – anybody's – nobody's'. (*Dorrit*, p. 531) In the tragi-comic narrative of her life she misinterprets others' kindly intentions towards her and drives herself into exile. Dickens intended for her story 'impossible of separation from the main story, as to make the blood of the book circulate through both' with her spitefulness, like the contaminated money of Mr Merdle corrupting every part of the novel. (Forster, iii, p. 139)

However, Dickens conceded that 'I can only suppose [...] I have not exactly succeeded in this.' (*Letters*, viii, pp. 297 – 280) Her story is mostly confined, rather awkwardly, to the chapter 'The History of a Self-Tormentor', which frames her self-written history as a confessional letter addressed to Mr Clennam.²³ Moreover, in the wake of Miss Wade seducing the defiant and stifled Tattycoram into her home, they are effectively excised from the narrative, cast abroad to exist in a state of ghostly inertia. Mr Meagles accuses her of harbouring a 'dark spirit', but in her depictions throughout the novel, she herself dematerialises into a spirit. (*Dorrit*, p. 329) As Shale Preston writes, 'she inhabits an emphatically dead space [...] Dickens actually sought to depict Miss Wade as an apparition.'²⁴ In her few appearances she is often shrouded in darkness: the 'close black house' in which she lodges or the 'dead house' in Calais. (*Dorrit*, p. 326, p. 642) When Clennam glimpses her drifting through the misty and gloomy streets of London, he has to assure himself that 'he was not in an odd dream'. (*Dorrit*, p. 524) Thematically discordant with a novel whose themes had shifted, she was paradoxically placed 'somehow at the heart of things, yet both excisable and having no natural place.'²⁵

²³ Dickens had originally intended for Miss Wade's story to appear in the novel as a dialogue between herself and Mr Clennam.

²⁴ Shale Preston, 'Miss Wade's torment: the perverse construction of same-sex desire in *Little Dorrit*', in *Changing the Victorian Subject*, ed. by Mandy Treagus and others (Adelaide: University of Adelaide Press, 2014), pp. 217 – 239 (p. 229).

²⁵ Anna Wilson, 'On History, Case History, and Deviance: Miss Wade's Symptoms and Their Interpretation', *Dickens Studies Annual*, 26 (1998), 187 – 201 (p. 188).

Though this is symptomatic of the contradictory themes that arose in the novel's development, it perhaps also speaks to her refusal to be swept up by its destructive cycles. Upon her departure from the Meagles in the first chapter she ominously announces that 'In our course through life we shall meet the people who are coming to meet *us*, from many strange places and by many strange roads [...] and what it is set to us to do to them, and what it is set to them to do to us, will all be done'. (*Dorrit*, p. 38) [My emphasis] Miss Wade stands still, people, events, tragedies wash over her instead.

'Nobody' exists elsewhere too. Kathleen Tillotson and John Butt assert that "'Nobody's Fault' survives [...] Its meanings are multiple. Beginning as irony, a comment on the tendency to shift responsibility, it becomes a gloomy truth pervading all parts of the novel, as a ground-tone of despair about society.'²⁶ Similarly, Sherri Wolf argues that 'nobody' is emblematic 'of the potential disappearance of the individual in an increasingly bureaucratized, industrialized Great Britain'.²⁷ To dissolve into the vicious cycles of labour is to become an anonymous mechanised subject. In other words, it is to be transformed into a body which is fundamentally interchangeable and drained of inherent worth. Drawing on this idea, I read 'nobody' as the hollow centre of the novel's furious cycles – cycles which are variously depicted in the Circumlocution Office, drudging labour under capitalism, or in Mr Merdle's manic economics. While Victorian sanitarians believed that cycles of waste were supposedly put into motion and sustained by a divine natural order, when these circulations were translated from the theoretical to the practical, they only tended towards contamination and degeneration. The cycles in *Little Dorrit* reveal a hollow, godless system at their heart.

The Circumlocution Office: Entropic Decline

The biting satire of the Circumlocution Office is generally recognised as an attack on the bureaucratic bodies of the British government, in particular the Treasury Office, which mired the country and its operations in nepotism, incompetence and paperwork.²⁸ The Northcote-Trevelyan Report of 1854 which was produced as a result of an inquiry into the organisation of the Civil Service, had revealed that it was rife with jobbery and favouritism. It was not only a refuge for members of the aristocracy that Trevelyan reviled as 'the idle, and useless, the fool of the family, the consumptive, the hypochondriac, [and] those who have a tendency to insanity'.²⁹

²⁶ John Butt and Kathleen Tillotson, *Dickens at Work* (London: Methuen & Co., 1957), p. 233.

²⁷ Sherri Wolf, 'The Enormous Power of No Body: *Little Dorrit* and the Logic of Expansion', *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 42 (2000), 223 – 254 (p. 226).

²⁸ Trey Philpotts, *The Companion to Little Dorrit* (Robertsbridge: Helm Information, 2003), p. 134.

²⁹ Quoted in Edward Hughes, 'Sir Charles Trevelyan and Civil Service Reform', *English History Review*, 64 (1949), 53 – 88 (p. 72).

These were the clear target of the Barnacles in *Little Dorrit*, the family of parasitic aristocrats who occupy the stagnant heart of the Circumlocution Office.

Dickens had formerly turned his ire on the evils of bureaucracy in a *Household Words* article named 'Red Tape' published in February of 1851. ('Red tape' was an idiom for bureaucratic excess originated from the woven tape used to secure legal or governmental documents). The primary target of this article fell on politicians in Parliament who stunted the moral, social and economic growth of Britain, with particular criticism of the Treasury's role in obstructing and interfering with sanitary reform enacted by the Board of Health, which was then spearheaded by Chadwick and Shaftesbury. The General Board had ambitious plans for reform, including the Interment Act, which would prevent the overcrowding of graveyards by effectively bringing urban burials under state control. The Treasury, concerned about the far reach of the Board and its precarious finances, effectively staged a coup by calling on Lord Seymour, the head of the Board of Woods and Forests, who was friendly to the Treasury, to step in as the ex officio president of the Board of Health. This was a position he was technically licensed to take due to the architecture of government. Lord Seymour himself had no patience or desire for social reform, one of his dictums being 'there must be poor'.³⁰ The Treasury, through the all-too-obliging Lord Seymour, used delay and bureaucracy as a political tactic, refused the Board of Health necessary loans and thus slowed the pace or killed entirely the Board's planned reforms.

Sharing Chadwick and Shaftesbury's outrage in 'Red Tape', Dickens' lambasted red tape as suffocating the 'General Interment Bill, say, or a Law for the suppression of infectious and disgusting nuisances!', and all but called out Lord Seymour by name.³¹ The irony of the Treasury's operations was that it not only hindered the removal of nuisances which were then believed to create poisonous miasmas but generated bodily waste in doing so.³² Dickens imagined Seymour and those like him as 'Red Tapists' vomiting out endless coils of red tape like a tapeworm from their mouths, and winding it around institutions, buildings, and colonies, strangling the nation and leading it into a state of degeneracy and disease. 'In either House of Parliament', he wrote, 'he will pull more Red Tape out of his mouth, at a moment's notice, than a conjuror at a Fair'. ('Red Tape', p. 481) Dickens also charged the Red Tapists with the sin of blasphemy: 'Red Tape, as a great institution quite superior to Nature, positively refused to

³⁰ Edward Seymour, quoted in *The Life and Times of Sir Edwin Chadwick*, p. 387.

³¹ Charles Dickens, 'Red Tape', *Household Words*, 2 (1851), 481 – 484 (p. 483).

³² 'Nuisances' for the purpose of the bill covered a wide range of issues. This included dwelling houses or buildings which were filthy or unwholesome, foul or offensive ditches, gutters, privies, ashpits or cesspools, the keeping of animals in bad conditions, and accumulations of dung, manure, offal, filth or refuse.

receive them [scientific and medical truths] – strangled them, out of hand – labelled them Impositions, and shelved them with great resentment'. ('Red Tape', p. 481) It seemed that in wrapping the world in red tape, they fashioned a duplicate of creation which spurned the natural order set in place by the divine.

If political and social stagnation was facilitated by digestive anatomies in 'Red Tape', this was taken to its scatological conclusion in the Circumlocution Office. For in *Little Dorrit*, bureaucracy not only meant vomiting red tape, but the continuous consumption and re-consumption of waste – the meeting of the ouroboros' head and tail. It functions in the novel as an all-encompassing organisation which absorbs and traps individuals within its entropic circulatory system. Sarah Winter writes that the Circumlocution Office epitomises *Little Dorrit's* obsession with 'epistemological blockages and institutional paralysis', but this wording perhaps obfuscates the fact that these deadlocks can often resemble motion and circulation.³³ The Circumlocution Office after all is described as a machine of 'political perpetual motion'. (*Dorrit*, p. 402) Like sanitarians' utopian ideals of a self-perpetuating exchange between excrement and food, it is built on the misplaced assumption that waste is enough to sustain progress. Moreover, the operations of the Circumlocution Office are described in terms which gesture towards the scatological. Lord Decimus Tite Barnacle, the patriarch of the Barnacle family and the controller of the Circumlocution Office is introduced as 'in the odour of Circumlocution'. (*Dorrit*, p. 401) *In its odour and not merely surrounded by it, the unwholesome air of the Office stench clings to and subsumes those mired in its operations – unable to be shaken off or diffused. Emblematic of bad circulation, the Circumlocution Office is entropic, inefficient, congested with the waste of its own processes and lacking a moral centre to anchor its motions. It is worth quoting Dickens' description of the Circumlocution Office at length:*

Because the Circumlocution Office went on mechanically, every day, keeping this wonderful, all-sufficient wheel of statesmanship, How not to do it, in motion. Because the Circumlocution Office was down upon any ill-advised public servant who was going to do it, or who appeared to be by any surprising accident in remote danger of doing it, with a minute, and a memorandum, and a letter of instructions that extinguished him. It

³³ Sarah Winter, *The Pleasures of Memory: Learning to Read with Charles Dickens* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011), p. 212. See also for analyses of blockages in *Little Dorrit*:

George Yeats, "'Dirty Air': *Little Dorrit's* Atmosphere"; Christopher Herbert, 'Filthy Lucre: Victorian Ideas of Money', *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 66 (2011), 328 – 354.

Rebecca Rainof, 'The Bachelor's Purgatory: Arrested Development and the Progress of Shades', in *The Victorian Novel of Adulthood: Plot and Purgatory in the Fictions of Maturity* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2015), pp. 116 – 155 (pp. 140 – 141).

was this spirit of national efficiency in the Circumlocution Office that had gradually led to its having something to do with everything. Mechanics, natural philosophers, soldiers, sailors, petitioners, memorialists, people with grievances, people who wanted to prevent grievances, people who wanted to redress grievances, jobbing people, jobbed people, people who couldn't get rewarded for merit, and people who couldn't get punished for demerit, were all indiscriminately tucked up under the foolscap paper of the Circumlocution Office.

Numbers of people were lost in the Circumlocution Office. Unfortunates with wrongs, or with projects for the general welfare (and they had better have had wrongs at first, than have taken that bitter English recipe for certainly getting them), who in slow lapse of time and agony had passed safely through other public departments; who, according to rule, had been bullied in this, over-reached by that, and evaded by the other; got referred at last to the Circumlocution Office, and never reappeared in the light of day. Boards sat upon them, secretaries minuted upon them, commissioners gabbled about them, clerks registered, entered, checked, and ticked them off, and they melted away. In short, all the business of the country went through the Circumlocution Office, except the business that never came out of it; and *its* name was Legion. (*Dorrit*, pp. 113 – 114)

The minuting, checking, ticking, entering the gabble of commissioners are accompanied by other repetitions : Barnacle's Junior's eyeglass popping out, and then being replaced; a suitor's inquiry of 'Mr Wobbler?' which has to be repeated several times, and the name of the Circumlocution Office itself which saturates Dickens' prose. All of these separate rhythms create a cacophony of activity which simulate the clatter of a machine, the noise of production. Though the comically long list of those who involved in the Circumlocution Office suggests an overflowing and irreducible assemblage of people, even they are drawn by centripetal force into its system and 'tucked under [its] foolscap paper': subsumed and hastily codified as bureaucratic detail. This is the case in Arthur Clennam's encounter with the Circumlocution Office where his enquiry of 'I want to know' is repeated again and again until it becomes part of the mechanistic clatter of the machine ('I want to know –' and Arthur Clennam again *mechanically* set forth what he wanted to know' [my emphasis]). (*Dorrit*, p. 122)

However, this is merely motion for motion's sake – the repetitious actions within the Circumlocution Office are meaningless and mask the stagnancy at the heart of the organisation. Within this swirling entropy are the Barnacle family which, like their namesake, inhabit tidal

waters, but remain inert and unmoveable. This is illustrated in the image that Dickens paints of an assembly of Barnacles within the Circumlocution Office:

A few steps brought [Arthur Clennam] to the second door on the left in the next passage. In that room he found three gentlemen; number one doing nothing particular, number two doing nothing particular, number three doing nothing particular. They seemed however, to be more directly concerned than the others had been in the effective execution of the great principle of the office, as there was an awful inner apartment with a double door, in which the Circumlocution Sages appeared to be assembled in council, and out of which there was an imposing coming of papers, and into which there was an imposing going of papers, almost constantly; wherein another gentleman, number four, was the active instrument. (*Dorrit*, pp. 122 – 123)

The namelessness and anonymity of these ‘Circumlocution Sages’ indicates the hollowness at the centre of the Circumlocution Office. With responsibility constantly deferred, passed from person to person, the Circumlocution Sages are the very embodiment of ‘Nobody’, evading both definition and responsibility. In this vacuum, the vast number of papers generated by the Circumlocution Office remain unprocessed, circulating redundantly. After absorbing and digesting the public’s enquiries (and the public itself), only leftovers remain, which like excrement, have had all worth extracted. The ‘awful inner apartment’ then stands in for the hidden innermost part of the body: the gut. With the constant coming and going of papers through its double doors, the scene is one of an obscene body consuming and excreting waste.

Like the circulation of waste around the ouroboros’ body, the endless stream of papers eschews the processes which transform waste back into a useful product. Instead, in this cloistered enclosure, all that is produced is fated to remain trapped. Mr Wobbler’s exclamation of ‘Shut the door after you. You’re letting a devil of a draught here!’ not only aligns the Circumlocution Office’s attitude of self-servitude with the airlessness of the Marshalsea but betrays the precarious balance which must be maintained in order to prevent its own disintegration. (*Dorrit*, p. 122) Fresh air must not be allowed to ventilate the system, nor stale air be let out. With all doors closed and the system completely enclosed, it continues to circulate the same old air: the correspondences, forms, minutes, and memoranda around its body. These excretions form an economy of waste comparable to the contaminants (the industrial waste, excrement, and disease) which cycle around the Victorian sanitary system. The Circumlocution Office, sustained on ‘political perpetual motion’ emblematises the tautological entanglement and the foreclosure of structures required to make this endless cycling of matter seem possible.

‘Fag and Grind’: Unethical Consumption and the Circulation of Capital
 There was something monstrous about Britain’s insatiable desire to consume. The German chemist Justus von Liebig suggests that the agricultural industry’s reliance on imported fertiliser disturbed a natural order where man was engaged in the continual restoration of the soil. In this instance, Liebig was particularly critical of Britain’s bonemeal industry, which from the 1820s to 1840s was the fertiliser of choice for many farmers. In 1840, imports of bone into England were worth £260,000 (approximately £20 million in today’s money). But these bones had troubling origins: fertiliser manufacturers looked to the battlefields of Leipzig, Waterloo and Austerlitz, which were rich in the bones of horse and fallen soldiers who had died in the Napoleonic Wars. Once dug up, these bones were imported into Britain in great quantity to bone grinders in Hull. The pulverised bones then made their way to agricultural markets in Doncaster, where they were sold to farmers across the country. In 1823, the quarterly magazine *The Investigator* stated the facts with a strain of dark humour:

It is now ascertained beyond a doubt, by actual experiments upon an extensive scale, that a dead soldier is a most valuable article of commerce; and, for ought known to the contrary, the good farmers of Yorkshire are, in great measure, indebted to the bones of their children for their daily bread. It is certainly a singular fact, that Great Britain should have sent out such multitudes of soldiers to fight the battles of this country upon the continent of Europe, and should then import their bones as an article of commerce to fatten her soil! ³⁴

Material bodies became literal fuel for the capitalist machine. The body of the soldier could do double duty for the state as military fodder and fertilising dust. The closest of familial relations were disrupted and inverted by the powerful forces of profit. This instance of recycling articulated a society where relationships had the potential to become cannibalistic.

James E. Marlow argues that the cannibal was a habitual figure in Dickens’s later fiction, most notably in *A Tale of Two Cities*, *Great Expectations*, *Our Mutual Friend* and *Edwin Drood*. In these texts, the cannibalistic appetite for others was embedded in social and class relationships. ³⁵ In *Little Dorrit*, Dickens constructs a world where this cannibalism is depersonalised. There is a

³⁴ ‘War and Commerce’, *The Investigator*, 6 (1823), 413.

³⁵ James E. Marlow, ‘English Cannibalism: Dickens after 1859’, *Studies in English Literature, 1500 – 1900*, 23 (1983), 647 – 666. For more on Dickens and cannibalism, see also: Harry Stone, *The Night Side of Dickens: Cannibalism, Passion, Necessity* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1994) and Kristen Guest, ‘Cannibalism, Class, and Victorian Melodrama’, in *Eating Their Words: Cannibalism and the Boundaries of Cultural Identity*, ed. by Kristen Guest (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), pp. 108 – 128.

menacing anthropophagy in the novel's villains. Rigaud, for example has a voracious appetite and intimidates others through suggestive nicknames: 'pig' for the nervous Cavalletto and 'cabbage' for the sneering Flintwinch. However, demeaning patterns of work also suggest a cannibalism through the grinding of capitalist subjects to dust – a simplified unit of humanity which could circulate around, feed and fertilise the city.

In *Dickens to Dracula*, Gail Turney Houston argues that Victorian anxieties regarding a newly emerging and unstable a capitalist economy express themselves in the Gothic or supernatural. The capitalised subject, alienated and fragmented, is compelled to 'enact both the duty to increase the velocity of circulation as well as the ultimate outcome of such energies, the collapse of energy'.³⁶ Turney Houston asserts that the banking panic of *Little Dorrit* is a spectacular collapse of the dynamism which powers capitalism and indeed the novel itself. This breakdown is foreshadowed by the spectre haunting the house of Clennam, which drives Affrey into madness and, it seems, drives the eventual disintegration and collapse of its walls. (Turney Houston, pp. 86 – 90) However, haunting within the novel not only suggests a disruptive presence that disturbs the economic and social orders, but a kind of incorporealisation. The grinding circulations of *Little Dorrit* create a subject who is worn down into their component parts – a ghost rattling around the machine.

As I discussed in chapter 1, both Chadwick and Ward both argued that the velocity of circulations of waste was intrinsic to its capacity to succeed. If waste were to stagnate, it could not be propelled towards productive transformation, but would instead inevitably become errant, undisciplined, and undisciplinable. Circular motion, therefore, was key to powering a utopian wasteless society. However, this motion could create the opposite – unproductive and mechanical movements where waste was not transformed – as it were, spiritually born anew – but stuck in a condition of contamination and corruption.

The perversion of spiritual rebirth is captured in the stiff, unmoving theology of Mrs Clennam. Turning away from the loving and merciful God of the New Testament, she figures herself as an arm of the vengeful Old Testament God, bringing hellfire and damnation on her enemies. In his working notes Dickens indicated that he wanted to 'Set the darkness and vengeance against the New Testament'. (*Dorrit*, p. 828) Her Christianity is not one of mercy, grace and resurrection, but of eternal condemnation. Mrs Clennam enacts this judgement by a process of consumption –

³⁶ Gail Turley Houston, *From Dickens to Dracula: Gothic, Economics, and Victorian Fiction* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 86. Further references to this edition are included after quotations in the text.

what Turney Houston defines as her ‘virile economic appetite’.³⁷ The following incident takes place after Arthur Clennam’s return home, where Dickens meticulously details the precise choreography of Mrs Clennam’s eucharistic ritual:

Upon this, the old woman cleared the little table, went out of the room, and quickly returned with a tray on which was a dish of little rusks and a small precise pat of butter, cool, symmetrical, white, and plump. The old man who had been standing by the door in one attitude during the whole interview, looking at the mother up-stairs as he had looked at the son down-stairs, went out at the same time, and, after a longer absence, returned with another tray on which was the greater part of a bottle of port wine (which, to judge by his panting, he had brought from the cellar), a lemon, a sugar-basin, and a spice box. With these materials and the aid of the kettle, he filled a tumbler with a hot and odorous mixture, measured out and compounded with as much nicety as a physician’s prescription. Into this mixture Mrs Clennam dipped certain of the rusks, and ate them; while the old woman buttered certain other of the rusks, which were to be eaten alone. When the invalid had eaten all the rusks and drunk all the mixture, the two trays were removed; and the books and the candle, watch, handkerchief, and spectacles were replaced upon the table. She then put on the spectacles and read certain passages aloud from a book—sternly, fiercely, wrathfully—praying that her enemies (she made them by her tone and manner expressly hers) might be put to the edge of the sword, consumed by fire, smitten by plagues and leprosy, that their bones might be ground to dust, and that they might be utterly exterminated. As she read on, years seemed to fall away from her son like the imaginings of a dream, and all the old dark horrors of his usual preparation for the sleep of an innocent child to overshadow him. (*Dorrit*, pp. 48 – 49)

Dickens implies that Mrs Clennam derives a sensuous pleasure from this conspicuous display of consumption that borders on the obscene. The port wine – or Christ’s blood – has been polluted and corrupted by worldly flavourings, and becomes a ‘hot and odorous mixture’, which could very well be the pungent emanations from rotting blood. Mrs Clennam is, as Dickens suggests, a maneater. Her religion hinges on the perversion of the eucharist where bread does not become flesh but rather the reverse: the flesh of her enemies is ‘ground to dust’. Reminiscent of the refrain from the classic fairy tale Jack the Giant Killer, ‘I’ll grind his bones to make my bread’, it also points to the pulverisation of human bones to make fertiliser. Under the ire of Mrs

³⁷ Gail Turley Houston, *Consuming Fictions: Gender, Class, and Hunger in Dickens’s Novels* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1994), p. 136.

Clennam, the processes which transform the body into food are foreshortened as individuals are inducted into vicious circulations of waste. The dry rusks Mrs Clennam consumes might as well be the bodies of her enemies. The ‘cool symmetrical, white, and plump’ rusks evoke the cleansed flesh of the innocent; cut down to size so that they can be easily absorbed by Mrs Clennam’s digestive system and, inevitably, passed into the sewage system below.

Later, taunting Mrs Clennam with his knowledge of her deceit regarding Amy Dorrit’s inheritance, Flintwinch puts the matter clearly:

I have been faithful to you, and useful to you, and I am attached to you. But I can’t consent, and I won’t consent, and I never did consent, and I never will consent to be lost in you. Swallow up everybody else, and welcome. The peculiarity of my temper is, ma’am, that I won’t be swallowed up alive. (*Dorrit*, p. 187)

Flintwinch draws back the curtain on Clennam’s religious ritual, revealing the cannibalism that underpins it. Like the exploitative economics of the Victorian city, Mrs Clennam relies, and thrives, on bodies which have been systematically disciplined, deconstructed, and disembodied – only to discard them as waste when their value has been extracted. As in a Benthamite dystopia (or utopia, perhaps) ‘usefulness’ becomes the sole measure of human worth. In such systems, the individual is ground down, drained of worth so that they remain only a hollow shell.

The amoral economic system which drives *Little Dorrit* also expresses itself in the commodification and automation of its subjects. The rent-collector Pancks, working under the unscrupulous Casby, defines life as a duty in which one is always ‘grinding, drudging, toiling’: a mechanical clatter where the individual becomes machine, albeit one in disrepair which rattles and shakes. (*Dorrit*, p. 166) Through Dickens’ description, Pancks is transformed into a machine: ‘He was in a perspiration, and snorted and sniffed and puffed and blew, like a little labouring steam-engine’. (*Dorrit*, p. 154) But rather than his motions forging forward towards some greater end, Pancks is driving on circular tracks. In a moment of explosive frustration he cries, ‘What has my life been? Fag and grind, fag and grind, turn the wheel, turn the wheel!’ (*Dorrit*, p. 783) Mr Clennam also reveals of his life and work abroad that ‘[I was] always grinding in a mill I always hated; what I to be expected from me in middle life? Will, purpose, hope?’ (*Dorrit*, p. 34) This imagery runs through the novel: from the Circumlocution Office, which a young Barnacle describes as a ‘windmill’ which ‘grinds immense quantities of chaff’ to the worker of the city ‘the dispersed grinders in the vast mill’. (*Dorrit*, p.722, p. 532) Labour represents a repetitious motion, a bad and abrasive circulation which erodes the labourer on every circuit and produces insubstantial ‘chaff’ as a waste product.

Excremental Pressure: Mr Merdle and the Consumption of Waste

The figure of Mr Merdle promises a way out of the monotonous duty of work and production. His ‘magic name’, Bar the lawyer obsequiously tells him, ‘will suffice for all’. (*Dorrit*, p. 532) His name has the power to erase debts, to generate prosperity and influence the highest levels of Parliament. Mr Plornish extols him as ‘*the* one, mind you, to put us all to rights in respects of that which all on us looked to, and bring us all safe home as much as we needed, mind you, fur toe be brought’. (*Dorrit*, p. 540) Speculating in his enterprises is seen to guarantee success – money seems to pour forth effortlessly without the need for the ‘grind’. Despite this optimism in the soundness of Merdle and his monetary empire, the characters of *Little Dorrit* are simply exchanging one malfunctioning system for another. His ‘magic name’ after all is related to *merde* (that is, *shit*). A name in Dickens’ novels, Harry Stone reminds us ‘signals the truth within; each name is a token of being and destiny’.³⁸ As we shall see, for Merdle, the enactment this scatological ‘destiny’ constitutes a pollution of self and society. Infected by the mere mention of his name, they become implicated in his excremental economics. The speculative practises he encourages and facilitates collapse in on themselves, revealing his economics to have been a precarious and destructive cycle with nothing more than a fiction – nobody – at its centre.

Merdle’s dirty business practises symptomise in his own ill digestive health. Throughout the novel, he displays an anxiety about his gut, a suspicion (though rebuffed by his physician) that it is defective. In a conspicuous lack of consumption, he eschews the lavish feasts at the grand dinners he hosts for ‘his usual poor eighteenpenny-worth of food in his usual indigestive way’. (*Dorrit*, p. 552) Despite this deficiency in appetite however, he still grows fat: after his death he is revealed to be a ‘heavily made man, with an obtuse head and coarse, mean, common features.’ (*Dorrit*, p. 692) Gwen Hyman suggests that Merdle swells on the intake of the ‘nutrition-free fare’ of ‘the greed of those around him’, an indictment of the insubstantial artifice of the monied classes.³⁹ However, I argue that the secret food that fuels Merdle is altogether more disgusting. If Mrs Clennam’s cannibalistic consumption carries the veneer of spiritual purification, Mr Merdle’s own capitalist consumption is unambiguously a poison, a dark shadow haunting his ever-growing influence. Considering Merdle through the logic of what Catherine Waters calls his

³⁸ Harry Stone, ‘What’s in a Name: Fantasy and Calculation in Dickens’, *Dickens Studies Annual*, 14 (1985), 191 – 204 (p. 203).

³⁹ Gwen Hyman, “By Heaven I must eat at the cost of some other man!”: Gluttons and Hunger Artist in *Little Dorrit?*, in *Making a Man: Gentlemanly Appetites in the Nineteenth-Century British Novel* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2009), pp. 88 – 126 (p. 116).

economy of ‘perpetual circulation’, his own excremental remains are continually being consumed and expelled from his body.⁴⁰

To understand this, first it is important to examine Merdle as a double emblem. His function in *Little Dorrit* reveals a Freudian slippage between gold and faeces. In terms of his money, he is a symbol with no referent. His name promises riches, but these are riches which are as phantasmal as his physical participation in Society. He haunts his home like a ‘lost waif or a phantom without a body’.⁴¹ But if he is indeed a kind of ghost, he leaves excremental marks behind him. He ‘ooze[s] sluggishly and muddily about his drawing-room’, so too is his own blood ‘sluggish’ within his veins and in the midst of conversation is ‘deeply intent upon a dust-cart that was passing the windows’. (*Dorrit*, p. 558, p. 605) The proximity of money and excrement belies the precariousness or perhaps the failure of his alchemy. Not clothed in gold, he is revealed to be mired in shit. If excrement can be metonymically transformed into wealth by theories of waste recycling, Dickens suggests that the transformation is always in danger of reversal or may remain incomplete. Resisting metamorphosis, excrement may still linger.

As excrement, the circulation of Merdle’s name around Society in whispers, gossip and rumours and his name present ‘in everybody’s mouth’ takes upon a new obscene meaning. (*Dorrit*, p. 541) Not only does this circulation mimic the ‘fluidity of his capital’, a representation of the good, frictionless circulation which at greater velocities generates more profit, but symbolises the dangerous cycles deliver faecal poison to the unwitting consumer.⁴² In uttering Merdle’s name or investing in his enterprises – people are unknowingly tainted with a ‘Merdle’s complaint’ (*Dorrit*, p. 241). The nature of this complaint is explicated by Dickens in a chapter aptly named ‘The Progress of an Epidemic’:

That it is at least as difficult to stay a moral infection as a physical one; that such a disease will spread with the malignity and rapidity of the Plague; that the contagion when it has once made head, will spare no pursuit or condition, but will lay hold on constitutions: is a fact as firmly established by experience as that we human creatures breathe an atmosphere. A blessing beyond appreciation would be conferred upon mankind, if the tainted, in whose weakness or wickedness these virulent disorders are

⁴⁰ Catherine Waters, *Dickens and the Politics of the Family* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 117.

⁴¹ Robert Kiely, ‘Charles Dickens: the lives of some important nobodies’, in *Nineteenth-Century Lives*, ed. by Laurence S. Lockridge and others (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 59 – 81 (p. 75).

⁴² Ayse Celikkol, ‘The Compression of Space in Charles Dickens’ *Little Dorrit*’, in *Romances of Free Trade: British Literature, Laissez-Faire, and the Global Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 123 – 142 (p. 129).

bread, could be instantly seized and placed in close confinement (not to say summarily smothered) before the poison is communicable.

As a vast fire will fill the air to a great distance with its roar, so the sacred flame which the mighty Barnacles had fanned caused the air to resound more and more with the name of Merdle. It was deposited on every lip, and carried into every ear. (*Dorrit*, p. 539)

Like a miasmatic vapour, Merdle drifts unimpeded through the air infiltrating each and every space within society. Dickens' remedy for this is a form of medical isolation. Mr Merdle as excrement, would be matter *in place*, contained within a stratified system which prevents his moral infection from spreading. Merdle belongs in the sewer, a space of 'close confinement' in which the noxious fumes of his name cannot seep free and circulate endlessly around Society. Furthermore, as 'Society and [Mr Merdle] had so much to do with one another in all things else, that it is hard to imagine his complaint [...] being solely his own affair', diffused amongst society, Mr Merdle shares his infection with the London population (*Dorrit*, p. 241). This infection enters through the mouths of the public, for, 'deposited on every lip', the proclamation of Merdle's name is tantamount to eating shit.

However, the consumption of excrement also implicates Mr Merdle himself. This is suggested in an exchange between him and Mr Dorrit where the latter is seeking to invest his money in Merdle's Ponzi scheme:

"You are well, I hope, Mr Merdle?"

"I am as well as I—yes, I am as well as I usually am," said Mr Merdle.

"Your occupations must be immense."

"Tolerably so. But—Oh dear no, there's not much the matter with me,"² said Mr Merdle, looking round the room.

"A little dyspeptic?" Mr Dorrit hinted.

"Very likely. But I—Oh, I am well enough," said Mr Merdle.

There were black traces on his lips where they met, as if a little train of gunpowder had been fired there; and he looked like a man who, if his natural temperament had been quicker, would have been very feverish that morning. (*Dorrit*, p. 602)

These 'black traces' on Mr Merdle's lips certainly can be read scatologically – they are the tell-tale signs of the excremental miasma that permeates the social atmosphere of Society. It is telling that

this detail appears at the moment Mr Dorrit meets with Mr Merdle seeking to invest his money in his enterprises. Mr Dorrit has caught the moral infection of Merdle, and as it comes to its critical state it is passed back to its point of origin. In this ouroboric economy of waste Merdle feeds on his own excrement and inhales disease after it has circulated around Society. He grows fat from his own notoriety (the *merde* which is in everybody's mouth), which in turn increases his wealth.

This circulation is distilled in one potent image:

Mr Merdle's right hand was filled with the evening paper, and the evening paper was full of Mr Merdle. His wonderful enterprise, his wonderful wealth, his wonderful Bank, were the fattening food of the evening paper that night. (*Dorrit*, p. 527)

With the paper in Merdle's right hand, it is poised for use at the privy. The fragile dissolvable toilet paper as we know it today only became available to the American public in 1857, reaching production in England in the 1880s. Victorians therefore used other materials to clean themselves up – most commonly the newspaper. Indeed, literature deemed useless or inferior was colloquially termed 'bum-fodder' or 'bumf' as early as the 17th century.⁴³ This is, it seems, an accurate term for the papers which uncritically extol Merdle's achievements. But considering the scatological etymology of his name, they are also smeared with excrement, fully invested in consuming and regurgitating *merde*. The circularity of the opening sentence which both begins and ends with Mr Merdle is indicative of the perpetual reciprocity between the paper and Merdle. His name, once disseminated, returns back to himself, from which it is again disseminated. This is of course, a destructive cycle as the fattening food which fills the papers, the 'nutrition-free fare' of Merdle's waste. (Hyman, p. 116)

In this process of continual infection and re-infection of himself, through a system of waste which cycles with increasing velocity and entropy, collapse is inevitable. In the wake of Merdle's suicide, Society diagnoses the cause as 'Pressure':

There was a general moralising upon Pressure, in every street. All the people who had tried to make money and had not been able to do it, said, There you were! You no sooner began to devote yourself to the pursuit of wealth than you got Pressure. The idle people improved the occasion in a similar manner. See, said they, what you brought yourself to by work, work, work! You persisted in working, you overdid it. Pressure came

⁴³ 'bum fodder', in *The Oxford English Dictionary* [online] <<https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/53562708>> [accessed 27 January 2022].

on, and you were done for! This consideration was very potent in many quarters, but nowhere more so than among the young clerks and partners who had never been in the slightest danger of overdoing it. These, one and all, declared, quite piously, that they hoped they would never forget the warning as long as they lived, and that their conduct might be so regulated as to keep off Pressure, and preserve them, a comfort to their friends, for many years. (*Dorrit*, p. 671)

Although this 'Pressure' is here considered a symptom of Merdle's wealth, the diagnosis is in a sense correct. Considering the metaphorical exchange of gold and excrement, Merdle has disintegrated from the build-up of waste within his body. If sewage were allowed to build up in sewers, not only would this eventually lead to its eventual overflow, but as one sanitarian wrote, 'the gasses of decomposition, being lighter than air, flow in ascending current toward the highest point of sewerage, where the accumulation exerts an enormous pressure'.⁴⁴

In the end, it is pressure which does Merdle in. (In Bleak House, this pressure leads to actual explosion, the spontaneous combustion of Mr Krook). His puffed-up image finally collapses when he quietly succumbs to suicide: 'he, the shining wonder, the new constellation to be followed by the wise men bringing gifts, until it stopped over a certain carrion at the bottom of a bath and disappeared – was simply the greatest Forger and the greatest Thief that ever cheated the gallows'. (*Dorrit*, p. 696) The holy aura he managed to maintain is punctured with the revelation of his dead, naked body. He is finally revealed to be carrion – putrefying flesh, fetid filth – who poisons the air with his noxious vapours. Thus, the scene of the crime where 'A skylight had been opened to release the steam with which the room had been filled' is symbolic of the putrid fumes which are finally, allowed to evacuate his body. (*Dorrit*, p. 668) The suicidal act of cutting his jugular vein acts as a crude parody of a bloodletting where his body can be purged. However, the excremental gasses do not dissipate, but still hover in the air; '[the steam] hung, condensed into water-drops, heavily upon the walls, and heavily upon the face and figure in the bath'. (*Dorrit*, p. 668) These drops function as Merdle's spectral presence which, unable to ascend to heaven, haunt the air. Therefore, even in Merdle's death his name still circulates as a miasma in the atmosphere:

But, at about the time of High Change, Pressure began to wane, and appalling whispers to circulate, east, west, north, and south. At first they were faint, and went no further than a doubt whether Mr Merdle's wealth would be found to be as vast as had been

⁴⁴ Alfred L. Caroll, 'Preventable Sickness', in *The Sanitarian: A Monthly Journal Volume III*, ed. by A. N. Bell (New York: McDivitt, Campbell & Co. Publishers, 1875), pp. 403 – 409 (p. 407).

supposed; whether there might not be a temporary difficulty in 'realising' it; whether there might not even be a temporary suspension (say a month or so), on the part of the wonderful Bank. As the whispers became louder, which they did from that time every minute, they became more threatening [...] So, the talk, lashed louder and higher by confirmation on confirmation, and by edition after edition of the evening papers, swelled into such a roar when night came, as might have brought one to believe that a solitary watcher on the gallery above the Dome of St Paul's would have perceived the night air to be laden with a heavy muttering of the name of Merdle, coupled with every form of execration. (*Dorrit*, pp. 671 – 672)

No longer does the circulation of Mr Merdle's name stand for the circulation of wealth, but its finally exposed as *merde*. The cumulative increase of his name, circulating through the mouths of society finally leads to the rupture of the economy of gossip which has fed Merdle's notoriety. These execrations are excretions – his name is spat from people's mouths as an expletive.

'Characters to be disposed of': Tying-up ends and the Search for Productivity

The final chapters of *Little Dorrit*, named sequentially, 'Closing in', 'Closed', 'Going', 'Going!', 'Gone' suggest a winding down or petering out of the frantic energy and chaotic circulations of the novel. However, to the contrary, the narrative suddenly grows thick with convolutions and contrivances that attempt to bring the novel to a close. Blandois blackmails Mrs Clennam with the knowledge of a will she has been hiding that would have endowed Amy Dorrit with great wealth. The House of Clennam collapses, crushing Blandois and possibly Flintwinch. Mrs Clennam is forever paralysed, presumably with shock. A put-upon Pancks finally turns on his master and exposes Casby as a callous miser. Meagles goes on an international hunt for Miss Wade and a missing copy of Amy's will which he finds along with a repentant Tattycoram. Amy and the still imprisoned Arthur get engaged, and Arthur's money troubles are solved when Doyce returns from Russia a rich and successful man. From the wreckage of Merdle's monetary empire, Dickens is busy in the work of reconstruction and the search for productivity – meaningful productivity that is. However, even though Arthur Clennam and Amy Dorrit's narrative is closed by the descent into 'a modest life of usefulness and happiness', this is only made possible by the subsumption into 'the roaring streets' as 'the noisy and the eager, and the arrogant and the froward and the vain, fretted and chafed, and made their usual uproar'. (*Dorrit*, p 806) Just as the inhabitants of London are still pre-occupied with the chafing grind of their futile circuits, the novel cycles again to the tumultuous circus adorning its cover.

Garrett Stewart reads the troubling ending of *Little Dorrit* as a mark of the ‘labor it takes to arrest the unspoken violence of the final plot turn’.⁴⁵ He argues that the subordination of Dickens’ social critique to the happy matrimonial ending which closes so many of his novels interrupts and corrects the trauma which has been exposed through the course of the plot. Camilla Hoel, on the other hand, interprets the ending of *Little Dorrit* as an ironic turn: stamped with the signs of fictionality, suspending it from the novel which has preceded.⁴⁶ Thus, its social critique can be preserved, and not be undone by a happy ending. However, I argue that the closure of *Little Dorrit* is a continuation of Dickens’ critique of redundant cycles and corrupted transformation. To borrow Stewart’s phrase, the *labour* of the final chapters reinstates (or seems to reinstate) waste to its correct and natural position, taking the place of the grinding labour which continuously produces and displaces waste within the novel. The mechanisms of Dickens’ puzzle-like plot that are exposed as the novel closes are reflected in the meticulous plotting revealed in his plans for the novel. Here he carefully lays out foreshadowing for events to come and characters are moved about like chess pieces. His notes become more frantic as the ending looms. ‘Finish Flintwinch’ he writes. ‘Rigaud smashed’. Regarding Mrs Clennam’s immobility: ‘Up and out’ (underlined five times). And in the plan for chapter 32 where Casby is exposed, ‘Take up characters to be disposed of’. (*Dorrit*, p. 828) These antagonists, like waste, are swiftly swept away and done away with, no longer allowed to participate in or propagate the novel’s entropic circulations, infecting others with the stench of misery and squalor.

Like the implosion of Merdle’s monetary empire, the collapse of the House of Clennam is sudden conversion to waste. Rigaud is found after digging through the ruins: ‘they found the dirty heap of rubbish that had been the foreigner before his head had been shivered to atoms, like so much glass, by the great beam that lay upon him, crushing him.’ (*Dorrit*, p. 776) The digging continues until the house is completely dug away, but though Flintwinch’s ‘hollow, subterranean, suffocated’ cries can be heard, his body, alive or otherwise, is never uncovered:

As it seemed reasonable to conclude that a man who had never been buried could not be unburied, the diggers gave up when their task was done, and did not dig down for him into the depths of the earth.

This was taken in ill part by a great many people, who persisted in believing that Flintwinch was lying somewhere among the London geological formation. Nor was their

⁴⁵ Garrett Stewart, ‘Dickens and the Narratology of Closure’, *Critical Inquiry*, 34 (2008), 509 – 542 (p. 514).

⁴⁶ Camilla Ulleland Hoel, ‘Secret Plots: The False Endings of Dickens’s Novels’, *Victoriographies*, 8 (2018), pp. 230 – 246.

belief much shaken by repeated intelligence which came over in course of time, that an old man who wore the tie of his neckcloth under one ear, and who was very well known to be an Englishman, consorted with the Dutchmen on the quaint banks of the canals of the Hague and in the drinking-shops of Amsterdam, under the style and designation of Mynheer von Flyntevynge. (*Dorrit*, p. 777)

If Flintwinch was indeed crushed by the crumbling House of Clennam, this scene would serve as a final, fatal irony. After his resistance to being ‘swallowed alive’ by Mrs Clennam, it is her home that claims him. He and his body are disposed of and returned to the depths of the earth. Like displaced waste he is removed to an altogether more natural place where he is now inert and inoffensive. However, the previous extract displays the tenuous terms on which *Little Dorrit’s* characters are discarded. The dynamic narrative shift of space and time resurrects Flintwinch from his burial place as a ghostly figure haunting the cities of Europe. Like Merdle, just at the moment of eradication, Flintwinch de-materialises into an intangible form which makes its mysterious circulations beyond the purview of the narrative. His movements only reach our ears in whispers and gossip.

With the disgrace of Casby too, he is rendered a ghostly figure as he is finally disposed of. With his flowing white locks sheared by an enraged Pancks, he is left a ‘bare-polled, goggled-eyed, big-headed lumbering personage’. (*Dorrit*, p. 779) Dickens continues, ‘After staring at this phantom in return, in silent awe, Mr Pancks threw down his shears, and fled for a place of hiding’. (*Dorrit*, p. 784) Shattered by description into an assemblage of body parts, the fiction of the benevolent Patriarch collapses in on itself to reveal the lurid, spectral being that has been tenuously holding it together. In other words, the ‘driver’ who has been facilitating bad circulation, the call to continuously ‘fag and grind’ evaporates into the novel’s eponymous ‘nobody’. (*Dorrit*, p. 782)

Mr Dorrit’s Escape

The only escape from the novel’s circulations comes some chapters earlier, with the death of Mr Dorrit and his brother Frederick. Thrust into the extravagant and hollow world of wealth, the shadows of the Marshalsea and the monotony of its small world still follow him. In embarking on the Grand Tour, a rite of passage into upper-class respectability, the Dorrit family begin a slow cycle through the European continent – Paris, Venice and Rome. However, thought this marks their ascent in fortune, their trip is troubled by the premonitions of their inevitable descent. As Mr Dorrit glides through the Italian countryside in a grand carriage directed towards Rome, this premonition appears as a ghostly haunting:

Letting down the glass again and looking out, he perceived himself assailed by nothing worse than a funeral procession, which came mechanically chaunting by, with an indistinct show of dirty vestments, lurid torches, swinging censers, and a great cross borne before a priest. He was an ugly priest by torchlight; of a lowering aspect, with an overhanging brow; and as his eyes met those of Mr Dorrit, looking bareheaded out of the carriage, his lips, moving as they chaunted, seemed to threaten that important traveller; likewise the action of his hand, which was in fact his manner of returning the traveller's salutation, seemed to come in aid of that menace. (*Dorrit*, p. 625)

The priest may as well be death himself, and the funeral he is officiating his own. This ghoulis procession both reflects and reverses his passage into Rome. Mr Dorrit's 'coach load of luxuries from the capitals of Europe' are transfigured as ominous funereal ornaments. (*Dorrit*, p. 625) Likewise, his opulent clothes become 'dirty vestments'. Although saturated with antipathy towards Roman Catholicism, this passage illustrates the uncanny moment where opposite motions on the cycle – the ascent and descent, or the progression into Rome and regression out of it – collide.

As Mr Dorrit's health and mental state further decline, time and space are subject to further collapse. This marks a turning point where his ascent becomes a descent. Thus, the two halves of his life, neatly defined by the structure of the novel as 'poverty' and 'riches' become confused:

The broad stairs of his Roman palace were contracted in his failing sight to the narrow stairs of his London prison [...] When he heard footsteps in the street, he took them for the old weary tread in the yards. When the hour came for locking up, he supposed all strangers to be excluded for the night. When the time for opening came again, he was so anxious to see Bob, that they were fain to patch up a narrative how that Bob – many a year death then, gentle turnkey – had taken cold, but hoped to be out tomorrow, or the next day, or the next at the farthest. (*Dorrit*, p. 637)

This, R. Rupert Roopnaraine writes, 'is the final triumph of circularity'.⁴⁷ His past rushes into the present as the 'whirling wheel of life' comes to a close – the wheel that returns him to the same place at which he began. (*Dorrit*, p. 705) In another moment of spatial collapse, he reads his own illness in his brother, telling Mrs General, 'Fast declining, madam. A wreck. A ruin. Mouldering away before our eyes'. (*Dorrit*, p. 631) Dickens gestures towards the necessary processes of decay

⁴⁷ R. Rupert Roopnaraine, "Time and the Circle in "Little Dorrit"", *Dickens Studies Annual*, 3 (1974), 54 – 76 (p. 72).

and putrefaction that were required, at least in the case of waste, to become renewed and reborn. Here, there lies the smallest glimmer of redemption.

In the monthly number plans for *Little Dorrit*, Dickens laid out his preparations for Mr Dorrit's eventual demise: 'So Mr Dorrit returns to Rome, building, building, building the Castle, that is to come down Crash! in the next chapter'. (*Dorrit*, p. 882) The castle, Dorrit's airy fantasy of grandeur, dramatically collapses as the bars of the Marshalsea once again close in around him. Although this puts this moment in alignment with the catastrophic implosion of Mr Merdle's empire, or the literal collapse of the House of Clennam, Mr Dorrit's death is a quiet one, suggesting more of a disintegration and dissipation:

Quietly, quietly, all the lines of the plan of the great Castle melted one after another. Quietly, quietly, the ruled and cross-ruled countenance on which they were traced became fair and blank. Quietly, quietly, the reflected marks of the prison bars and of the zig-zag iron on the wall-top, faded away. Quietly, quietly, the face subsided into a far younger likeness of her own than she had ever seen under the grey hair, and sank to rest. (*Dorrit*, p. 638)

In the culmination of the collapsing temporalities that have mounted during his time in Europe, he reverts to his younger self, a self that preceded the poisonous confinement of the Marshalsea. Thus, he fulfils the wish he once expressed. In a moment of bitterness and regret, he tells Amy, 'If you could see me as your mother saw me, you wouldn't believe it to be the creature you have only looked at through the bar of this cage.' His children, he adds, can never hope to truly know him 'Unless my face, when I am dead, subsides into the long departed look'. (*Dorrit*, p. 231) It is only in the completion of the circle and returning again to his youth in a magical metamorphosis, that Mr Dorrit can hope of escaping the shadows of the Marshalsea wall.

Unlike the novel's other endings – Amy and Arthur's dissipation into the roaring streets, Flintwinch's dematerialisation, Casby's transformation into a phantom or Merdle's dissipation into a ghostly miasma, Mr Dorrit's death does not beget more circulations but instead finally lays him to rest:

In the moonlight night; but the moon rose late, being long past the full. When it was high in the peaceful firmament, it shone through half-closed lattice blinds into the solemn room where the stumblings and wanderings of life had so lately ended. Two quiet figures were within the room; two figures, equally still and impassive, equally removed by and untraversable distance and all that it contains, though soon to lie in it. [...] The two

brothers were before their Father; far beyond the twilight judgment of this world; high above its mists and obscurities. (*Dorrit*, p. 639)

The ‘reflected marks of the prison bars’ find their negative in the shafts of light shining onto Dorrit’s deathbed. The accompanying illustration is a still-life of the moment of death, complete with the Dorrits’ Italian luxuries: his own morbid ornaments. (Figure 3.3) Mr Dorrit is barely visible, only a small bump beneath the covers. He seems to have dematerialised, finally taking him beyond the froward hubbub of the world and the tragic circularity of his life. Stewart reads the sudden awkward shift to the heavenly realm as indicative of Dickens’s agnosticism, arguing ‘The “distance” of death even when testified to, cannot be “traversed” by language, and the very moment of death’s “interval” is once more shunted entirely off-stage’.⁴⁸ However, considering Mr Dorrit’s course on the ‘whirling wheel of life’, this abridgement serves to demonstrate his final departure. ‘High above’ the world, they are physically removed from the vicious cycles below. This, for Dickens, seems the only means of permanent escape.

These transformations of Merdle, Flintwinch and Casby into ghostly miasma mark a wider failure of project of renewal. Just as Mrs Clennam’s eucharistic meal corrupts the potential of transformation – twisting it from a sanctifying act to one of degradation – so *Little Dorrit*’s characters are trapped in a purgatory, neither redeemed nor annihilated. They cannot be permanently disposed of or made useful, but instead re-emerge in new and altogether more troubling circulations. *Little Dorrit*’s rejection of closure begets yet more refuse. If the river of *Our Mutual Friend* figured as a symbol of rebirth, the stygian ‘deadly sewer’ running through the London of *Little Dorrit* betrays the uncomfortable proximity of the city to the Underworld, and the perilous ease in which the living can become the unliving. The ‘ghostly unrest’ that Dickens experienced in composing the novel blights the afterlife its characters. They dissipate into the phantom form haunting the novel’s empty cycles of waste, bureaucracy and capital.

⁴⁸ Garrett Stewart, *Death Sentences: Styles of Dying in British Fiction* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), p. 70.



Figure 3.3: 'The Night', Hablot Knight Browne (Phiz). *Little Dorrit*, p. 640.

Raw Materials and Undigested Facts: Systematic Breakdown in Henry Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor* (1849 – 1861)

See, here is what we call a book: what is it really – in itself – physically, what but a sundry collection of scraps of paper, tattooed with curious characters? Has it voice, soul, intellect, imagination? No! It is a dull lump of senseless matter – barren as so much granite – thoughtless as the rag from which it sprang.

Henry Mayhew, *What to Teach and How to Teach it: so that the Child may become a Wise and Good Man* (1848)

‘What is a raw material?’

In *Our Mutual Friend* the dredgerman Gaffer Hexam emerges out of the slime and ooze of the Thames. Dickens characterises him as a ‘Half savage [...] with no covering on his matted head, with his brown arms bare to between the elbow and the shoulder, with the loose knot of a looser kerchief lying low on his bare breast in a wilderness of beard and whisker’ and his dress ‘seeming to be made out of the mud that begrimed his boat’. ¹ His contact with the river through his work does not simply mean contamination, but a muddy fusion of the background and foreground, landscape and subject. Gaffer Hexam is impenetrably indistinct. The text’s description of him does not reveal any sort of inner truth or identity, but rather more obscurity: whether it be the ‘wilderness’ of his beard or the sticky Thames mud clinging to his body. The only item of clothing that emerges clearly is his noose-like kerchief, not yet fatally tightened.

Gaffer makes a living trawling the Thames for dead bodies and robbing them of their belongings. Through his philosophy, he justifies the morbidity of his work: ‘Has a dead man any use for money? Is it possible for a dead man to have money? What world does a dead man belong to? ‘Tother world. What world does money belong to? This world.’ (*Our Mutual Friend*, p. 4) In the reckless commodification of society’s subjects, the corpse is only such because its relationship with money has been irrevocably severed. With no connection to its former host, the body is indistinguishable from waste. Yet money, even when lost in the river mire persists as

¹ Charles Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 1 – 2. Further references to this edition are included after quotations in the text.

a master signifier, resisting the same reduction. For Gaffer at least, its intrinsic value is not under any doubt.

But as Gaffer reclaims the property of the dead, so too is he a 'borrowed' figure, sourced from Henry Mayhew's encyclopaedic project *London Labour and the London Poor*. Harland S. Nelson has made a strong argument for this case, identifying similarities in the dredgermen sketched out by Mayhew:

A short stout figure, with a face soiled and blackened with perspiration, and surmounted by a tarred sou'wester, the body habited in a soiled check shirt, with the sleeves turned up above the elbows, and exhibiting a pair of sunburnt brawny arms, is pulling at the sculls, not with the ease and lightness of the waterman, but toiling and tugging away like a galley slave, as he scours the bed of the river with his dredging-net in search of some hoped-for prize.²

Anne Humphreys suggests that the principal difference between Dickens' and Mayhew's style is their approach to representation. While 'Dickens tends to distance himself from his subject and create an impressively generalised picture of London life', Mayhew's 'compulsive search for detail renders him adept in particularizing the facts of slum life, although because of his obsession with minutiae, his picture [...] occasionally fails to converge into a coherent whole'.³ This is certainly the case with the dredgerman. While Gaffer's description in *Our Mutual Friend* disintegrates into river mud, Mayhew begins with a general view which then focuses on precise observations as he scans his subject. This dredgerman is not part of the Thames but uses his bodily power to oppose its incessant flow. Yet this, as Mayhew reminds us, is a kind of enforced labour. His 'toiling and tugging' is a means of keeping afloat, a means of distinguishing himself from the Thames lest he become one of the bodies claimed by its depths. Mayhew's dredgerman actively resists the generalising, obscuring effect of the river.

Gaffer's defence of reappropriation appears in *London Labour* too. Mayhew writes, 'The dredgers cannot by any reasoning or argument be made to comprehend that there is anything like dishonesty in emptying the pockets of a dead man. They consider them as their just perquisites [...] After having had all the trouble and labour, they allege that they have a much better right to whatever is to be got, than the police who have nothing whatever to do with it' (*Labour*, ii, p. 148) By this simple equation, the inherent morality of labour nullifies or even purifies the act of

² Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor*, 4 vols (London: Griffin, Bohn and Company, 1861), II, p. 149. Further references to this edition are included after quotations in the text.

³ Anne Humphreys, 'Dickens and Mayhew on the London Poor', *Dickens Studies Annual*, 4 (1975), 78 - 90 (p. 78).

thievery. Mayhew, unlike Dickens, who framed the work of the dredgerman as criminal activity, was not afraid to label them ‘industrious’ or ‘skilful’. The corpse, or the uninterested authorities shared the same inertia which allowed capital to slip between their fingers to be lost, perhaps irretrievably, in the murkiness of the city.

Though Dickens made no formal references to Mayhew or *London Labour*, the two were personally acquainted. In 1845 both performed in an amateur production of Ben Jonson’s *Every Man in His Humour*, along with an assortment of other *Punch* writers. However, their relationship seems to have gone cold; after 1845, Mayhew is conspicuously absent from Dickens letters. Anne Humphreys suggests that there may have been an element of jealousy or some unresolved quarrel which led to Dickens’ silence in relation to Mayhew.⁴ Despite this, the two shared an interest in the sanitary reform of London. In *London Labour*, Mayhew dedicated hundreds of pages to the ordure of the city – its dustheaps, sewers, contaminated waters and choked rivers. Mayhew’s London ran to excremental excess. But he was also invested in what Barbara Leckie defines as its ‘urban ecology’, the cycles which transformed valueless ‘waste’ into usable objects or materials.⁵ In the city he brought to life, everything was brimming with its potential forms: bones could become bonemeal, the intestines of animals could become catgut, rags could be turned to paper and the corpse could be stripped of its possessions. Even excrement in the sewers was imagined as a ‘precious ore, running in rich veins beneath the surface of our streets’. (*Labour*, ii, p. 161). It seems fitting then that *London Labour* was also recycled in the economy of London’s literature.

Nelson suggests that *London Labour* was ‘useful’ for Dickens in his composition of *Our Mutual Friend*, and that probing the relationship between the two ‘offers the chance to see Dickens at work, how he shaped his raw materials to his specific fictive aims’.⁶ The work of the dredgerman or the pure-finder may not be too dissimilar from that of the author: scanning the river, street, or text for material that may be useful: it is to be an arbiter of value. According to Dickens’ first biographer John Forster, the inspiration for the dredgermen in *Our Mutual Friend* originated in his walks by the riverside where ‘the many handbills he saw posted up, with dreary description of persons drowned in the river, suggested the long shore men and their ghastly calling whom he sketched out in Hexam and Riderhood.’⁷ *London Labour*, it seems, provided supplementary

⁴ Anne Humphreys, *Travels into the Poor Man’s Country: The Work of Henry Mayhew* (Firle, Sussex: Caliban Books, 1977), p. 180. Further references to this edition are included after quotations in the text.

⁵ Barbara Leckie, ‘Henry Mayhew, Urban Ecologist’, *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 48 (2020), 219 – 241.

⁶ Harland S. Nelson, ‘Dickens’s *Our Mutual Friend* and Henry Mayhew’s *London Labour and the London Poor*’, *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 3 (1965), 207 – 222 (p. 210).

⁷ John Forster, *The Life of Charles Dickens*, 3 vols, (London: Chapman and Hall, 1872 – 74), III (1874), p. 8

material to flesh out his portraits. There have been suggestions that *Our Mutual Friend* was not the only one of Dickens' novels to borrow from *London Labour*. Richard Dunn asserts that Krook and his rag-and-bottle shop bears the mark of Mayhew's description of these shops in the poorer sections of London.⁸ (Krook too, it may be added, indiscriminately gathers materials and texts yet cannot transform them into anything but waste). However, to regard Mayhew's text simply as 'raw material': a dust-heap of images and impressions primed for scavengery by his more famous contemporaries, is to overlook its own complicated composition, publication history and relationship with the city that it attempted to depict.

Using the same language as Nelson, Leah Price points out that Mayhew's articles for the *Morning Chronicle* from 1849 to 1850 were 'raw material' for the weekly periodical *London Labour*, which ran from 1850 to 1851. This in turn was collected, re-edited, expanded and published as a hefty-four volume series in 1861.⁹ Yet this was not all – it was a text which had many forms. Over Mayhew's lifetime, his sprawling project also spawned an abridged text called *London Characters* (1874), a lecture series performed by Mayhew named *The Hidden Life of London* (1852), a live dramatization called *Curious Conversavione* including its accompanying souvenir script: *A Few Odd Characters out of the London Streets* (1857). This is not to speak of the numerous bootleg editions and plagiarised extracts of *London Labour* from both home and abroad.

Just as *London Labour* was scavenged by others, so it was itself an exercise in self-cannibalisation and recycling. Mayhew's work also scoured the city in search for its contents. The phrase 'I found' which is almost obsessively repeated throughout *London Labour* is more than a rhetorical tick but expresses a mode of discovery in which Mayhew is combing through the urban landscape; collecting images, voices and texts which are of value to his encyclopaedic project. 'In one of the worst class of lodging-houses', Mayhew writes, 'I found ten humans living together in a small room'. (*Labour*, i, p. 110) Again, when roving a poor district between St. Katherine's Docks and Rosemary Lane characterised by 'foul channels, huge dust-heaps and other unsightly objects', Mayhew comments, 'I found a bone-grubber who gave me the following account of himself'. (*Labour*, ii, p. 140) Visiting the site of a building demolition in Maida Hill he again commented that, 'I found seven men, out of about 30, all fast asleep in the nooks and corners of the piles of bricks and rubbish'. (*Labour*, ii, p. 293). The characters that populate the text are mingled with the waste of their surroundings, seemingly lying in wait among the city's dust-heaps to be salvaged by the author. By this logic, the poor are fair game as plunder.

⁸ Richard J. Dunn, 'Dickens and Mayhew Once More', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 3 (1970), 348 – 353.

⁹ Leah Prince, 'The Book as Waste: Henry Mayhew and the Fall of Paper Recycling', in *How to Do Things with Books in Victorian Britain* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), pp. 219 – 257 (p. 220).

If Gaffer Hexam endows his found corpses with economic meaning and significance, Mayhew claims the poor as his own scavenged findings, transforming them into consumable textual matter. As such, *London Labour* troubles the notion of the author as the sole producer of the text. Mayhew was remembered by his friend George Augustus Sala (a fellow journalist who wrote for the *Illustrated London News* and the *Daily Telegraph*) as ‘the great and shamefully ignored *compiler* of that amazing human document, “London Labour and the London Poor”’ [my emphasis].¹⁰ *London Labour* was a bricolage of descriptive tableaux, governmental reports, copious amounts of statistical data as well as the expressive oral accounts of urban life from the mouths of the poor. These all elbow for space alongside Mayhew’s authorial voice.

‘My vocation is to collect facts, and to register opinions’ Mayhew wrote in the second of his *Morning Chronicle* letters.¹¹ This was the organising method for *London Labour* as it emerged as a text. Inspired by the scientific methods of chemistry, by this so called ‘inductive method’ he sought to gather information on the city’s populous and through ‘positive inspection’ discover the “laws” which determined the condition of the lower classes’. (*Travels*, p. 38) ‘Classification’, Karel Williams writes, ‘was the methodological complement of inductive empiricism’, a means of coherently organising his data. However, this classification collapsed under the sheer weight and complexity of London’s populous. His categories swelled, subdivided, mutated and eventually disintegrated.¹² More than a way of ordering the city, his methodological precepts became ‘an active disorganising principle’. (Williams, p. 241) Another problem was that, as much as Mayhew claimed to reveal the city and its poor in all their unprocessed nakedness, he also covered his tracks as an author. He edited his questions out from his interviews so that it would appear that his subjects exposed themselves willingly and without prompt. Furthermore, Mayhew’s original interviews were transcribed in shorthand, a method which inevitably meant that there was some degree of editing and translation in the accounts that finally appeared on the page. As John Seed writes, ‘Mayhew transformed his raw materials into coherent prose, smoothing out repetitions and hesitations and *non sequiters*.’¹³ The notion of *London Labour* as ‘raw material’ was in some way manufactured by Mayhew’s work as an author and editor.

¹⁰ George Augustus Sala, *Things I have Seen and People I have Known, Volume 1* (London: Cassell and Company, 1894), p. 111.

¹¹ Henry Mayhew, *The Morning Chronicle Survey of Labour and the Poor: The Metropolitan Districts*, ed. by Peter Razzell, 6 vols (Firle: Caliban Books, 1980 - 1982), I (1980), p. 52. Further references to this edition are included after quotations in the text.

¹² Karel Williams, *From Pauperism to Poverty* (Abingdon Routledge, 1981), p. 240. Further references to this edition are included after quotations in the text.

¹³ John Seed, ‘Did the Subaltern Speak? Mayhew and the coster-girl’, *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 19 (2013), 536 – 549, p. 538. Further references to this edition are included after quotations in the text.

But why did this ‘disorganising principle’ express itself in *London Labour*? Topinka suggests that ‘the profusions of objects and actors on the city street overwhelmed any infrastructural or governmental technology that might be capable of linking part to whole.’¹⁴ Even in the abundance of texts that *London Labour* as a project generated, it simply could not sustain a neat categorisation of the city. Robert Douglas makes a similar case for *London Labour*’s degeneration, writing that it ‘gradually transformed itself from a statistical survey into an epic struggle between the centripetal forces of structure and containment, and the centrifugal forces of expansion and collapse. Put another way, what had begun as an investigation into how London worked started to look increasingly like a reflection of the city itself.’¹⁵ Although it is certainly true that the text could not contain the heterogenous mass that was the metropolis, the *why* of the systematic breakdown comes into clearer focus when we consider it in tandem with the ‘urban ecology’ and ever-mobile circulations which are threaded through the text.

Tina Young Choi argues that ‘the possibility that waste might become useful elsewhere enable writers like Mayhew to transform an earlier discourse, in which waste threatened to become a vector for disease, into an alternate model of social connection: a positive, utopian one’. This expressed itself in ‘networks of pipes, chemical processes of transformation, or narrative circuits of recuperation or closure – through which waste could be redeemed, recovered, and remade into something productive once again’.¹⁶ Though I agree that motifs of recycling allowed Mayhew to imagine uncanny and transgressive relationships between social classes, objects and matter or the city as tissue of connections, this political project had consequences. This utopianism collapsed into familiar anxieties of the poor constituting a fluid, uncontrollable mass. The boundaries between connection and amalgamation are ultimately traversed. In the circulation of waste, regeneration and renewal always come at the expense of degeneration and decay.

Writing in 1851, Mayhew rhetorically asked: ‘What is a raw material and what a manufacture?’¹⁷ This was a question he could not answer. For him, the question of what constituted a raw material was much more determined by the object’s direction of movement in the processes of production than a statement of its inherent form. As a text, *London Labour*, with all of the

¹⁴ Robert J. Topinka, *Racing the Steet: Race, Rhetoric, and Technology in Metropolitan London, 1840 - 1900* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2020), p. 22.

¹⁵ Henry Mayhew, ‘London Labour and the London Poor: A Selected Edition’, ed. by Robert Douglas-Fairhurst (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. xxxviii.

¹⁶ Tina Young Choi, *Anonymous Connections: The Body and Narratives of the Social in Victorian Britain* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016), p. 85.

¹⁷ Henry Mayhew, ‘The Great Exhibition. Second Article: Of the Arrangement of the Great Exhibition’, *Edinburgh News*, 10 May 1851, p. 8.

complexities of its composition, publication and consumption embodied both the raw material and final product. It was embedded in circulations of waste where texts, objects, materials and people always had the potential for transformation, degeneration or regeneration. As this chapter will explore, it was precisely these circulations that opposed the rigid classificatory structures on which *London Labour* was originally founded. If the corpse could be made economically viable through the dredgerman's labour, then even the living bodies that made up the city were inherently unstable. A body could at once denote an embodied individual, a source of capital extraction, or worthless waste. It, like so many of the many objects of *London Labour*, was always shifting between categories.

CLASSIFICATION	
OF	
THE WORKERS AND NON-WORKERS	
OF GREAT BRITAIN.	
THOSE WHO WILL WORK.	
I.	ENRICHERS, as the Collectors, Extractors, or Producers of Exchangeable Commodities.
II.	AUXILIARIES, as the Promoters of Production, or the Distributors of the Produce.
III.	BENEFACTORS, or those who confer some permanent benefit, as Educators and Curators engaged in promoting the physical, intellectual, or spiritual well-being of the people.
IV.	SERVITORS, or those who render some temporary service, or pleasure, as Amusers, Protectors, and Servants.
THOSE WHO CANNOT WORK.	
V.	THOSE WHO ARE PROVIDED FOR BY SOME PUBLIC INSTITUTION, as the Inmates of workhouses, prisons, hospitals, asylums, almshouses, dormitories, and refuges.
VI.	THOSE WHO ARE UNPROVIDED FOR, and incapacitated for labour, either from want of power, from want of means, or from want of employment.
THOSE WHO WILL NOT WORK.	
VII.	VAGRANTS.
VIII.	PROFESSIONAL BEGGARS.
IX.	CHEATS.
X.	THIEVES.
XI.	PROSTITUTES.
THOSE WHO NEED NOT WORK.	
XII.	THOSE WHO DERIVE THEIR INCOME FROM RENT.
XIII.	THOSE WHO DERIVE THEIR INCOME FROM DIVIDENDS.
XIV.	THOSE WHO DERIVE THEIR INCOME FROM YEARLY STIPENDS.
XV.	THOSE WHO DERIVE THEIR INCOME FROM OBSOLETE OR NOMINAL OFFICES.
XVI.	THOSE WHO DERIVE THEIR INCOME FROM TRADES IN WHICH THEY DO NOT APPEAR.
XVII.	THOSE WHO DERIVE THEIR INCOME BY FAVOUR FROM OTHERS.
XVIII.	THOSE WHO DERIVE THEIR SUPPORT FROM THE HEAD OF THE FAMILY.

London Labour and the London Poor, iv, p. 12.

Mayhew's System

Calling attention to *London Labour's* infamous subtitle: 'A Cyclopaedia of the Condition and Earnings of Those that *Will* Work, Those that *Cannot* work, and Those that *Will Not* Work.', Grant H. Kester argues that *London Labour* 'demonstrates the characteristic drive toward taxonomic classification elicited by the threatening class and ethnic diversity of the modern city'.¹⁸ (Figure 4.1) Similarly, Paul Fyfe asserts that Mayhew's impulse for classifying the urban landscape 'segmented and striated an otherwise undifferentiated 'mass' of the populace whose potential for collective insurgency was yet unmeasured'.¹⁹ With London existing in the imaginary as an unwieldy and impenetrable conglomerate breaking it down into distinct categories theoretically

could be made legible and more easily consumable. However, this is quickly undone. It was precisely the heterogeneity of the city which resisted such easy segmentation.

The confusion over the 'taxonomic' nature of *London Labour* is not helped by its complicated publishing and compositional history. In the fourth volume, Mayhew seems to reassert the classification of London's workers, adding another category: 'Those who need not work'. Over sixteen long pages in its introduction, he endeavoured to discipline the unwieldy subject of the workers and non-workers of Britain into a coherent system. However, the patchwork nature of this introduction and the volume of which it was a part is of significance, as otherwise it seems to be an addendum to *London Labour*, appearing in its official final chapter. This 'extra volume' was first published some years after the first volumes of *London Labour* in 1862, after the

¹⁸ Grant H. Kester, *The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 156.

¹⁹ Paul Fyfe, *By Accident or Design: Writing the Victorian Metropolis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 141

copyright was bought by a new publisher, Griffin & Bohn. It was something of a cash grab which saw no editorial oversight or authorisation from Mayhew, despite the cover bearing his name. What was more, Mayhew only wrote the introduction with the surveys on prostitution, thieves and beggars being conducted by Bracebridge Hemyng, John Binny, and Andrew Halliday respectively.²⁰ The introduction itself was patched together from upcycled content from the *Morning Chronicle* (specifically Letter LII which was published in May 1850) and parts of articles he had written for the Great Exhibition in 1851. It was in the *Morning Chronicle* that Mayhew first (tentatively) set out the scope of his project of creating a comprehensive ‘catalogue’ of the poor and the ordering of London’s workers. (*Morning Chronicle*, i, p. 40) However, even here he admitted that ‘The branches of industry are so multifarious, the divisions of labour so minute and manifold, that it seems almost impossible to reduce them to any system’.²¹ Again, in the *Morning Chronicle* he wrote:

I would have rather have pursued some more systematic plan in my inquiries, but, in the present state of ignorance as to the general occupations of the poor, system is impossible. I am unable to generalize, not being acquainted with the particulars – for each day’s investigation brings me incidentally into contact with a means of living utterly unknown among the well-fed portion of society. (*Morning Chronicle*, i, p. 61)²²

Mayhew was never fully able to shake off the haphazard nature of his inquiries. The population of London’s poor was too unwieldy, too complex to be bought under a coherent system. Nevertheless, he persisted (or more accurately struggled) to do just this. With all this in mind, the classification set out by Mayhew was not arrived at inductively per se, the result of his explorations and observations of London’s workers, but rather deductively, theorised at the outset of his project. What is evident over the course of *London Labour*’s long history is the degradation of its ‘taxonomic drive’ and the ways in which his classifications, gave way to distended generalisations which could not accurately represent the city or its populous.

In the words of Humphreys, ‘*London Labour and the London Poor* unfolded and gradually lost its original direction in the continual amplification during the years of 1850 – 1852.’ (Humphreys, p. 85) But Mayhew’s attempt to textually capture London through interviews, dense tableaux and an overwhelming amount of data also illustrate his difficulty in systemisation. Ironically, in forgoing

²⁰ The fourth volume was not received well and was often excluded from subsequent collections of *London Labour*. Anne Humphreys suggests that Mayhew penned the first 37 pages.

²¹ Henry Mayhew, *The Morning Chronicle Survey of Labour and the Poor: The Metropolitan Districts. Volume 2*, ed. by Peter Razzell (Horsham: Caliban Books, 1981), p. 188. See also, *London Labour*, iv, p. 4.

²² See also, *London Labour*, iii, p. 311.

broad generalisations for specific details, his city is one of the ‘heterogenous crowd’, the ‘crude mass’ or the ‘rough unprocessed heap’. Mayhew, as a ‘mere collector of facts’: reproducing whole interviews without editing out seemingly irrelevant remarks, including long uninterrupted passages from Blue Books as well as large tables of data allowed for his reader to sift, like scavengers through this ‘raw’ material and come to their own conclusions.²³ It is left to the reader to do the labour of digesting – consuming, processing and abridging this text into a more palatable form.

Turning the Blue Book to Waste

In the introduction the fourth volume, Mayhew spurned many attempts at categorising labour or the products of labour that went before him, labelling them as wholly deficient. The previous censuses he found ‘unsatisfactory and unphilosophical’ in their organisations of labour, with them drawing distinctions that did not exist between types of workers, or confusing distributors, employers, and operatives into one ‘heterogenous crowd’ (*Labour*, iv, p. 4). Blue books too, governmental reports which sought to scientifically analyse and disentangle social phenomena, were ‘a crude mass of undigested facts, being a statistical illustration of the “rudis indigestaque moles”’ (rough unprocessed/unordered heap). (*Labour*, iv, p. 30)²⁴ Using a quotation from *Metamorphoses* in which Ovid described the chaos of pre-creation, Mayhew characterised the contents of Blue Books as a chaotic void, in a way which was precisely opposed to their aim of reducing Victorian society into neat and easily digestible rows and columns of numbers. There is also something gastronomic, if not scatological in Mayhew’s description of the Blue Books’ contents. Mayhew plays on the multiple meanings of ‘undigested’: information which had not been made orderly and harmonious, a lengthy text which had not been summarised, as well as matter which had not been processed and ‘digested’ by the body. In this way, the ‘crude mass of undigested facts’ not only pointed towards the disorganised data of the Blue Book, but its excessiveness and redundancy as a material object. In *London Labour*, Parliamentary Papers anticipated their own reduction and induction to the dust-heap. Unable to sort information coherently themselves, they became one with the accumulations of waste which Mayhew so obsessively orders and catalogues in the text.

In the first volume of *London Labour*, Mayhew claimed that the text was ‘the first commission of inquiry into the state of the people, undertaken by a private individual, and the first “blue book”

²³ Henry Mayhew, *The Essential Mayhew: Representing and Communicating the Poor*, ed. by Bertrand Taithe (London: Rivers Oram Press, 1996), p. 97.

²⁴ This quote also appeared in another of Mayhew’s projects: *The Great World of London*, which was published as *The Criminal Prisons of London and Scenes of Prison Life* in 1862.

ever published in twopenny numbers.’ (*Labour*, I, p. iii) Mayhew made extensive use of governmental reports in his text, often transposing long quotations wholesale. But he also attempted to gather his own data. The periodical of *London Labour* also included the paratextual *Answers to Correspondents* and *To Correspondents* printed on its disposable wrapper. These short sections, normally only a page or two long were a platform where Mayhew could directly communicate with his readership, as well as (sometimes combatively) responding their inquiries. Here, Mayhew regularly requested information from his readers on their specific trades – and this was often extensive. On one wrapper he asked for readers whose occupation fit in the category of manufacturers or “makers up” of silk, cotton, wool, worsted, flax, hemp, silk, gut or feathers to furnish him with data on their earnings, expenditure, the hours worked, the style of their accommodation, where they were boarded and the amount they paid for it, the quality and quantity of their provisions there, the prices they were charged for such provisions, whether they were required to pay for their own tools and whether they received any benefits from trade unions. It is evident that Mayhew was invested in forgoing the disorganised information found in governmental reports with his own ‘trustworthy’ data, where he himself could determine the reliability of each of his sources.

The presentation of the text also gestured towards the Blue Book – the first twenty-six numbers of the *London Labour* periodical were initially bound together with a ‘cheap blue cover’.

(Humphreys, p. 76) Blue books, so named after their blue covers, were a genre of parliamentary literature which included royal commissions and parliamentary reports. With the Whigs in power in the 1830s, reformers within the party implemented policies which ‘aimed at improving the accuracy and volume of state knowledge’.²⁵ Information which was hitherto gathered by various officials including clergymen, magistrates and physicians was centralised under the government’s control and published and printed by parliamentary printers to be consumed by the public. Knowledge originating from Royal Commissions, inquiries, select committees, petitions and the operations of Parliament was to circulate freely throughout the country. But it was also an apparatus of power which could shape political narratives, a performance of transparency, and a means of connecting the (middle-class) voter to the internal operations of Parliament and Government. As an integral part of the British parliament’s ideological project to produce knowledge about the state and its inhabitants, Blue Books sought to scientifically analyse and disentangle social phenomena. According to Oz Frankel, ‘They envisioned a universally

²⁵ Oz Frankel, *State of Inquiry* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2006), p. 43. Further references to this edition are included after quotations in the text.

accessible great body of knowledge that would address every facet of British public life, a representative mirror image of the nation'. (Frankel, p. 41) Yet, whilst many of them purported to take a cool analytical view of the populous, producing information useful for parliamentary policy making, increasingly over the nineteenth century their audience had expanded to include many curious members of the public.

Chadwick's 1842 *Report on the Sanitary Conditions of the Labouring Population*, for one, had become a bestseller, with 20,000 copies sold only two weeks after its publication.²⁷ No doubt some of the appeal lay in the pathetic and sometimes sensational scenes of poverty vividly depicted in the text. In 1849 the political theorist Joshua Toulmin Smith complained that this approach pandered to the maudlin impulses of the politically uninterested: 'The pictures of horror artfully put together in the pages of Blue Books are greedily devoured, and serve as food for the sentimental philanthropy of the reader; while the reports themselves are accepted as infallible gospel'.²⁸ In Toulmin Smith's eyes, Blue Books encouraged uncritical and unrestrained consumption: selfish gratification which erred on animalism. Readers grew fat on images which were easily digestible but devoid of substance. 'Calm reasoning and earnest personal investigation' were the correct means of examining the ills of society: slowing chewing over the facts at hand. (Toulmin Smith, p. 173)

But Blue Books could veer too far in the other direction. All too often, they were cumbersome documents which overflowed with gratuitous, redundant detail and endless tables of statistics. The economist John Ramsay McCulloch remarked that the statements and details included in the 'extremely bulky volume' produced by the 1844 Royal Commission on the Health of Towns added nothing of worth to the public and that 'the times and talents of the Commissioners would be employed to greater advantage in sifting the information previously obtained [by Chadwick's *Report of the Sanitary Conditions of the Labouring Population*], and in framing available plans and schemes for obviating the evils complained of, than in adding to the unwieldy mass of superfluous evidence already before the public.'²⁹ The government was yet another producer of waste material, adding to contaminative refuse that the Royal Commission was attempting to

²⁷ Benjamin Weinstein, *Liberalism and Local Government in Early Victorian London* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2011), p. 75.

²⁸ Joshua Toulmin Smith, *Government by Commissions Illegal and Pernicious: The nature and effects of all commissions of inquiry and other crown-appointed commissions. The constitutional principles of Taxation; and the rights, duties, and importance of local self-government* (London: S. Sweet, 1849), pp. 172 – 173.

²⁹ J. R. McCulloch, *The Literature of Political Economy: A Classified Catalogue of Select Publications in the Different Departments of that Science, with Historical, Critical and Biographical Notices* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), p. 274.

eradicate. McCulloch instead advocated for a type of statistical recycling, keeping data in productive circulation.

Up until the late 1850s, Blue Books produced by Parliament were delivered to all of its members. MPs complained that this mass of information was both physically and mentally overwhelming. One MP claimed that ‘nothing was more depressing to the spirits and trying to the temper than the attempt to extract a few simple facts out of the mass of documents which now encumbered one’s room’.³⁰ If this was a problem for MPs, then the literate public were hardly expected to source and read the indigestible contents of the Blue Books that flooded the market. Over the course of the 1840s, governmental printing of parliamentary papers had ballooned. By 1852, it had reached such unsustainable heights that a Select Committee on Parliamentary Papers was formed to investigate. Because parliamentary papers were printed in the larger folio format, they were not only characterised as ‘unmanageable to read’, but there was a suspicion that the up to half of the reports sent to MPs were being sold directly to waste-paper dealers for as much as three pence a pound.³¹ Hansards, the official Parliamentary printer, admitted that between 1844 and 1848 the warehouses which held stocks of unsold Parliamentary Papers had become full to bursting. In an attempt to recoup costs, surplus copies were sold to the waste-paper merchant. In 1849 alone, the income generated from this amounted to £1766. (*Parliamentary Papers*, p. 195)

These large sheets of paper were valuable because they could be used to wrap goods – particularly food. Everything from cheese, butter, meat, fish, poultry, sausages, sweets, tobacco and candles could be enclosed within a Parliamentary Paper. (*Labour*, ii, p. 114) There was a perverse circularity in the fact that the nutrition-free fare of the Blue Book found meaningful usage enclosing that which could be consumed. Finally muted, the Parliamentary Paper could live on merely as a material object. It was not only the waste of Government which found its way to the waste-paper dealer. One waste-paper dealer interviewed by Mayhew offered him comprehensive catalogue of the material he collected:

Missionary papers of all kinds. Parliamentary papers, but not so often new ones, very largely. Railway prospectuses, with plans to some of them, nice engravings; and the same with other joint-stock companies. Children’s copy-books, and cyphering-books. Old account-books of every kind. [...] An old man dies, you see, and his papers are sold off, letters and all; that’s the way; get rid of all the old rubbish, as soon as the old boy’s

³⁰ House of Commons, *Hansard’s Parliamentary Debates, Volume 178* (London: Cornelius Buck, 1865), p. 218

³¹ House of Commons, *Report from the Select Committee on Parliamentary Papers* (7 July 1853), p. 33. Further references to this text are included after references in the text.

pointing his toes to the sky. What's old letters worth, when the writers are dead and buried? Why, perhaps 1½*d.* a pound, and it's a rattling big letter that will weigh half-an-ounce. O, it's a queer trade, but there's many worse. (*London Labour*, ii, p. 114)

In the staccato listing of materials, there is a rapid association of the jumbled contents of the waste-dealers bag. The workings of government or business, religious sentiments or the educative process once committed to paper enter an economic system where everything can be reduced to its monetary value. There is an ease in the slippage between the 'old rubbish' of the discarded text and the 'old boy', its former author. Yet whilst the dead are finally committed to the ground, the text never dies, and is resurrected as material object. The waste-paper dealer in his last remark recognises the uncanniness of his trade, the way in which the distinctions which separate the Parliamentary Paper from the sentimental letter are finally flattened. Blue books, with all their indigestibility, were introduced into *London Labour* as diegetic physical material, indistinguishable from the other forms of waste which circulated around the city. For Mayhew, the waste-paper dealer worked in digestive terms: 'Tons upon tons are [...] consumed yearly. Books of every description are ingredients of this waste'. (*London Labour*, ii, p. 9) If the Blue Book contained nothing more than a 'crude mass of undigested facts', it finally became 'digestible' when its inscriptions were discarded completely. It was only through the stomach-like 'insatiate bag of the waste collector', which consumed all literature as equal, that the hefty volumes of Governmental reports became single pages which serviced the populous of the city. Edward Morton, a journalist and committee member put it thus: 'Parliament dams up its waters until the dry season is over, and then lets them out in a flood which inundates, not fertilises'. (*Parliamentary Papers*, p. 159) Morton laid the excremental connotations of Parliamentary literature bare. The undigested and indigestible content of the Blue Book pointed to a systemic failure in the Government's project to condense and represent the country. Morton suggested that the Blue Book had no extractable value, even as waste. However, in *London Labour*, the Blue Book was made useful precisely because of its excess. The 'rough unprocessed heap' of abstract statistical tables were made tangible as it made its way to the waste bin. The taxonomy of the Blue Book required London's population to be a static tableau. Mayhew noted that the Government figures on many 'wandering' professions were inaccurate precisely because these were people always on the move, migrating to, from, or within the city. These circulations could not be captured by a simple statistical table. The incorporation of the superfluity of Parliamentary Literature into the general category of waste demonstrated how in the circulatory economies of the city distinctions inevitably collapse. Even though the Government had

become, as Frankel put it, an ‘incontinent printer’, the circulations of the city ensured that even the most excremental of waste could be made useful. (Frankel, p. 42)

Systemisation at the Great Exhibition

In the fourth volume of *London Labour*, the Great Exhibition of 1851 was also held up as an example paralleling the unsystematic organisation of the metropolis in Parliamentary Manufacture. Like the Blue Book, the Great Exhibition ordered and generalised the goods of the world in such way that it could expose the natural laws latent in the social organism. Prince Albert, as its organiser and chief advocate, regarded the event a ‘sacred mission’ by which humanity could ‘discover the laws by which the Almighty governs his creation, and, by making these laws his standard of action, to conquer nature to his use; himself a divine instrument’.³² With humanity being an instrument of the divine, the goods produced by human hands could be re-defined as an extension of God’s creation. Therefore, the four broad categories in which the exhibited objects were divided – Raw Materials, Manufactures, Machinery and Art – followed the internal logic of Prince Albert’s ideology. However, for Mayhew this categorisation was regarded as a complete failure. It was in this context that Mayhew asked: ‘What is a raw material, and what a manufacture?’. This sentiment however was nothing new. In fact, significant parts of Mayhew’s tirade against the Great Exhibition from the fourth volume of *London Labour* published in 1862, were taken wholesale from articles Mayhew had written on the Exhibition in 1851. Exploring the original contexts for these comments sheds light on how Mayhew represents and simulates the breakdown of systemisation, and the chaos which follows in its stead.

The ‘crude mass’ described by Mayhew evoked the vast heaps of raw materials which were displayed at the Great Exhibition of 1851, the same year in which the first volume of *London Labour* was published. Officially named ‘The Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations’, this event followed the model of other Great Fairs, notably *The Exposition des produits de l’industrie française* (Exhibition of Products of French Industry) which was hosted in Paris intermittently between 1798 and 1849. Prince Albert intended to succeed this by being ‘not merely national in its scope and benefits, but comprehensive of the whole world’.³³ Representing the world as a vast marketplace, it gathered products from around the globe in London as the imperial centre. Over 100,000 objects were exhibited, from the most mundane to the most highly decorative arts. The Crystal Palace, which was purpose built to host these objects,

³² Prince Albert, *Addresses delivered on different public occasions by His Royal Highness the Prince Albert, President of the Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures, and Commerce* (London: Bell and Daldy, 1857), p. 61.

³³ Quoted in: John Timbs, *The Industry, Science, & Art of the Age: Or, The International Exhibition of 1862 Popularly Described from its Origin to its Close* (London: Lockwood & Company, 1863), p. 5.

spanned nineteen acres of densely packed exhibition space. The event was certainly a success. Over the six months it was open, six million people passed through its doors, flooding London with eager visitors.



Figure 4.2: Illustration of Raw Materials at the Great Exhibition. ‘The Exterior’ from, Louis Haghe, Joseph Nash and David Roberts, *Dickinson’s Comprehensive Pictures of the Great Exhibition of 1851* (London: Dickinson Brothers, 1854)

For Mayhew, like many others, the Great Exhibition was a rich source that could be exploited for his own literary projects. In 1851 he wrote sixteen articles describing the Exhibition for *The Edinburgh News* as well as co-writing a comic novel impressively titled *1851: or, The Adventures of Mr and Mrs Sandboys and Family, who came up to London to “enjoy themselves”, and to see the Great Exhibition* illustrated by George Cruikshank. Though published on opposite ends of Britain, the *Edinburgh News* articles and the *London Labour* periodical shared an overlapping literary space. The Great Exhibition articles were advertised in the leaves of the *London Labour* periodical whilst the *Edinburgh News* drew attention to the fact the articles were written by the ‘Author of the Letters on “Labour and the Poor”’. (Giving authorship to journalists in newspapers was a fairly unusual practise at the time.) In Mayhew’s typical fashion of reusing and recycling his own materials, not only were large sections of the articles integrated into the introduction of the fourth volume of *London Labour*, but as Humpherys points out, much material was shared between the *Edinburgh News* articles and *Mr and Mrs Sandboys*.³⁴ (Humphreys, pp. 13 – 14).

³⁴ Discussions about the unscientific classification of objects in Mayhew’s second article for the *Edinburgh News* on 10th May 1851 also appears in *London Labour and the London Poor, Vol. 4*, p. 4.

Several critics have pointed out the parallels between *The Great Exhibition* and *London Labour*. In both there is a compulsive tendency of cataloguing of peoples and objects, the transformation of the everyday to spectacle, and the impulse to endlessly categorise and subdivide.³⁵ Sabine Schülting argues that *London Labour* functions as a complementary text to the Exhibition. The former is ‘dedicated to the dirt of the metropolis’, with Mayhew conjugating waste, refuse and excrement, reconstructing them as sources of wealth. In contrast, the Exhibition displayed objects out of their context, thus dissociating them from the grind and decay of production and circulation.³⁶ In terms of this last point however, looking towards Mayhew’s own representations of the Great Exhibition is instructive. For here the Exhibition resembled a thoroughly disorganised display which comingled objects and materials from around the globe into a ‘quagmire of incoherences’.³⁷ The Exhibition was only one step removed from collapsing entirely into waste through lack of adequate systemisation. Rather than isolating these objects from their productive cycles, it extended these cycles beyond the processes of production to processes of fragmentation and degeneration. This event was for Mayhew a model for the profligate generation of waste – materials and objects which by virtue of their disorganisation reflected the offscourings or debris of the industrial processes it attempted to valorise.

The four categories of the Great Exhibition: Raw Materials, Machinery, Manufactures and Fine Art announced a progressive narrative in which the most ‘simple’ materials were shaped and transformed by industry into more ‘sophisticated’ objects. The raw materials which included such diverse offerings as huge slabs of stone, heaps of coal, dried fruits, teas, tobacco, oils, cottons, wood and glue, to name a few, were displayed outside – thus constructing a journey for the viewers from the unprocessed exterior or periphery to the ‘civilised’ interior or imperial centre of the Crystal Palace. In the official catalogue to the Great Exhibition, which exhaustively detailed all of objects on display, it was admitted that many of the Raw Materials

Have little or no external beauty, and present, consequently, no appreciable value to the uninstructed. But if to be considered that, in the preparation of these materials for use, and in their application to the purposes of life, consist the daily toil of multitudes of the

³⁵ See Philip Landon, ‘Great exhibitions: Representations of the crystal palace in Mayhew, Dickens, and Dostoevsky’; Priti Joshi, ‘The Other Great Exhibition: Mayhew’s Catalog of the Industrious’; Thomas Prasch, ‘Eating the World: London in 1851’.

³⁶ Sabine Schülting, *Dirt in Victorian Literature and Culture: Writing Materiality* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), p. 21

³⁷ Henry Mayhew, ‘The Great Exhibition. Third Article: Of the Raw Materials’, *Edinburgh News*, 24 May 1851, p. 8

human family, then the Classes of raw materials appear to take on a new and interesting aspect.³⁸

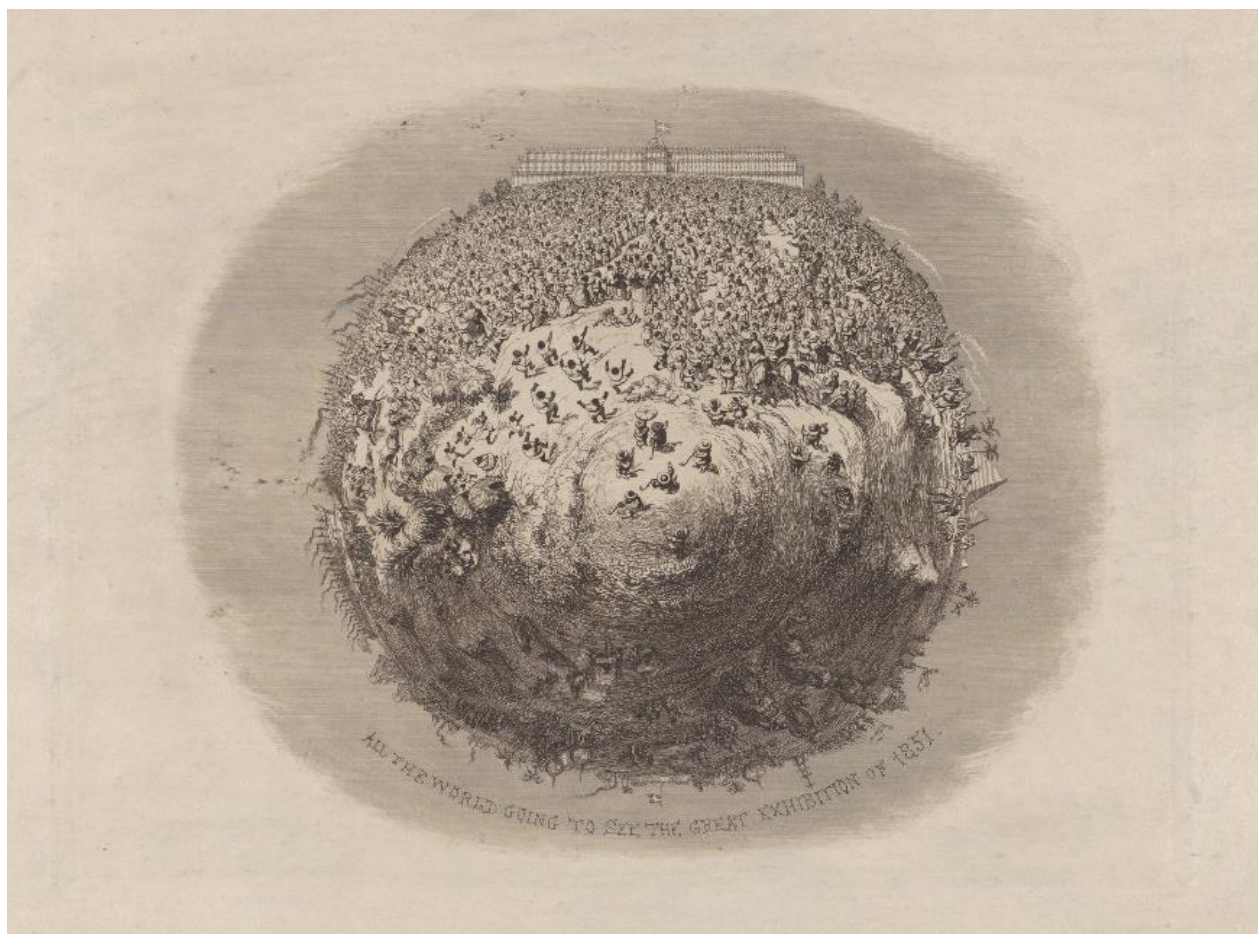


Figure 4.3: George Cruikshank, 'All the World is Going to See the Great Exhibition of 1851'. Frontispiece from *Mr and Mrs Sandboys*

According to the official narrative, raw materials symbolised the global organism. Passed from nation to nation, from the gatherer to the mechanic, architect or miner, raw materials continually metamorphosed from sea to shore, and eventually, in the case of the Great Exhibition, towards the Crystal Palace. These raw materials, therefore, reinforced a hierarchy of labour which placed Great Britain, and more specifically London, at the industrial centre of the globe.

These themes were announced in the accompanying illustrations for *Mr and Mrs Sandboys* (Figure 4.3). Cruikshank's frontispiece boldly depicted the world as a stark sphere on a blank page, with all the peoples of the world scrambling towards the glistening edifice of the Crystal Palace adorned with the Union Jack. In a defiance of perspective and geometry, the Crystal Palace's

³⁸ *Official Descriptive and Illustrated Catalogue of the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of all Nations 1851, Volume 1*, ed. by Robert Ellis (London: Spicer Brothers, 1851), p. 119. Further references to this edition are included after quotations in the text.

hybrids. The inanimate object is made animate, and the animal anthropomorphised. Pairs of boots march forward without bodies to fill them, then follows a procession of stringed instruments, and several equestrian statues reared up on their hind legs. A menagerie of various anthropomorphic animals: frogs, foxes, rabbits and mice armed with umbrellas and bindles evacuate the palace seeking refuge. Steam engines, elephants, carpets, dolls, ornamental vases, dresses, animal skins, chandeliers, clocks, cannons, exotic bells – all the miscellaneous items once displayed at the Exhibition now exit en masse, seemingly of their own will. Loosely sketched in broken lines, the objects seem to melt and transform into the puffs of dust that surround them. In this depiction of the Great Exhibition, a departure from the clean precise lines of the frontispiece, the heterogenous mass of things exhibited were now indistinguishable from waste, sinking into utter confusion.

The endpiece also spoke to some of Mayhew's criticisms of the systemisation of the Great Exhibition's objects in the *Edinburgh News*. Although these articles contained some vivid descriptions and lively discussions of the Exhibition, they mostly consisted of rather dry recapitulations of the listings of the Exhibition's official catalogues, with Mayhew drawing particular attention to Scottish products. The *Official Descriptive and Illustrated Catalogue of the Great Exhibition 1851* was published concurrently with the Exhibition and was intended 'to serve as a lasting memorial of the splendid collection of which it professes to be the exponent' and meticulously detailed every object and material exhibited, their manufacturer and from where they were derived. (*Official Catalogue*, p. vi) This information was classified by the same categories as the Exhibition itself. This massive amount of data was published across four volumes totalling over 1500 pages. Its editors acknowledged the unwieldiness of this document and the difficulty in its composition: a large number of manuscripts not only had to be gathered and collated, but the data that they contained had to be transformed into a uniform literary composition. In the catalogue's preface it was written that 'The combination of the elements of disorder thus presented has never before arisen to oppose the publication of any work in this or other times'. (*Official Catalogue*, p. vi) These 'disordered' elements had to be disciplined, the implied disease within them purged within the confines of the page.

By Mayhew's own admittance, it was the *Official Catalogue*, rather than the Exhibition itself, which was the primary text – the raw material – for his *Edinburgh News* articles. Thus, the pomp and spectacle of the event could not obscure any deficiencies in categorisation, as he saw it. Rendered as lines of data rather than groupings of objects in three-dimensional space, the rather skeletal systemisation of the Exhibition was laid bare. All of Mayhew's second article, and much of the third were dedicated to lambasting its catalogues and systemisation. (It was material from these

articles which finally made its way in the fourth volume of *London Labour*). This aside, Mayhew laid the blame of the Exhibition's chaotic arrangements at the feet of Prince Albert:

Note the consequence of the 'hasty generalisation' adopted by the Prince at the very outset of the Institution has been that no one has ventured to hint that the 'system' was both confused and deficient, and a catalogue has consequently been published that is a *national disgrace to us*. [...] What is a Raw Material and what a manufacture? It is from the difficulty of distinguishing between these two conditions that leather is placed under Manufactures, and steel under Raw materials – though surely steel is iron *plus* carbon, and leather kin *plus* tannin; so that technologically considered, there is no difference between them. (Mayhew, 'Second Article')

Mayhew undid the logic of the Great Exhibition, which dictated the categorisation of raw material was based on its ability to be transformed by machinery (the second category) into manufactures (the third). The raw material was thus simply a state of matter pregnant with the objects into which it could be turned. Mayhew extends this productive chain backwards by retreating through the processes of production, subdividing materials into their constituent parts. Why stop at iron, carbon, animals or tannin as raw materials when they too were formed through processes aided by man or nature? Mayhew wrote that, 'So interlinked are the various arts and manufactures, that what is the product of one process of industry is the material of another— thus, yarn is the product of spinning, and the material of weaving, and in the same manner the cloth, which is the product of weaving, becomes the material of tailoring'. (Mayhew, 'Second Article') Distinguishing between raw material or manufacture was an impossibility as it depended on flattening the circulations of production into a linear process. The Exhibition's static categories obscured the ever-shifting definitions of raw material and manufacture. Like the rubbish in *London Labour*, raw materials are only even one step away from transformation, a type defined by its potential to move through and be transformed by systems of industry.

Mayhew parodied the lavish displays of the Great Exhibition in *Mr and Mrs Sandboys*. As the plot of the novel unfolds, the Sandboys family attempt to travel to the Great Exhibition from their small Cumberland village, just as many other British families did. In its comic twist, the family only reach the Exhibition as it just closed, their progress having been interrupted by various problems and misadventures. The Great Exhibition, however, is set in relief through the displays and 'exhibits' of the urban poor. Rather than heaps of raw materials or opulent pieces of art, they encounter instead the miscellaneous spoils of London's street sellers. This is described by the narrator in Mayhew's typical obsessive detail:

There sat a barterer of crockery and china, in a bright red plush waistcoat and knee breeches, with legs like balustrades, beside his half-emptied basket of “stone-ware,” while at his feet lay piled the apparently worthless heap of rags and tatters, for which he had exchanged his jugs, and cups, and basins. A few yards from him was a woman done up in a coachman’s drab and many-caped box-coat, with a pair of men’s cloth boots on her feet, and her limp-looking straw-bonnet flattened down on her head, as if with repeated loads, while the ground near her was strewn with hareskins, some old and so stiff that they seemed frozen, and the fresher ones looking shiny and crimson as tinsel. Before this man was a small mound of old cracked boots, dappled with specks of mildew—beside that one lay a hillock of washed-out light waistcoats, and yellow stays, and straw bonnets half in shreds. Farther on was a black-chinned and lantern-jawed bone-grubber, clad in dirty greasy rags, with his wallet emptied on the stones, and the bones and bits of old iron and pieces of rags that he had gathered in his day’s search, each sorted into different piles before him; and as he sat waiting anxiously for a purchaser, he chewed a piece of mouldy pie-crust, that he had picked up or had given him on his rounds. In one part of the Exchange was to be perceived some well-known tinker behind a heap of old battered saucepans or metal tea-pots, side by side with an umbrella mender, in front of whom lay a store of whalebone ribs and sticks. In another quarter might be seen the familiar face of some popular peep-showman, with his “back-show” on the form on one side of him, while on the other were ranged the physic phials and wine bottles and glass pickle jars that he had taken of the children for a sight at his exhibition; and next to him was located a flower-seller, with his basket emptied of all its blooming and fragrant contents, with the exception of one or two of the more expensive plants, and the places of the missing flowers filled with coats, waistcoats, boots, and hats.

To walk down the various passages between the seats, and run the eye over the several heaps of refuse, piled on the ground like treasure, was to set the mind wondering as to what could possibly be the uses of each and every of them. Everything there seemed to have fulfilled to the very utmost the office for which it was made; and now that its functions were finished, and it seemed to be utterly worthless, the novice to such scenes could not refrain from marvelling what remaining purpose could possibly give value to “the rubbish.”⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Henry Mayhew and George Cruikshank, *1851: or, The Adventures of Mr and Mrs Sandboys and Family, who came up to London to “enjoy themselves”, and to see the Great Exhibition* (London: David Bogue, 1851), p. 99.

This passage could have been drawn directly from the first volume of *London Labour*, and certainly was heavily informed by his research into the costermongers of the city. The market is breathlessly described in a list extended to almost Dickensian levels of absurdity. Each character seems gathered and choreographed by the narrator, placed in proximity to one another. The prose mimicking the flitting of the eye, and a gaze haphazardly advancing through the scene is barely held together by a series of conjunctives and punctuation. The effect is one of bewilderment at the overwhelming detail of the scene. However, it still acknowledges its intricate order and organisation. The exchanges between seller and purchaser transforms the flower-seller's produce into 'coats, waistcoats, boots, and hats', and another seller's 'mound of old cracked boots [...], washed-out light waistcoats, and yellow stays, and straw bonnets half in shreds' presumably into money. Even in this short scene, objects seem to migrate between its actors. Thus, it dramatises the perpetual circulation of objects and materials around London's economy and the ways that they can evade the designation of waste. Here rubbish is constantly on the move, handed from one hand to another, transformed, broken down and made anew. Unlike the objects at the Great Exhibition which existed in a state of stasis, divorced both from their industrial origins and contemporary usages, the objects of the costermongers and street-sellers are rapidly transformed from raw material, to manufacture, and back to raw material. It once again begged the question: how would these materials be categorised at the Great Exhibition?

The narrator, by placing 'rubbish' in quotation marks, acknowledges that rubbish is not an absolute definition, but rather a subjective category. What constitutes rubbish was always in the eye of the beholder. In *London Labour*, Mayhew had written that:

In the economy of Nature there is no loss: this the great doctrine of waste and supply has taught us; [...] The dust and cinder from our fires, the "slops" from the washing of our houses, the excretions of our bodies, the detritus and "surface-water" of our streets, have all their offices to perform in the great scheme of creation. (*London Labour*, ii, p. 258)

Waste could become an endlessly renewable commodity in its continual movements through industrial or ecological processes or simply, as in *Mr and Mrs Sandboys*, the casual traffic of transactions and exchange in the marketplace. Even the most common or abject matter, in the performance of duty in 'creation', could be sanctified. Strict definitions or rigid classifications like those at the Great Exhibition were at odds with the fluidity and mutability of London's objects and materials.

As Natalie Prizel points out, there is an inherent friction between the aims and composition of *London Labour*: ‘Though he imagines himself, in *London Labour and the London Poor*, to be rendering types in a taxonomy of labor, his endless subdivision of categories, his unrelentingly specific detail, and the extensive space that he gives to his subjects’ own speech undo the very taxonomy of which they are constitutive.’⁴¹ Continuously fragmenting his own categorisations of peoples, these categories came to reflect the mess and confusion Mayhew saw in the Great Exhibition. Like Cruikshank’s endpiece, the objects and peoples of London come in an indecipherable crowd which resisted reduction.

Despite the density and vividness of the narrator’s description in the above extract from *Mr and Mrs Sandboys*, it is deflated in the following paragraph, abruptly reduced to ‘several heaps of refuse’ (albeit refuse which resembles treasure). In an ironic reversal of the raw materials of the Great Exhibition, the sublime effect is created not by the consideration of what the raw materials may become, but the sources and industrial journey which these supposedly ‘raw materials’ have already been on. But this passage also highlights the inherent problem of the blue book. The reduction of the populous, described by Mayhew in such expressive detail to a ‘rough unprocessed heap’ of data was a process of aggressive decontextualization and commodification. It required a flattening and indifference towards the individuals that made up the fabric of the city.

As it turns out, even the *Mr and Mrs Sandboys* scene was destined for recycling. Six years later in 1857, the passage reappeared, barely modified, in the periodical *The Great World of London*, another one of Mayhew’s aborted projects.⁴² (*The Great World of London* also lifted passages from *London Labour*). Like *London Labour*, it attempted to analyse and represent the bustling heart of the city, and according to Karel Williams can be considered as the ‘missing fifth volume’.⁴³ The series only managed to cover London’s criminal prisons before it abruptly stopped in October 1856 when Mayhew fell ill.⁴⁴ Notably, in the transition from *Mr and Mrs Sandboys* to *The Great World of London*, Mayhew dropped any references to refuse as ‘treasure’. Instead, he closed the scene with the claim: ‘in no other part of the entire world is such a scene of riot, rags, filth and

⁴¹ Natalie Prizel, ‘The Non-Taxonomical Mayhew’, *Victorian Studies* 57 (2015), 433 – 444 (p. 433).

⁴² Henry Mayhew, *The Great World of London: Part IX* (London: David Bogue, 1856), p. 40. Further references to this edition are included after quotations in the text.

⁴³ Karel Williams, *From Pauperism to Poverty* (Abingdon Routledge, 1981), p. 237.

⁴⁴ Janice Schroeder, ‘The Publishing History of Henry Mayhew’s *London Labour and the London Poor*.’, *BRANCH: Britain, Representation and Nineteenth-Century History*, (2019), <https://www.branchcollective.org/?ps_articles=janice-schroeder-the-publishing-history-of-henry-mayhews-london-labour-and-the-london-poor> [accessed 4 June 2021] (para. 13 of 21).

feasting.’ (*Great World*, p. 41) Here, not only did the rubbish remain unredeemed, but it also became a symbol of disordered excess.

Fluid Waste and Categorical Confluence

In the second volume of *London Labour*, alongside his inquiries into the waste-dealers, dust-men, sewer workers and other labourers who dealt with the city’s rubbish, Mayhew went to considerable lengths to analyse the composition of London’s waste, specifically its dust-heaps. These piles of assorted ashes and rubbish accumulated in dust-yards situated either in the suburbs of London or near canals. Dust-heaps were also imagined as sources of great wealth, tantalisingly concealing objects of great worth within their grey masses. Such was the case for *Our Mutual Friend*’s Noddy Boffin, the ‘Golden Dustman’. Mayhew, not swayed by the romantic potential of these stories discounted them as myth. Instead, he drew attention to the mundane and arduous labour of the dust worker. These were usually women or old men who would sift through the dust, separating it out into saleable commodities. (Figure 4.4) In *London Labour*, Mayhew performed this work textually, breaking down the dust-heap into a neatly ordered list. He thus determined that dust-heaps were comprised of these materials:

1. “Soil,” or fine dust, sold to brickmakers for making bricks, and to farmers for manure, especially for clover.
2. “Brieze,” or cinders, sold to brickmakers, for burning bricks.
3. Rags, bones, and old metal, sold to marine-store dealers.
4. Old tin and iron vessels, sold for “clamps” to trunks, &c., and for making copperas.
5. Old bricks and oyster shells, sold to builders, for sinking foundations, and forming roads.
6. Old boots and shoes, sold to Prussian-blue manufacturers.
7. Money and jewellery, kept, or sold to Jews. (*London Labour*, ii, p. 171)

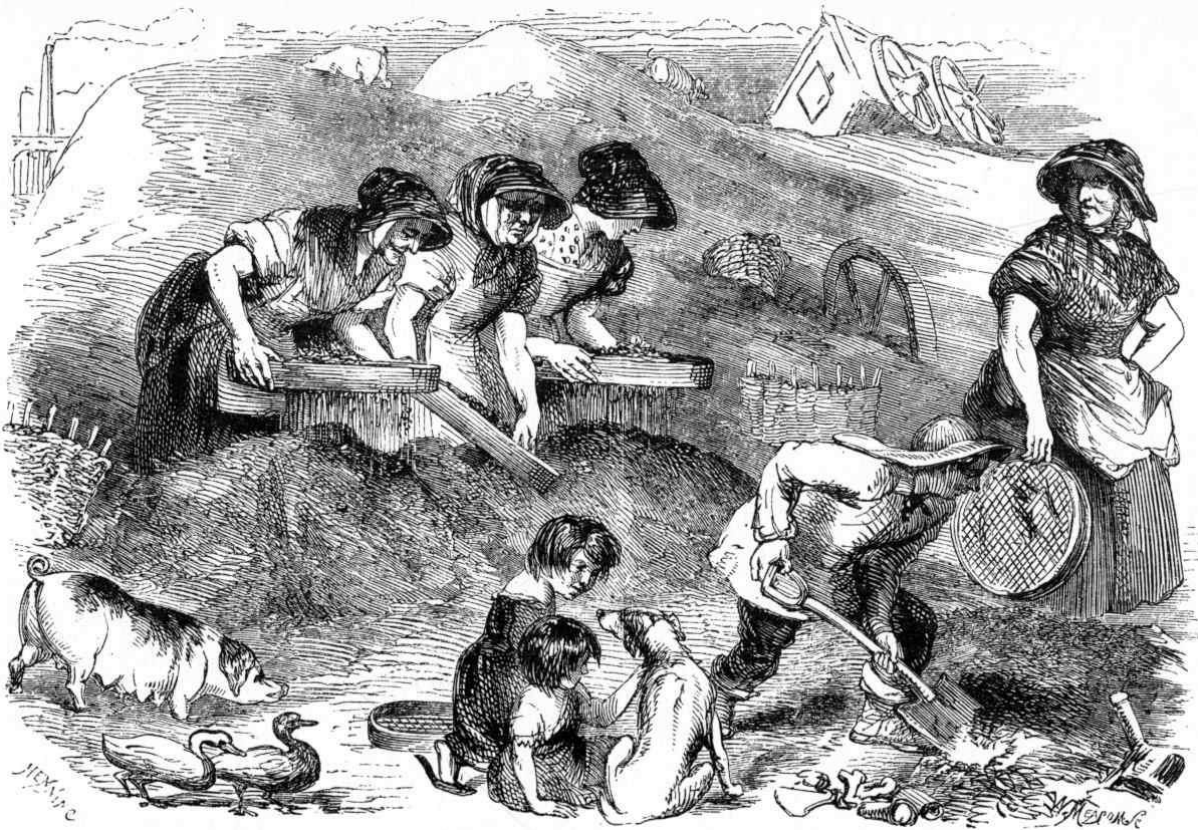


Figure 4.5: 'View of a Dust Yard. (From a Sketch taken on the spot)'. Illustration from *London Labour and the London Poor*, ii, p. 208

It is not enough to simply state the composition of the dust-heap, Mayhew also anticipates the continued journeys of these materials, truncating the transformative processes where trash again can circulate around London's economy. Each object neatly shifts from raw material to manufacture. What Mayhew excludes are the complicated procedures that recuperated matter from the dust-heap. 'Soil' for example, here a euphemism for the ashes left by coal fire, was transported by barge and cart to brickfields which increasingly lay outside the bounds of the metropolis. Once there it would be mixed with clay, fired in huge kilns and transported back to London to feed the city's insatiable appetite for expansion. Rags, on the other hand, depending on their composition commanded various prices from marine store dealers – wool rags being the most valuable. Marine shops, the equivalent of Krook's shop in *Bleak House*, became repositories for these rags to be stored until they could be sold on to paper-makers (who would boil and bleach the rags in the manufacture of paper), or servants who used the rags for mending clothes. For all of this categorisation of the rubbish of the dust-heap, it could not be deployed with the same efficacy in regard to the fluid waste of the city. Jules David Law writes that 'In his zeal to

reduce the city to a completely transparent, rationalizable hydraulic body, Mayhew treats the inexhaustible variety of urban fluids from a purely quantitative point of view.’⁴⁵

However, the quantification of urban fluids conflicts with its slipperiness and variability. ‘Wet-refuse’, was all and any refuse of a ‘liquid or semi-liquid character’ which had the ability to flow through the city’s streets or in its sewery depths. (*Labour*, ii, p. 383) Rainwater, wastewater from laundry, blood from slaughter-houses, liquid waste from factories and dye houses, drinking water, water in the form of drinking water, beer, soda or cocoa, and then excreted as urine; these are all reduced down and collapsed under the label of the ‘wet refuse’. As these liquids comingled in the sewers, they became one unified body. Wet-house refuse therefore, was waste which was completely anonymised and permanently alienated from its origins. It is notable also, that liquid waste (or ‘sewer-water’ as he also called it) was considered by Mayhew to be the ideal state for waste to be renewed and utilised as manure. Theoretically, liquid waste could be more easily transported to where it was needed through pipes, to then be directly used in the irrigation of fields. It was mode through which transformation was most effortless, thus completing the erasure of its component parts. According to *London Labour*, the annual fluid refuse of London amounted to nearly 4 billion cubic feet, a number arrived at by a series of calculations which bordered on the absurd. Mayhew constructed tables which variously calculated the amount of water that drained into the sewers, the excrement generated by cattle, and even the volume of blood that drained from them after slaughter.

The accumulation of estimations and extrapolations meant that his final figures were unlikely to be accurate to any degree, but by Mayhew’s own admission these numbers were intended to show the ‘inexpressible’ amount of refuse generated by the city. (*Labour*, ii p. 385). The showing of his working therefore was a performance of the exponential expansion of waste, the ways in which it could elude the seemingly hard and definite science of mathematics. In *London Labour*, waste could become sublime, even when pinned down with figures. As Lynda Nead suggests, it was indicative of the uncontrollability of the city, ‘that is as no beginning and no end and resists all attempts at demarcation’.⁴⁶ This is to say that with fluid waste, Mayhew reverses the depiction of sifting through the dust-heap. Rather than project the object’s potential forms, tracing its future journeys from heterogenous mass to a distinct and particularised use, with wet-refuse all of the various origins of its components were consolidated: combined by repeated addition to

⁴⁵ Jules David Law, *The Social Life of Fluids: Blood, Milk, and Water in the Victorian Novel* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018), p. 6.

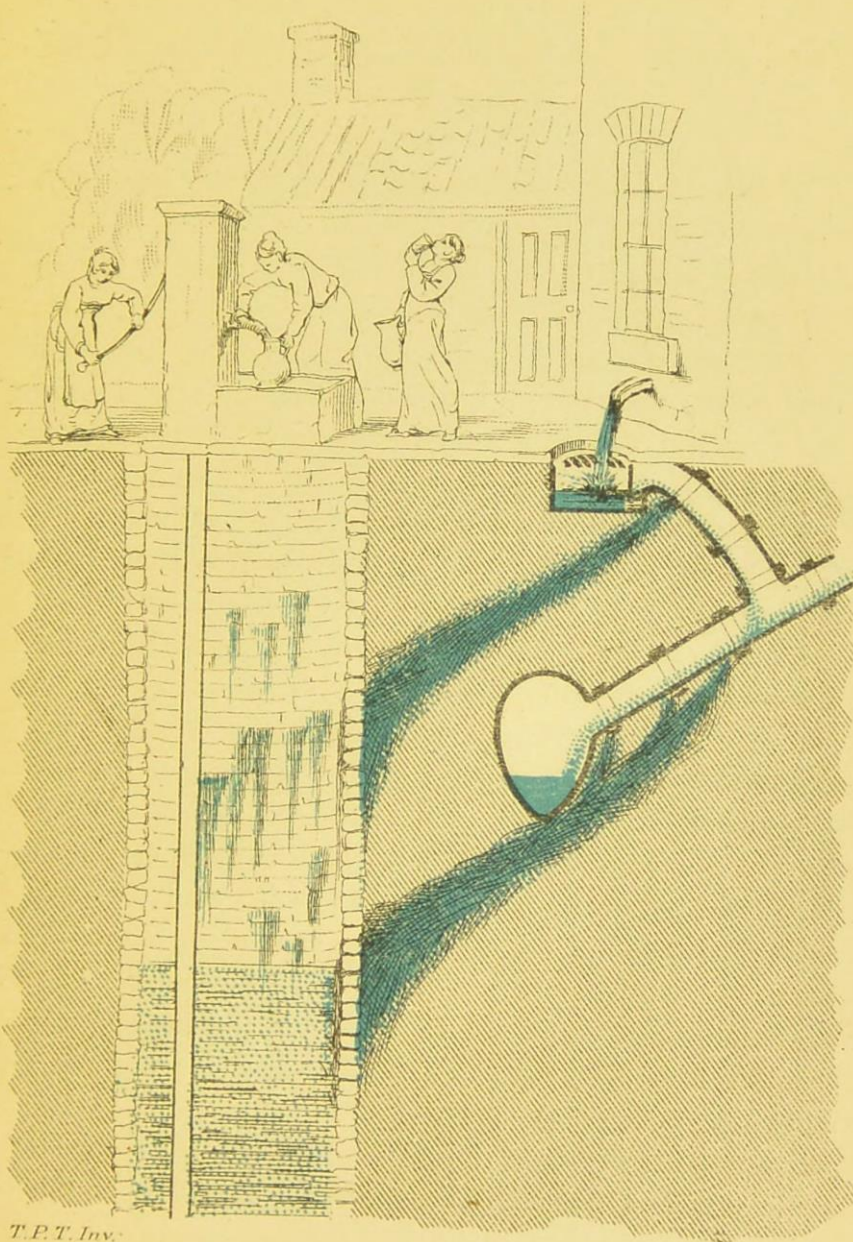
⁴⁶ Lynda Nead, *Victorian Babylon: People, Streets and Images in Nineteenth-Century London* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 15.

singular body. This was matter which was not only inexpressible by its sheer volume, but inexpressible through its fluctuating composition. In *London Labour*, solid waste was more easily contained by Mayhew's categorisations, but these were always categories which were not water tight. Fluid waste, fluctuating, pliant and indefinite, eluded Mayhew's attempts to define it.



Figure 4.6: Density map of the incidences of cholera in London. From *Report of the General Board of Health on the Epidemic Cholera of 1849 & 1850* (London: W. Clowes & Sons, 1850)

PLATE XXX.



How people drink sewage.—No. 1.
Drain leaking into a well,

Figure 4.7: Illustration demonstrating the contamination of drinking water from a faulty drain and cistern. Thomas Pridgin Teale, *Dangers to Health: A Pictorial Guide to Domestic Sanitary Defects* (London: J & J. Churchill, 1878), p. 81

The Incontinent City

The leakage of fluid waste was an anxiety which was informed by mid- and late-nineteenth-century epidemiology. When the General Board of Health represented the distribution of cholera cases in London at the height of the 1849 epidemic, it was imagined as a blue ink wash bleeding over an unadorned line map of the city. (Figure 4.5) This deepened almost to black where cholera cases were most concentrated – a black which obscured the lines which delineated London’s districts. Cholera was like a rash spreading through neutral urban space, a contaminative fluid which bled from district to district, disregarding social and spatial boundaries. Therefore, it was not only fluid waste, but fluidity itself which functioned as a signifier for the spread of disease, in particular cholera. Erin O’ Connor writes that cholera ‘became the operative term in an entire metaphoric of bodily contamination, a figure for the fluidity of boundaries in metropolitan space.’⁴⁷

As John Snow proposed in *On the Mode of Communication of Cholera*, published in 1849, and in another more detailed treatise outlining his theory in 1855, cholera was spread by the consumption of water tainted with excrement, which for Londoners was either drawn from corrupted Thames water or from contaminated wells. Water was not only contaminated by the direct dumping of sewage into sources of drinking water, but through the insidious leakage from porous or damaged structures. Household cesspools, for example, although intended to contain excremental waste were often permeable by design, allowing the liquid portion of the sewage to drain away into the soil so as to leave the solid waste left behind to be carted away more easily and efficiently by nightmen. Although a quick fix for cesspools which would fill up too quickly, sewage could seep into drinking water sources such as wells or springs. A report quoted in *London Labour* looked towards France for a remedy: in 1819 the French government issued an ordonnance which demanded that all cesspools should be constructed to be water-tight. (*Labour*, ii, p. 442) However, in London the problem persisted – not only with leaky cesspools but drains and sewers which were crumbling from age or from inadequate construction. This was dramatised in the striking illustrations which accompanied Thomas Pridgin Teale’s instructional manual *Dangers to Health: A Pictorial Guide to Domestic Sanitary Defects* which attempted to alert the public to the hidden paths that fluid waste could take through domestic space. In one plate, simply entitled ‘How people drink sewage’ the corrupted liquid, here euphemised as a blue wash, seeps through faulty joints in an underground drain, soaks through the ground and into a well

⁴⁷ Erin O’ Connor, *Raw Material: Producing Pathology in Victorian Culture* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2000), p. 41.

where it is drawn up by unsuspecting women and drank. (Figure 4.6) The composition of this diagram suggested the contaminative cyclical motions of sewage when it was not contained and sealed away.



Figure 4.8: Detail from the Board of Health's Cholera Map showing Jacob's Island.

In the years where this theory was still overshadowed by the miasmatic or zymotic model of choleric communication, Mayhew rejected the argument that it was the inhalation of infectious fumes which caused the disease. For his first article for the *Morning Chronicle* entitled 'A Visit to the Cholera Districts of Bermondsey' in 1849, he donned the pseudonym 'Anti-Zymosis' and pointed towards the dangers of drinking polluted water. Here he depicted in horrific and unflinching detail the conditions of Jacob's Island, a notorious slum in Bermondsey where cholera had taken hold. It figured on the Board of Health's cholera map as a black germ-like dot, a plague-spot infecting the skin of the city. (Figure 4.7) The area became a locus of morbid fascination for the literary class, functioning as a symbol of depravity and squalor. It featured in Charles Kingsley's 1850 novel *Alton Locke* and was earlier immortalised as a hive of criminals in *Oliver Twist* (1837 – 39). As was indicated on the Board of Health's map, Jacob's Island was home to an open stream of poisoned water on which houses bordered and overlooked, known ominously as 'Folly Ditch'. This was the source of much of their drinking water, which was identified as a carrier of disease by Mayhew:

As we passed along the reeking banks of the sewer the sun shone upon a narrow slip of the water. In the bright light it appeared the colour of strong green tea, and positively looked as solid as black marble in the shadow - indeed it was more like watery mud than muddy water; and yet we were assured this was the only water the wretched inhabitants had to drink. As we gazed in horror at it, we saw drains and sewers emptying their filthy contents into it; we saw a whole tier of doorless privies in the open road, common to men and women, built over it; we heard bucket after bucket of filth splash into it, and the limbs of the vagrant boys bathing in it seemed, by pure force of contrast, white as Parian marble. And yet, as we stood doubting the fearful statement, we saw a little child, from one of the galleries opposite, lower a tin can with a rope to fill a large bucket that stood beside her. In each of the balconies that hung over the stream the self-same tub was to

be seen in which the inhabitants put the mucky liquid to stand, so that they may, after it has rested for a day or two, skim the fluid from the solid particles of filth, pollution, and disease. As the little thing dangled her tin cup as gently as possible into the stream, a bucket of night-soil was poured down from the next gallery.⁴⁸

Mayhew's article captured the scenes of sordidity at Jacob's Island as if a visitor to an art exhibition, distancing himself and the middle-class readership from the environment they both overlooked. The images that made up the tableau, ironically, take on the characteristics of fine and expensive goods: the 'black marble' of the polluted waters or the 'Parian marble' of the boys within it, reduced to mere limbs engulfed by filth. Through Mayhew adopting this same metaphor for both human and dirt, not only did they tend towards congruity, but the focus of the scene was muddied. Just as the human figures are fragmented and commodified – transformed into no more than raw material – the muddy water is elevated to an exhibited object comparable to the lumps of rock that were on display at the Great Exhibition. Rendering the contaminated water as 'strong green tea', Mayhew anticipates the moment of its lethal consumption. If tea was water infused with fragrant leaves, this was water impregnated with the leftovers of human life. Mayhew constructs a scene where the lack of boundaries leads to a grotesque and aberrant melange where definitions fluctuate and substances and objects combine. Folly Ditch, for instance, becomes a sewer leading through the district; open lavatories imply a wanton union of men and women; and humanity becomes material and object becomes art. Mayhew, it seems, finds difficulty in pinning down a description of the foetid water of Jacob's Island – he is always circling his subject. He equivocates between 'muddy water' and 'watery mud', and in this short extract progresses through a profusion of metaphors. There is a volatility surrounding fluid waste: it resists the determinacy of stable and solid representation. In such circumstances excrement and drinking water are one and the same. These substances are in absolute interchange: just as one lifts their cup from Folly Ditch, sewage plunges into it.

There was a futility in the slum dwellers' attempts to separate pure water from its contaminates, only skimming off the 'solid particles of filth, pollution and disease' after these impurities had settled. For those who subscribed to miasmatic theory, this was theoretically adequate for transforming their drinking water into something that was a little less offensive to the nose or mouth. In 1827, when the Grand Junction Works Company was accused publicly of supplying London with diluted excrement which was in turn 'offensive to the sight, disgusting to the imagination, and destructive to health', they responded that while Thames water 'when turbid by

⁴⁸ Henry Mayhew, 'A Visit to the Cholera Districts of Bermondsey', *Morning Chronicle*, 24 September 1846, p. 4.

floods, may not in that state be fit for culinary purposes' when left to stand 'it very speedily becomes bright in repose, and is then the finest water in the world'.⁴⁹ ⁵⁰ This was of course inconsistent with the realities of purifying water. Mere filtration was insufficient to remove the impurities which rendered it dangerous to those who drank it. As Mayhew's descriptions of Jacob's Island had made clear, it was a place completely infused with the seeds of illness: air thick with foetid sulphurous fumes, its water 'almost red as blood from the colouring matter that pours into it', and a general atmosphere of depression and despair. (Mayhew, *Cholera Districts*) These were clearly not the 'solid particles' sieved from the contaminated water, which drove the many fatalities from cholera. Liquid waste was not only indefinable and elusive, but it was also an indicator of the deadly flows which ebbed through the city.

The Flows of the London Docks

Robert Topinka writes that 'By apprehending laborers as types. Mayhew sought to locate them within a shared abstract field, and thus to render them manageable within London's circulatory network.' (Topinka, p. 57) He further argues that race was deployed as a technology to gather the disparate peoples of London under one comprehensive view. However, as I have shown, the circulatory networks of London – the infrastructure and natural features which facilitated the flow of fluid waste – were incontinent, leaky bodies which instead contaminated their surroundings. Therefore, I want to suggest that Mayhew's attempts to manage the excess of London's populations took on the properties of managing fluid waste but were simultaneously undermined by the fluid's capacity to overspill and escape its bounds.

Nowhere is this more evident than in London's docks, which held a distinct fascination for Mayhew. Up until the beginning of the nineteenth century, goods were delivered to wharves that lay directly on the river. However, as the population and hence the appetite of London grew, the Thames became clogged with vessels which sat in maritime traffic for miles along the river. What was more, as ships waited to be offloaded, they were prime targets for thieves. During the preceding century, a series of enclosed docks were constructed which would streamline the steady flow of goods from around the world into the metropolis. Coal, cotton, timber tobacco, coffee, and spices were some of the commodities which were unloaded by an army of dock labourers and funnelled into an intricate network of canals, roads and railways which extended like veins into the country. They resembled the flow of goods and peoples into the Great

⁴⁹ John Wright, *The Dolphin; or, Grand Junction Nuisance: proving that seven thousand families in Westminster and its suburbs are supplied with water, in a state, offensive to the sight, disgusting to the imagination, and destructive to health* (London: T. Butcher, 182), p. 61.

⁵⁰ W. M. Coe, 'Supply of Water to the Metropolis', *The Times*, 21 March 1827, p. 3.

Exhibition, as well as centring London as an imperial centre, fed by the ‘offerings’ of its colonies. This was in ironic symmetry with the discharge of sewage – the leftovers of this consumption – back into the Thames.

But the docks were also sites where other flows – from both at home and abroad – could converge. Mayhew depicted the peoples of the dock as ethnically cacophonous, a microcosm of the imperial world compressed in one scene:

Along the quay you see, now men with their faces blue with indigo, and now gaugers, with their long brass-tipped rule dripping with spirit from the cask they have been probing. Then will come a group of flaxen-haired sailors chattering German; and next a black sailor, with a cotton handkerchief twisted turban-like round his head. Presently a blue-smocked butcher, with fresh meat and a bunch of cabbages in the tray on his shoulder; and shortly afterwards a mate, with green paroquets in a wooden cage. Here you will see sitting on a bench a sorrowful-looking woman, with new bright cooking tins at her feet, telling you she is an emigrant preparing for her voyage. As you pass along this quay the air is pungent with tobacco; on that it overpowers you with the fumes of rum; then you are nearly sickened with the stench of hides, and huge bins of horns; and shortly afterwards the atmosphere is fragrant with coffee and spice.⁵¹

Unable to ‘generalise’ this population under one view, Mayhew resorts to depicting the flood of visual, aural and olfactory impressions. Switching from the third person of the preceding paragraphs to second-person here, he is performing the part of impartial viewer which channelling these images through the text to the reader. Mayhew drifts from the representation of peoples to objects: the ‘face blue with indigo’ conceal racial identity beneath a dye imported into England from India and harvested by exploited labourers. The black sailor too transgresses the narrow boundaries of racial ‘types’ by wearing a handkerchief ‘twisted turban-like round his head’. The brief description of the butcher gives way to the vegetables he holds, and description of the mate is traded for a focus on the caged bird in his arms. The human body is substituted with the goods of the dock, transformed into symbols of imperial trade. As Mayhew continues in his description of the docks, its bodies disappear completely, engulfed by the scents of colonial trade which likewise overpower his sensory apparatus. Like the market-place scene of *Mr and Mrs Sandboys*, the sublime excess of the docks overwhelms the tools of representation. Mayhew as

⁵¹ Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor Volume III* (London: Griffin, Bohn, and Company, 1861), p. 303.

narrator remains static whilst the current of the heterogenous crowd, or rather the jumble of goods, flows past him.

But for Mayhew, the most threatening flows which converged at the docks came from the city itself. The labour required to keep the docks moving, which not only included the offloading of ships, but loading ballast onto empty vessels as well as transporting offloaded goods to waggons or warehouses, was fed by a supply of casual labourers, employed by subcontractors on a somewhat intermittent basis. According to Mayhew, this particular kind of work attracted desperate people from around the city. He wrote that, ‘the docks constitute, as it were, a sort of home colony to Spitalfields, to which the unemployed weaver migrates in the hope of bettering his condition’. (*Labour*, iii, p. 301)

Isolating the local migrations of Londoners in the context of the international population of sailors who arrived at the docks, and labourers who worked at them revealed the city as fractal of ever more intricate and complex flows. It was not only weavers who were drawn to the docks but ‘decayed and bankrupt master-butchers, master-bakers, publicans, grocers, old soldiers, old sailors, Polish refugees, broken-down gentlemen, discharged lawyers’ clerks, suspended government clerks, almsmen, pensioners, servants, thieves – indeed, every one who want a loaf, and willing to work for it’. (*Labour*, iii, p. 301) Mayhew cuts short his ever-more protracted list to archive it under the most general of categories. In these brief descriptions, these characters resemble a sort of urban residue. The decayed, the old and the broken-down listed in close succession evoke the miscellaneous rubbish of the dust-heap.

However, the docks did not and could not offer redemption by the sifting and sorting of these people, putting them back into economic circulation by returning them to their specialised occupations. Instead, the docks provided labour which for Mayhew was the most basic and unabstracted. Dock work was ‘mere muscular labour of the human animal’ which required no formal training or skill. Under such conditions, the dock labourer was ‘commercially considered, as it were, a human steam-engine, supplied with so much fuel in the shape of food, merely to set him in motion’. (*Labour*, iii, p. 301) Aggressively decontextualised into a machine which consumes and expends, the dock worker is easily slotted into the simple equations of labour. Much like the docks itself, they were vessels which funnelled through the endless passage of matter: converting the raw materials they were fed into capital.

But simplification also meant liquidation. As a generic machine, defined only by their input and output, dock labourers – or those who attempted to gain work at the docks – could be collapsed into a body or organism which moved with single purpose. To find work at the dock was by no

means a given. The number of labourers employed at the docks was constantly fluctuating and therefore could not be accurately captured by Mayhew's usual method of statistical tables – which by definition were *static*. The number of ships entering the dock and thus the amount of work to be done was dependent on season as well as the prevalence of eastern winds which prevented ships from arriving. Mayhew described the scenes at the 'calling-on' process when subcontractors took on labour from the pool of hopeful individuals clustered at the dock:

Presently you know, by the stream pouring through the gates and the rush towards particular spots, that the "calling foremen" have made their appearance. Then begins the scuffling and scrambling forth of countless hands high in the air, to catch the eye of him whose voice may give them work. As the foreman calls from a book the names, some men jump up on the backs of the others, so as to lift themselves high above the rest, and attract the notice of him who hires them. All are shouting. Some cry aloud his surname, some his christian name, others call out their own names, to remind him that they are there. Now the appeal is made in Irish blarney—now in broken English. Indeed, it is a sight to sadden the most callous, to see thousands of men struggling for only one day's hire; the scuffle being made the fiercer by the knowledge that hundreds out of the number there assembled must be left to idle the day out in want. To look in the faces of that hungry crowd is to see a sight that must be ever remembered. Some are smiling to the foreman to coax him into remembrance of them; others, with their protruding eyes, eager to snatch at the hoped-for pass. For weeks many have gone there, and gone through the same struggle—the same cries; and have gone away, after all, without the work they had screamed for. (*Labour*, iii, p. 301)

Characterising the dock workers as a 'stream' had two purposes: first it relieved Mayhew of the labour of depicting the heterogeneity of the crowd and the inexhaustible detail to be found in each face. But it also figured the crowd as a hydraulic liquid which could mould itself perfectly to the well of required labour, leaving the remainder of the people who could not find work to overflow and 'idle the day out in want'. In attempting to distinguish themselves from the stream, men only appear as fragmented parts – a raised hand, a name detached from its owner, a smiling face or a set of 'protruding eyes'. Like the white marble limbs of the children splashing in the poisonous water of Folly's Ditch, or the nameless corpses that Gaffer Hexam pulls from the Thames, they are ultimately irretrievable and unidentifiable. Having collapsed into the liquidity of the crowd, they could not be extracted individually. For all the crying of names, the sounds blur into one indissoluble whole – not a cacophony, but an impenetrable harmony. In the final sentence, Mayhew pans out to reveal the greater population of disappointed men at the Docks,

all sharing the ‘same cries’, finally completing the process of assimilation. They had become one with the tidal flows of the docks.

The Sewer-Hunter and the Dredgerman: Resisting Flow?

Though the thrashing disembodied limbs of the dock workers sank into the liquid flows of the city, others of London’s workers seemed to promise an alternative mode of urban existence where they instead fought against these flows. These workers, namely the dredgerman and the sewer-hunter advanced and sieved through the excremental waste of the city, reclaiming hidden objects and materials within them and returning them to economic circulation on the streets. Through this they created flows which allowed dead, spent objects to be resurrected (or regurgitated). But they not only exposed the urban ecology and circulatory networks that ordered the city; they also seemed to disrupt the irreversible amalgamation of liquid waste. In other words, they complicated the composition of London’s fluids. For Mayhew, the singular and adventurous spirits of the dredgerman and the sewer-hunter set them apart from the generic mass of London’s other workers. Pike argues that these ‘outcast’ professions were framed as deviant: an outright challenge to mainstream society, resisting assimilation into the lumpenproletariat.⁵² However, for all of their deviancy, they too could sink (sometimes) literally into the impenetrable mire of the city. Just as Mayhew reinforces the taxonomies of the sewer-hunter and the dredgerman, the very categories of which they are a part disintegrate.

For the sewer-hunters (alternatively known as ‘toshers’ or ‘shore-workers’), work consisted of scavenging the mire of the city’s depths for objects that had washed down the sewers. On their travels, equipped with a hoe and lantern, they would search for valuables, sieving the sewage or chipping away at large deposits of waste. Metals, rope and bones – items most likely washed down the sewers from cesspools and house drains were their most common pickings. These were quickly sold when brought above ground, probably to street-buyers who specialised in the purchase of miscellaneous forms of refuse. The migrations of these objects did not stop here. Old metals were in demand by iron-founders, coppersmiths, brass-founders and plumbers; rope could be unravelled and pulverised to form brown paper or oakum, a fibre used in caulking ships; and bones could be sold on to mills who ground them into bonemeal for manure, thus starting the cycle of consumption and excretion again. But if in luck they would come across objects which did not require reconstitution in order to be made useful: ladles, silver handed cutlery, mugs, drinking cups or even jewellery. These could be sold for a considerable amount to

⁵² David Lawrence Pike, *Subterranean Cities: The World Beneath Paris and London, 1800 – 1945* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), p. 200.

traders who were not deterred by their origins. Such objects, journeying from the dinner table to the sewer, and potentially back, gestured towards the contaminative circulatory relationship which had led to so many deaths in London. It was after all water laced with excrement which was the invisible communicator of cholera.

The dredgerman, on the other hand, evolved out of the city's fishermen and worked on the Thames. Trolling the riverbed with their nets, they would haul up their harvest, sorting the rubbish from materials that could be sold on for profit. Like the sewer-hunter this mostly included bones and old rope, but they also harvested a large amount of coal that had spilled into the river from sunken coal-barges. But perhaps, as is evident in the characterisation of Gaffer Hexam, they were most notorious for dragging the bodies of the drowned from the water – for this they could procure a modest amount of inquest money from the authorities.

Mayhew attributed dredgermen and sewer-hunters to a distinct class of labourer. He wrote that they were 'strictly *finders*; but their industry, or rather their labour, is confined to the river, or to that of the subterranean city of sewerage unto which the Thames supplies the great outlets. These persons may not be immediately connected with the *streets* of London, but their pursuits are carried on in the open air (if sewer-air may be so included).' (*Labour*, ii, p. 136) Mayhew traces the passages of waste from the sewer to the river, its outlets and potentially beyond. The city's waste is not just confined within its boundaries but seeps out to make contaminative connection with the rest of the world. With this process of pollution defined through the neutral economic language of 'supplies', Mayhew drew a grim symmetry with the international vessels which poured into London's docks and supplied the city. In this way, the dredgerman or the sewer-hunter did not only retrieve objects for their own monetary gain but were enmeshed in the global networks and complex processes by which the city absorbed, digested and then excreted matter.

Topinka makes a convincing case for the interconnection of the urban networks of sewer and streets, and the international routes of the sea. He writes:

By apprehending laborers as types, Mayhew sought to locate them within a shared abstract field, and thus to render them manageable within London's circulatory network. Race equipped Mayhew with a heuristic for typification (hence his suggestion that "wandering" is a characteristic of savages rather than what someone looking for work on the street would quite obviously have to do). Race also allowed Mayhew to reckon with the imperial scope of the street-sewer-sea nexus. (Topinka, p. 57)

In *London Labour*, sewer-hunters and dredgermen were certainly racialised through their labour. According to Schulting: 'Dirt in nineteenth-century texts is [...] a marker of class, and frequently also of race, suggesting not only physical labour but also dark skin colour, uncivilized habits, immorality, and the neglect of homes and personal belonging'. (Schulting, p. 6) In *London Labour*, the 'fuzzy hair' of the sewer-men's wives or the 'soiled and blackened' face of the dredgerman seem to suggest ethnic difference or racial contamination by virtue of their connection with the tidal flows which carried dirt to the sea and which in return brought in goods from abroad. However, the circulatory networks they were part of did not just consist of the imperial trade routes which enabled Britain to grasp the resources of the wider colonised world, but the bodily and urban circulations of waste and capital, or excretion and consumption. These circulations were as much a threat to the embodiment and individualisation of the sewer-hunter, as much as it allowed them to earn a living. Thus, in these figures we see a tension between the individual as classified, racialised labourer, and the liquidated, generic mass, completely integrated into the city's circulatory systems.

In *London Labour* this liquidation is rendered in grotesque and sometimes violent terms. The labour of dredgermen and sewer-hunters meant that they not only had to submerge themselves into the filth of the Thames or the muck of the sewers, but also that they could become completely (and involuntarily) engulfed by it. In an aside, Mayhew recounts an apocryphal tale of one dredgerman who dived into the waters to retrieve lost objects:

One of these men, known some years ago as "the Fish," could remain (at least, so say those whom there is no reason to doubt) three hours under the water without rising to the surface to take break. He was, it is said, web-footed, naturally, and partially web-fingered. (*Labour*, ii, p. 137)

Submerging his body in the river's waters in this case is an indicator of transformation, a baptismal rebirth. Bearing both the markers of man and fish, the dredgerman violates the taxonomic boundaries between genera. However, this hybridity extends from Mayhew's narratives of classification. The dredgerman is defined not only by the nature of his labour, but the physical markers of difference inscribed on his body: the dredgerman's feet and hands are 'naturally' webbed. What Mayhew suggests here is that, rather than labour shaping the body, the body pre-determines what labour one can take up. However, this specialisation is accelerated to the point of bodily decomposition. As the dredgerman's story concludes, he dives into the sea in order to retrieve a silver cup for a reward. Yet this is how he meets his end. Mayhew writes that, 'It was believed that he got entangled among the weeds on the rocks, and so perished.'

(*Labour*, ii, p. 137) The dredgerman's watery death first appears as ironic, given his namesake and amphibious anatomy. However, being lost to the sea is an indicator of his ultimate assimilation into the city's liquids. Writing only that 'he was never seen again', Mayhew leaves the door open to the fantastical possibility that the dredgerman is perhaps still swimming beneath the water – not as man, but as man completely transformed into a fish.

It was not only dredgermen that could be drowned and absorbed by the tidal flows of the city. The dangerous work of the sewer-hunter was also a risky business. As they ventured into the sewers they braved packs of marauding rats, deadly accumulations of suffocating gasses (known as 'choke damp'), sudden and powerful rushes of sewage as well as the crumbling brickwork of the sewers themselves. Mayhew recounted stories told of, 'sewer-hunters beset by myriads of enormous rats, and slaying thousands of them in their struggle for life, till at length the swarms of the savage things overpowered them, and in a few days afterwards their skeletons were discovered picked to the very bones'. (*Labour*, ii, p. 150) In another fatal incident a labourer swept away by a torrent of sewage was 'found by [his] informant, a "shore-worker," near the mouth of the sewer quite dead, battered, and disfigured in a frightful manner.' (*Labour*, ii, p. 151) These victims are literally digested and regurgitated by the sewers, the former by ravenous rats and the latter found suggestively at the 'mouth' of the sewer. The speed at which the body could be stripped away to bone was indicative of the ferocious forces which anonymised the individual and transformed them into commodity. There was the gruesome possibility that the bones scavenged by the sewer-hunter were not just derived from animals, but from the human victims of the sewer itself. In these passages, the dead bodies are not irrevocably swept away into the depths of the sewers but become part of the sewer-hunter's labour of 'finding'. Perishing in the sewers meant being inducted into the circulations of waste which the sewer-hunter depended on to make a living.

The corpses retrieved from river and the bodies of the dredgerman were also placed in unsettling proximity. One dredgerman recounts a story that illustrates this point clearly:

Do you see them two marks there on the back of my hand? Well, one day—I was on'y young then—I was grabblin' for old rope in Church Hole, when I brings up a body, and just as I was fixing the rope on his leg to tow him ashore, two swells comes down in a skiff, and lays hold of the painter of my boat, and tows me ashore. The hook of the drag went right thro' the trowsers of the drowned man and my hand, and I couldn't let go no how, and tho' I roared out like mad, the swells didn't care, but dragged me into the stairs. When I got there, my arm, and the corpse's shoe and trowsers, was all kivered with my

blood. What do you think the gents said?—why, they told me as how they had done me good, in towin' the body in, and ran away up the stairs. (*Labour*, ii, p. 150)

The uncanniness of this scene can be attributed to the blurred and merging distinctions of the dredger and the inert corpse, the violent disempowerment which leaves his cries ignored. The doubling of the body is first suggested in the linguistic mirroring of 'tow *him* ashore [...] tows *me* ashore' [my emphasis]. As the hook penetrates both man and corpse, the dredger is similarly transfigured as haulable goods without feeling. The motivation of the attack is never made clear, but the attackers' final comment that 'they had done [him] good, in towin' the body in', makes no distinction between the body of the dredger and the corpse. They are, after all, both soaked in the same blood. In this unholy transfusion of bodily fluids, the drowned corpse and the dredger both appear freshly deceased. As such, these bodies are revealed to be indistinguishable in that they are two points in the circulations of waste that transform subject into object or even the living into the dead. Though Mayhew constructs and delineates the category of the 'finder' in London's labourers, the labourer's body collapses into their objects of reclamation. To put it another way, just as the definition of the object or material constantly shifts under the economic circulations of waste exposed in the text, so when integrated into these cycles, the individual is also susceptible to metamorphosis.

Michelle Allen has written that *London Labour* 'conveys an idea of London not as a modern, million-peopled metropolis, but as a traditional community made up of recognizable individuals [...] the city, for all its stink, is still an essentially knowable place.'⁵³ Allen argues that Mayhew resists the centralising project of the Metropolitan Commission of Sewer's plans for a unified body of sewerage. Under such a system the city's inhabitants would be conjoined through what constituted a communal digestive system. However, I argue that Mayhew's London with its uncanny bodies, consumed, fragmented or distorted by London's currents and circulations, anticipates this anxiety of amalgamation. As London's population was engulfed by the obscene liquids of the city, the borders which maintained them as individual bodies dissolved. Even the distinctions between the individual and the animal, or individual and inanimate object, became blurry. Thus, the liquidated bodies of the poor were always in flux. In the attempt to divide the city up into intelligible units, Mayhew was returned to the unknowable and indigestible mass of the metropolis.

⁵³ Michelle Allen, *Cleansing the City: Sanitary Geographies in Victorian London* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2008), p. 33.

The Recycled Narratives of *The Wild Boys of London* (1864 – 1866)

Imagination generally loves to run wild about underground London, or the sub-ways of any great city. [...] The dark arches of our own dear riverside Adelphi – familiarised, not to say vulgarized, as they have been by being turned into a thoroughfare to coal-wharves and halfpenny steam-boats – are still looked upon as the favourite haunts of the wild tribes of London, or City Arabs, whatever these may be.

John Hollingshead, *Underground London* (1862)

In 1846, the publisher Charles Knight lambasted what he saw as a tide of virulent publications flooding the English market:

There are manufactories in London whence hundreds of reams of vile paper and printing issue weekly; where large bodies of children are employed to arrange types at the wages of shirt makers, from copy furnished by the ignorant at the wages of scavengers. In truth, such writers if they deserve the name of writers, *are* scavengers. All the garbage that belongs to the history of crime and misery is raked together, to diffuse a moral miasma through the land, in the shape of the most vulgar and brutal fiction.¹

Knight could hardly have been more damning in his assessment of so-called ‘low-class’ literature. Published for a largely working-class audience and released in penny parts, it was likened to poisonous vapours spreading moral and physical disease. Their circulations were a threat to middle-class conceptions of public health in the city and beyond. As texts comprised of ‘scavenged’ material, penny serials themselves were perceived to be beyond the confines of ‘real’ literature. Rather than original stories and cohesive narratives, this kind of literature was an incoherent and unsorted collection of contaminative trash.

But as critics like Knight wrung their hands over the possibility of the penny serial circulating and polluting urban space and readers, these same motifs were echoed in its contents. The notorious juvenile serial *The Wild Boys of London; Or Children of the Night* (1864 – 66) published by the equally infamous Newsagent’s Publishing Company (NPC) wove these contaminative circulations into its narrative and structure. Its convoluted and longwinded narratives reflected the ways in which waste matter could be continuously recuperated and depleted. Its run

¹ Charles Knight, ‘Address to the Reader’, *Knight’s Penny Magazine: Volume 1* (London: Charles Knight and Co., 1846), pp. 231 – 234 (p. 233).

produced two books, 103 weekly parts, 189 chapters and approximately 800,000 words (over double the length of *David Copperfield*), but quickly came to a brusque end with its characters still mid-adventure.² As such, *The Wild Boys* exemplifies the complexities which arise when stock narratives of progress and social mobility clash with the long-term economic viability of a text marketed towards a seemingly insatiable young audience. This chapter looks towards the first book of *The Wild Boys* in which the protagonists – a group of delinquent youths who live in the sewers – ramble around the city. The second book, in which many of the boys are relocated to Australia, expands their circulatory routes from the local to the trans-Pacific thus lays beyond the scope of this chapter.

The writers of the NPC were typically poorly paid, receiving between two guineas and 15 shillings for a weekly instalment. *The Bookseller* identified the particular writers responsible for the production of their ‘literary garbage’ as James Redding Ware, Charles Stevens, Thompson Townsend, Cecil Stagg, Vane Ireton Shaftesbury St John and Bracebridge Hemyng, (who was responsible for writing material for the fourth volume of *London Labour and the London Poor*).³ Many of these men were of an upper-middle class extraction and nevertheless led tumultuous lives. *The Bookseller* unflatteringly characterised them as ‘Very great men [...] in their own estimation, with eye-glasses, cigars, and swaggering gait, that convey the idea of great means, instead of, as is the fact, living far beyond their slender incomes, and being so continually in debt as never to be able to stay in their lodgings.’ (‘A Reader’s Experience’, p. 810) Although, like most penny dreadfuls, *The Wild Boys* was published anonymously, John Adcock has theorised that Vane St. John, was the author. Comparing his known works to *The Wild Boys* it is possible to see his stylistic quirks – backward phrasing, run-on sentences and sentences which peter off altogether.⁴

Vane St. John was born in Edmonton in 1838 to a literary family: his father James Augustus St. John had made his living as a journalist and travel writer. The younger St. John began his working life as a clerk for Inland Revenue and Customs in 1858, before pursuing a career as an author. His output was prolific. In addition to *The Wild Boys*, his work for the NPC included *The Boy Detective; or, the Crimes of London* (1865 – 66), *The Young Apprentice* (1868) and the spiritual successor to *The Wild Boys*, *The Wild Boys of Paris; or, the Mysteries of Vault of Death* (1866). During

² John Springhall, *Youth, Popular Culture and Moral Panics: Penny Gaffs to Gangsta Rap 1830 – 1996* (New York: St. Martin’s Pres, 1998), p. 60. Further references to this edition are included after quotations in the text.

³ ‘Mischievous Literature’, *The Bookseller*, 1 July 1868, pp. 445 – 449 (p. 446). Further references to this article are included after quotation in the text.

⁴ John Adcock, ‘The Wild Boys of London; or, the Children of the Night’ <<http://yesterdaypapersarchive.blogspot.com/2008/03/wild-boys-of-london.html>> [accessed 20 February 2022].

the late 50s and 60s he also produced work for the *Halfpenny Journal* (which was famous for serialising the novels of Elizabeth Braddon). He tried his hand at sensational novels too: *St. Eustace; or, The Hundred-and-One* (1857), *Under-Currents: A Novel of Our Day* (1860) and *The Chain of Destiny* (1862). These, according to one critic were ‘true to the ancient lines, governess, heroine, baronet villain, stolen marriage certificate, etc.’⁵ When the NPC had ceased operations, he followed Brett to his next enterprise, the boys’ magazine *The Boys of England*. During the 1870s, he also wrote for the Emmett family who were also in the business of publishing cheap literature for children and adolescents. Vane St. John had a rocky private life: he was a life-long alcoholic, fathered 27 children, and was constantly in debt. He was declared bankrupt at least twice during his life and moved constantly from lodging to lodging, likely due to unpaid rent. He died in 1911 ‘in poor circumstances.’⁶

For the Wild Boys, the sewer is home. They are able to transform its filth and stench into a comfortable domestic space. The serial describes their subterranean home as having the all trappings and atmosphere of a gentleman’s club:

Our hero found himself in a chamber of strange construction.

It was built in a style of architecture which is rarely seen now; the walls were stone, the roof vaulted, and supported by large pillars.

It was furnished with innumerable piles of mat of every description from the rough rope to the luxurious woollen.

On these a number of boys reclines in various attitudes, each according to his inclination.

Several lamps hung from chains fixed to the roof, and gave a smokey aspect to the place.

A square iron stove stood in the centre, and the smoke was conducted out by means of a pipes, which with considerable ingenuity was so placed as to lead downward into an adjacent sewer.

A box formed of rough planks, served them for a table, and completed the domestic arrangements since it served as a receptacle for provisions.⁷

⁵ Henry Llewellyn Williams, ‘The Braddon-Maxwell Book-Making Factory’, *The Writer: Volume V* (Boston: The Writer Publishing Company, 1891), pp. 28 – 31 (p. 30).

⁶ ‘St John, Sir Spencer Buckingham (1825 – 1910), diplomatist’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. by G. Le G. Norgate and H. C. G. Matthew (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) <<https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-35906>> [accessed 17 February 2022].

⁷ *The Wild Boys of London: or, Children of the Night*, 2 vols (London: Newsagent’s Publishing Company, 1866), I, p. 8. Further references to this edition are included after quotations in the text.

Above ground, vagrant children like the Wild Boys faced a hostile environment. By necessity, boys of poor families spent a large proportion of their time on the streets: it was both a site of work, of selling, vending or begging; and an arena for play and adventure. This put them at odds with the sanitarian doctrine of ‘*continuous circulation*’.⁸ Those loitering in the streets were deemed a nuisance, and impediment to the orderly ‘healthy’ circulation of people and capital around the metropolis and its streets. Children and adolescents visibly idling also made them a target for the policing of public space. Peter Andersson writes that in the nineteenth-century city, the work of the police officer was to ‘maintain the flow [of traffic] and remove any object that might obstruct it.’⁹ Legislation enacted through the Vagrancy Act of 1822 had empowered authorities to proactively arrest those whose public behaviours had even faintest whiff of suspicion. In addition to those who were suspected of being thieves, or who were found ‘wandering abroad’ and could not give a good account of themselves, ‘every Person playing or betting in any Street [...] or any Game or pretended Game of Chance’ could also be arrested and convicted under the law.¹⁰ As Susan Magarey points out, this had the effect of criminalising child-like behaviours with ‘children playing marbles, pitch and toss, or gambling with halfpennies, farthings, or buttons in the street’ potentially falling foul of the law.¹¹

In the Wild Boy’s subterranean home, they are able to fashion for themselves a makeshift refuge from the inhospitality of the street, with its coercion of juvenile bodies to move with purpose and join the flow of pedestrians and traffic. In the sewers they instead adopt the language of upper-class idle luxury. Here loitering can be reframed as lounging. If the gentleman’s club was, as Barbara Black argues, a place where masculine identities were forged and recast, the Wild Boys are equally able to refashion themselves in their underworld replica.¹² Above ground they are uncharitably characterised as ‘ragamuffins’, ‘vagrants’, ‘moochers’, or ‘urchins’ – tattered and dirty juveniles who block the flow of the street like troublesome waste. In the sewers, they are able to deconstruct and reconstruct their characters into the model of young manhood. Essentially, the Wild Boys are master recyclers – both of the material that make up their home and of their own identities.

⁸ Edwin Chadwick and Frederick Oldfield Ward, “*Circulation or Stagnation*”: *Being a Translation of a Paper by F. O. Ward* (London: Cassell & Company, 1880), p. 8.

⁹ Peter K. Andersson, *Streets in Late Victorian London: The Constable and the Crowd* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 90.

¹⁰ *Vagrancy Act 1824* (7 & 8 Geo. IV c. 30, cl. IV) [Online] <<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/Geo4/5/83/section/IV/enacted?view=plain>> [accessed 21 February 2022].

¹¹ Susan Magarey, ‘The Invention of Juvenile Delinquency in Early Nineteenth-Century England’, *Labour History*, 34 (1978), 11–27 (p. 20).

¹² Barbara Black, *A Room of His Own: A Literary – Cultural Study of Victorian Clubland* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2012), p. 22.

Vagrant children were not only hurried on by the police but were systematically swept like rubbish into institutions in which their movements could be regulated and their bodies disciplined.¹³ In 1854, Parliament passed the Youthful Offenders Act, which authorised magistrates and justices to send young offenders under the age of 16 to special penal institutions dubbed ‘reformatory schools’. This legislation was supplemented by the Industrial School Act of 1857 which took a preventative approach to juvenile delinquency and vagrancy. Any child ‘whose social circumstances made it likely that they would commit crime’ could be removed to newly formed ‘Industrial Schools’ which aspired to educate them through a strict daily routine of formal schooling, religious and moral guidance, and training to particular ‘wholesome’ trades. It targeted a broad range of children and young adolescents including any child found begging or receiving alms, found wandering without a home or visible means of support any child found in the company of thieves or even a child whose parents declared them ‘out of control’.¹⁴ The Wild Boys on the other hand denote a kind of freedom and mobility. In the words of one boy ‘a cove as rambles about the streets and lives as best as he can; that’s a Wild Boy.’ (*Wild Boys*, p. 86) Because rambling put one at risk of institutionalisation, it opposes an ideology of streamlined productivity. The Wild Boys trace their own routes around urban space, scrounging its meagre offerings for no more than pleasure and survival.

The act of rambling – of wandering for pleasure over moving with efficiency – is one which informs the shape of *The Wild Boys*’ narrative. In one of the latter chapters, the author inserted a rather knowing comic epigraph reading: “‘The course of a true story never could run smooth.’” *Ungrammatical Philosophy not by T. F. Mupper.*’ Directly beneath he added, ‘In such a story as this the truth of the above proverb is frequently exemplified, the rapid thronging of incident rendering a straight course an impossibility.’ (*Wild Boys*, p. 278) T. F. Mupper was in all likelihood a parody of Martin Farquhar Tupper (1810 – 1889), the author of a popular series of books named *Proverbial Philosophy* (1838 – 1876). The meandering story of *The Wild Boys*, like many other juvenile penny serials, was produced by the theoretical perpetuity of a serial. With no immediate need to bring the serial to a planned conclusion, they could continue circulating around London, eagerly passed through the hands and devoured by their juvenile readership. But for *The Wild Boys* in particular, it is the protagonists’ ‘wildness’ – their unsettledness in urban space, their unrestraint and their resistance to conforming to the straight courses of the street which brings

¹³ Christine L. Krueger, ‘Legal Uses of Victorian Fiction: Infant Felons to Juvenile Delinquents’, in *Functions of Victorian Culture at the Present Time*, ed. by Christine L. Krueger (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2002), pp. 115 – 136 (p. 122).

¹⁴ Jeannie Duckworth, *Fagin’s Children in Victorian England* (London: Hambledon and London, 2002), p. 219.

them into natural conflict with the serial's antagonistic actors. Thus, its narrative is episodic and disjointed. Between the strands of its main plot, *The Wild Boys* is punctuated by the boys' brief encounters with the police and criminal gangs. The street is a stage on which different classes come into fraught contact. However, because the Wild Boys' movements are characterised by an aimless wandering and loitering, these encounters recur again and again in a predictable, inevitable rhythm.

In this respect the basic plot of *The Wild Boys* is difficult to recount succinctly. In its short preface, the author professed that the adventures aimed to demonstrate 'there is hope for those who are born in the lowest depths of degradation, and proves that many of the world's future heroes – the great in honour, and the rich in fame – have yet to rise from the ranks of "The Wild Boys of London"'. (*Wild Boys*, p. 2) As such it sets up a standard narrative of moral and physical improvement. However, as A. E. Waite, an avid collector of penny dreadfuls put it: 'whether it emerges is another question', adding that 'the story has no plot'.¹⁵ Like many other juvenile penny serials, *The Wild Boys* cycled between numerous loosely connected narrative threads and featured a seemingly endless list of characters. (See appendix 1) Outside the troop of Wild Boys this included Dick Lane, whose family is thrust into poverty, and whose father descends into criminality; the perpetually unlucky Mat the Mongrel, who is constantly antagonised by the Wild Boys; Arthur Grattan, a young gentleman who turns out to be the orphan son of a murdered Lord; Arthur's villainous uncle Stephen Grantham who is also the leader of a shadowy organisation called the Companions of the Silver Dagger; Savage Mike, a hardened criminal (and friend of Mat the Mongrel), who is hired by Grantham to murder Arthur; Andrew Blake, a detective who is engaged in a years-long attempt to capture and prosecute Savage Mike; Emily Munroe, Grantham's abandoned wife who attempts suicide at the beginning of the serial; Lady Isabelle, the new subject of Grantham's evil desires who he plans to ruin in order to gain her hand; and Ralph Montreal, the serial's manly hero who leads much of the prevailing action. This is by no means an exhaustive list of the text's storylines and characters, but it serves to demonstrate how juvenile penny serials created a dense collage of interlocking storylines across social classes. Seen as a whole, *The Wild Boys* represented the stratified social order as a site fraught with oftentimes excremental contact.

At present there have been no attempts to analyse *The Wild Boys* beyond the first hundred pages or so. Darin Graber, writing about the 'sickening circulation' of *The Wild Boys*, argues that their movements through urban space emulate 'the waterborne circulation of cholera as described by

¹⁵ A. E. Waite, quoted in <<https://bearalley.blogspot.com/2006/11/vane-st-john.html>> [accessed 1 January 2022].

[...] John Snow'. According to his reading, the alternative communal homosocial model of living pioneered by the Wild Boys in their subterranean home functions as a critique of dominant paths of social consumption and excretion. As they circulate their 'surplus' bodies through metropolitan space, they flout medical-sanitary narratives which determined that waste must be flushed out of the social or urban body in order that it may be made healthy.¹⁶ Although Graber is correct to point out how the Wild Boys pose a threat to social hierarchies and Victorian paternalist politics, this fails to consider the courses the Wild Boys' lives take as the serial continues. Rather than remaining figures of counter-cultural subversiveness, the Wild Boys integrate themselves (each with varying success) into the social order, ascending and then descending the social ladder. In this respect, the narratives of *The Wild Boys* come to represent the myriad meanings and forms waste can inhabit in its cycles around the city. At some points in the serial, the Wild Boys are stridently opposed to formal work, at others they are fully immersed in the doctrines of productivity. From seemingly worthless waste, they become matter which is both useful and profitable. In this way, the 'sickening circulations' can more widely come to represent the serial's narratives of recycling.

Claude Lévi-Strauss saw repetitious and circulatory structures a result in the degradation of mythic thought. As myths shifted from tools to explain creation or cosmic cycles of time to shorter periods, their structures and narratives collapsed in repetitious structures:

The deterioration begins when opposition structures give way to reduplicatory structures: the successive episodes all follow the same pattern. And the deterioration ends at the point where reduplication replaces structure. Being itself no more than the form of a form, it echoes the last murmur of expiring structure. The myth, having nothing more to say, or very little, can only continue by dint of self-repetition.¹⁷

Lévi-Strauss argues that this repetitious structure was exemplified by the *roman-feuilleton*, a kind of cheap French serial which found popularity from the late-1830s. It was the *feuilleton* that served as inspiration for the English penny serials of the 1840s, 50s and 60s. In addition to their weekly serial structure and sensational style, they both shared a tendency to elongate their narratives by means of cliff-hangers at the end of every number. In this way, the English penny serial and the French *feuilleton* operated in a state where conclusions were artificially imposed for the sake of

¹⁶ Darin Graber, 'The Wild Boys of London's Sickening Circulation', *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, 27 (2020), 753 – 778, p. 754. Further references to this article are included after quotations in the text.

¹⁷ Claude Lévi-Strauss, 'From *The Origin of Table Manners*', *Theory of the Novel: A Historical Approach*, ed. by Michael McKeon (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), pp. 100 – 113 (pp. 101- 102). Further references to this edition are included after quotations in the text.

closure, or perpetually deferred in favour of continual (and increasingly repetitive) action. In regard to the *feuilleton*, Lévi-Strauss argued that although it seemed to reach a happy ending in which the good are rewarded and the evil punished, this conclusion was an illusion:

[A *feuilleton*] begins with an accident, continues with a series of discouraging and inconclusive adventures, and ends without the initial deficiency having been remedied, since the hero's return solves nothing; having been indelibly marked by his arduous journey through the forest, he becomes the murderer of his partner or his pet animals, and is himself either doomed to an incomprehensible death or reduced to a state of wretchedness. It is, then, as if the myth's message reflected the dialectical process that had produced it, and which is an irreversible decline from structure to repetition. (Lévi-Strauss, p. 103)

In the *feuilleton*, the 'myth's message', that is the articulation of cosmic cycles, deteriorates into collection of broken forms. From fragments of myth, the writer 'collected these scattered elements and re-uses them as they come along, being at the same time dimly aware that they originate from some other structure'. (Lévi-Strauss, p. 103)

The Wild Boys of London is perhaps more radical than the *feuilletons* cited by Lévi-Strauss in that its structure is almost completely resistant to closure. Though *The Wild Boys* begins its narrative journey with the promise of social mobility, it is aborted halfway through its run. The Wild Boys, who have over the course of the narrative managed to lift themselves out of poverty into respectable positions, are suddenly reduced back to their ruffian lifestyles. Despite the proliferation of storylines, *The Wild Boys* did not produce a cohesive narrative nor a satisfying or coherent conclusion. Major characters were dropped without explanation and storylines quietly petered out. *The Wild Boys* is thus marked by a seriality in which progress is impossible. As the bodies of the Wild Boys circulate through the sewers and streets of London, they embed themselves within repetitive narratives which follow the patterns of recycled waste in the city.

'Poor innutritious stuff': The History of the Juvenile Penny Serial

The juvenile penny serials of the 1860s are often considered interchangeable with the term 'penny dreadful'. This pejorative label was constructed by middle-class critics of 'low-quality' sensational cheap literature. One of its first appearances in print was in the magazine *The Bookseller* who characterised them as 'raw-head-and-bloody-bones serials'.¹⁸ What is considered a

¹⁸ 'A Reader's Experiences', *Bookseller*, 2 November 1868, pp. 809 – 810 (p. 809). Further references to this article are included after quotations in the text.

‘penny dreadful’ covers a broad array of texts – criminal and gothic tales of the 1830s and 40s otherwise known as ‘penny bloods’; the juvenile penny serials of the 1860s; and serial literature associated with the more ‘respectable’ boys’ magazines that succeeded the NPC and which continued to thrive well up to the turn of the century. (*Moral Panics*, p. 42)

In the first volume of *London Labour and the London Poor*, Mayhew captured the changing tastes in literature of the working-class. “They’ve got tired of Lloyd’s blood-stained stories” one costermonger commented, referring to the aforementioned ‘penny bloods’.¹⁹ These inexpensive serial novels were written for adults rather than children and included such tales as the murderous barber Sweeney Todd in *The String of Pearls: A Domestic Romance* (1846 – 47), *Varney the Vampire; or the Feast of Blood* (1845 – 47) and the notorious highwayman Dick Turpin who was a mainstay of penny literature throughout the century. Many of these found their home in one of the many periodicals of the publisher Edward Lloyd (1815 – 1890). Mayhew noted that ‘Works relating to Court, potentates, or “harristocracts,”’ were most sought after. (*Labour*, I, p. 26) From 1844, G. W. M. Reynolds’ long-running penny serial novel *The Mysteries of London* had captured the imagination of working-class readers with its consciousness of contemporary London life and radical politics. Reynolds himself had taken inspiration from the wildly successful *roman-feuilleton* *Les Mystères de Paris* (1842 – 43) written by Eugène Sue. It was by far the best-selling novel of its day, reaching a circulation of 250,000 in the late 1840s. It was a lengthy project too, being published in 624 weekly volumes over 12 years, amounting to an eye-watering 4.5 million words.

Meanwhile, the tales of pirates, highwaymen and gothic villains found a new audience among a growing population of literate and semi-literate working-class children. At the point of the 1861 census, twenty-percent of the population of England and Wales were between the ages of 10 and 19 – some 4 million young people. Even before a system of compulsory education was made possible by Forster’s Education Act of 1870, an estimated two-thirds of English working-class children had had some sort of schooling through a patchwork system of factory and workhouse schools, dame schools, charity schools, Sunday schools, religious schools and orphan schools.²⁰ This pattern of juvenile literacy is observable in *The Wild Boys*, through the character ‘Schooly Bright’ who is able to read through briefly attending school: ‘He used to go to the Ragged, and

¹⁹ Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor*, 4 vols (London: Griffin, Bohn and Company, 1861), I, p. 25. Further references to this edition are included after quotations in the text. Further references to this edition are included after quotations in the text.

²⁰ ‘The Education of the Working Classes to 1870’, *A History of the County of Middlesex: Volume 1*, ed. by J. S. Stockburn et. al. (London: Victoria Country History, 1969), pp. 213 – 240.

learned his letters; and now he talks like a parson'. (*Wild Boys*, p. 9) According to David Vincent, reading was taught to the working classes with the goal of 'produc[ing] young men able to approach the task of earning a living, whether in an established trade or in an industrialising sector, in an entirely new frame of mind. The task of deconstructing and reconstructing language on the basis of its inherent rules was to be replicated as the pupil entered the workplace'.²¹ By contrast, penny serials, with their tales of romance and adventure, provided juvenile audiences with literature which made no claims of didacticism or moral improvement. They represented what 'juveniles actually *chose* to read, as opposed to the improving 'reward book' literature which adults in power over them felt that they *should* read'. (*Moral Panics*, p. 39)

In the 1850s and 60s, there were a number of changes in regard to so-called 'taxes on knowledge' which made these decades a fertile ground for a booming 'penny press'. In 1853 advertisement duty was removed, stamp duty on newspapers was repealed in 1855, and in 1861 paper excise duty was also removed. This, combined with technological advances in steam-powered printing presses, meant that production costs for serial fiction, periodicals and newspapers alike dropped considerably, with the increased competition in the market driving prices down further.²²

Though the price of the juvenile penny serial put them out of reach of the very poor, it made them an attractive proposition to a population of young working-class people hungry for escapism from the mundanity of their working lives. While information on the readership of juvenile penny serials is generally sparse, there is some evidence that penny serials were also read amongst children of the urban middle-classes as well. An article written for the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge rather sneeringly characterised their readers as 'ignorant shop and office boys, young apprentice and factory hands, and perhaps, a small number of school lads'.²³

From the 1860s, the NPC was at the forefront of this burgeoning juvenile penny serial market and produced some of its most popular (and reviled) titles. It was managed, and later owned by the enterprising Edwin J. Brett (1828 – 95), who had a knack for distilling the tastes of the young population and for canny, if not unusual, marketing. In his early adulthood Brett worked as an engraver and found himself immersed in Radical Chartist circles, of which included G. W. M.

²¹ David Vincent, *Literacy and Popular Culture: England 1750 – 1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 104.

²² Martin Hewitt, 'The Cheap Press', in *The Dawn of the Cheap Press in Victorian Britain: The End of the 'Taxe on Knowledge', 1849 – 1869* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013) <<https://www.perlego.com/book/875172/the-dawn-of-the-cheap-press-in-victorian-britain-pdf>>

²³ John Pownall Harrison, 'Cheap Literature – Past and Present', *The British Almanac of The Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge* (London: The Company of Stationers, 1873), pp. 60 – 81 (p. 70).

Reynolds. Evidently his political zeal became more muted as he aged, although the occasional radical sentiment did make its way into the serials of the NPC. By the 1850s he was working with Ebenezer Landells, one of the founders of *Punch*, and rubbing shoulders with other Fleet Street bohemians like Douglas Jerrolds, Edmund Yates and Henry Mayhew. At some point between 1862 and 1864 Brett joined the NPC, which under his management was transformed from a small company publishing limited runs of pamphlets into a flourishing business which almost exclusively produced juvenile serials. Though no records from the NPC now exist, the most popular of their serials reached circulation figures of over 30,000.

NPC penny serials were typically comprised of convoluted tales with a rolling cast of characters and several concurrent, loosely connected adventures. These were sold in weekly penny parts on cheap octavo paper crammed with tiny print. Paragraphs were often only a sentence long, slotting neatly into the narrow double columns on the page. The effect of this was that the prose had a stuttering and abrupt quality, with unfolding action broken up into short motions or single exclamations. This was only exacerbated by tendency for serial parts to end mid-action or even mid-sentence. Each part was fronted by woodcut engraving, enticing the reader to the contents within. For these, popular subjects were half-dressed women helpless in the arm of an aggressor or rescuer, grimacing faces of villains, or the mischief carried out by the protagonists. To save money, Brett would employ the illustrative services of amateurs or would lend his own hand in creating illustrations. These engravings captured action in stiff, cartoonish strokes, reducing the contents of a number to a single, striking tableau.

Because advertising was an expense that the NPC and other penny serial publishers and newsagents were often unwilling to outlay, they pursued more unorthodox means of promotion. Newsagents sometimes surreptitiously sneaked in free numbers in the leaves of popular working-class journals and newspapers, for example *Reynold's News* or the *London Journal*. (G. W. M. Reynolds of *The Mysteries of London* was involved in both of these ventures). For penny serials beginning their run, the first two numbers were sold bundled in a red or yellow wrapper for the price of one. This wrapper could also serve as a means of announcing other serials, as could the final page of a penny dreadful at the end of its run. Other sellers enticed young readers by organising lotteries for subscribers with tickets slipped into a penny serial's pages.²⁴ To enter, readers had to forward on this cheque to the offices of the penny serial in an envelope affixed with two stamps. For one of the NPC's serials, *The Dance of Death* (1865 – 1866) a poster

²⁴ John Deck, *The Printing Press the Church's Lever* quoted in G. Staunton Batty, 'Pernicious Periodicals: or Wholesome Parish Literature', *The Fireside Annual: 1879* (London: Hand and Heart Publishing, 1879), pp. 402 – 407 (p. 403).

promised a pot of £250 worth of prizes including watches and chains, guns, stiletto daggers, cricket bats, smoking pipes and volumes of *Lives of Notorious French Criminals*. Whether these ever made their way into the hands of hopeful ticket holders was contended by the NPC's critics. In the *Daily News*, it was reported that the advertised prizes for these kinds of lotteries were actually the unsold junk from Fleet Street shops and that only a small portion of the promised prizes were given out.²⁵ *The Bookseller* made the more serious accusation that the whole lottery system was a sham, allowing publishers to pocket the profits of the stamps posted to them by ticket holders. ('Mischievous Literature', p. 446)

Brett eventually used the money raised from the NPC to start the children's magazine *The Boys of England* in 1866. This allowed him to dissociate himself from the dirty image that the NPC had garnered over the years and start afresh with a more reputable enterprise, though many of the writers from the NPC were brought on board. *The Boys of England* promised to provide its readers with 'sport, sensation, fun and instruction', with many of its stories drawing on the lure of British colonial power through sensational adventures in foreign lands. It met with huge success. In 1866 its circulation was 150,000, which rose to 250,000 by the end of the 1870s.²⁶ However, the move from the 'low-life' serials of the NPC signalled growing stratification in the children's literature market. While Brett pursued a more middle-class readership, 'penny dreadfuls' continued to be published by the Emmett family. By the 1890s though, they were all but snuffed out by the popularity of even cheaper story-papers like Alfred Harmsworth's *The Halfpenny Marvel* (1893 – 1922) and *The Union Jack* (1894 – 1933). As a genre, the 'penny dreadful' could not compete with more virulent and transmissible products.

'The old exhausted mines of the circulating library': Self-Referentiality in the Juvenile Penny Serial

Juvenile penny serials of the 1860s followed well-established 'scripts' and can be broadly categorised to several sub-genres. Many carried on the traditions of earlier penny bloods, recounting the stories of criminal or bandit folk heroes, such as *Charley Wag, the New Jack Sheppard* (1860 – 62) or *Black Bess; or the Knight of the Road* (1866 – 68). On the other hand, there were those whose protagonists were agents for justice like *Spring Heel'd Jack, the Terror of London* (1863) and *The Boy Detective; or the Crimes of London* (1866 – 67). Pirate penny serials were perennial hits too, including *The Boy Pirate; or, Life on the Ocean* (1865) and *Wild Will; or, Pirates of the Thames*

²⁵ 'The Literature of Crime', *Daily News*, 10 June 1868, p. 8.

²⁶ John Springhall, "Disseminating Impure Literature": The 'Penny Dreadful' Publishing Business Since 1860, *The Economic History Review*, 47 (1994), 567 – 584, p. 575. Further references to this article are included after quotations in the text.

(c.1865). Others took after the model of *The Wild Boys*, using depictions of lower- and working-class adolescent life as the basis for their stories: *The Poor Boys of London; or, Driven to Crime* (1866), *The Wild Boys of Paris; or, the Mysteries of the Vaults of Death* (1866) and *The Work Girls of London* (1865). There were also serials which detailed the thrilling and sometimes seedy lives of the stage, written specifically for girl or young women audiences: *Rose Mortimer; or, the Ballet Girl's Revenge* (c. 1865) and *Ellen Pery; or, the Memoirs of an Actress* (1856).

Over the course of its long run, *The Wild Boys* incorporated all these genres, especially in Book Two as it began to exhaust its original premise. Some of the Wild Boys, on being transported to Australia, take charge of the ship and become pirates; Savage Mike and Mat the Mongrel have a stint at being highwaymen; the Dolphin's abandoned lover is driven to make a living as an actress; and the Wild Boys make mischief by disguising themselves as reanimated skeletons. This demonstrates how the market for juvenile penny serial was highly self-referential, and even verged on plagiarism. The Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge noted that penny dreadfuls had a 'monotonous similarity which pervades the contents of these publications, and that one criminal romance is very much like another'. ('Cheap Literature', p. 70) The writer theorised that this explained 'why they cannot compete successfully with the light literature of a higher class, where more matter is given for the money, and the contents more varied in character'. ('Cheap Literature', pp. 70 – 71). As 'matter', the penny serial was reduced to mere inked paper. The narratives found in the penny serial could similarly be compressed down to one uniform story.

Wilkie Collins identified this very fact in the essay 'The Unknown Public', published anonymously in *Household Words* in 1858. This humorously derided cheap print literature, in particular penny periodicals aimed at the juvenile working classes. As part of his 'research', he read and dissected five examples supposedly representative of the genre. Though Collins did not follow the familiar rhetoric which desecrated these texts as morally contaminative, he was critical of their poor writing and lack of originality. He argued that in the popular penny periodical the sensational gave way to the dull, prosaic tropes endemic to popular fiction: 'Each part of each successive story settled down in turn, as I read it, to the same dead level of the smoothest and flattest conventionality. A combination of fierce melodrama and meek domestic sentiment'.²⁷ Penny literature could not be radical because it drew from well-trodden conventions, regurgitating characters, tropes, and even entire narratives from 'the old exhausted mines of the

²⁷ Wilkie Collins, 'The Unknown Public', *Household Words Vol. XVIII* (London: Bradbury & Evans, 1858), pp. 217 – 222 (p. 221). Further references to this article are included after quotations in the text.

circulating library'. ('Unknown Public', p. 221) Circulating libraries of the nineteenth century were often stand-alone institutions aimed at the middle-class readers, allowing them to rent books for an annual or quarterly fee. However, circulating libraries also operated on a smaller scale at premises where penny novels were usually sold – newsagents, sweet shops, toy shops or marine stores – with prices in reach of the working classes. ('Impure Literature', p. 572) In these places (derisively referred to by A .E. Waite as 'fifth-rate circulating libraries') volumes of 'penny dreadfuls' crowded the shelves, and were lent out for a penny each.²⁸ These borrowed texts would often be passed around social groups, extending again the circulations of these texts. Waite identified the centres for this reading culture in the poorer regions of London – Bermondsey, Whitechapel, Bell Street and Edgware Road.

Collins suggests that perversely, this circulation was mirrored in the composition of the 'penny dreadful'. The circulating library was the locus for a self-consumptive ouroboric pattern of influence. The same tropes drawn from the library's 'old exhausted mines' were fed back into the library to be devoured by juvenile readers or used again as influence by 'penny dreadful' authors seeking inspiration. Collins tells us that, in essence, the economy of the 'dreadful' existed in a closed circuit which failed to introduce anything new into its system, and thus had long since been drained of any discernible value.

Crafting a moral panic: *The Wild Boys on Trial*

If fears surrounding the potential criminality of vagrant children led those with influence to institute greater control over the wandering body, the juvenile penny serial's wide-reaching and unpredictable circulations through urban space also had to be controlled. In 1868 an article in the *Bookseller* wrote that:

You may see little street Arabs, at the corners, painfully spelling through their penny numbers; and if you want to find the shops at which these stories are sold, you must go into the courts and alleys of Westminster, Whitechapel, or Lambeth, and into the lowest parts of Manchester, Birmingham, and other manufacturing towns. ('Mischievous Literature', p. 446)

In this passage, the writer constructs an expanding fractal network of streets, neighbourhoods, towns and cities, all which have been infected with the pernicious effect of the penny dreadful. This network radiates out from the lowly 'street Arabs' leafing through their literary finds.

²⁸ Arthur Edward Waite, 'By-Ways of Periodical Literature, Part II', *Walford's Antiquarian Vol. XII* (London: George Redway, 1887), pp. 65 – 74, (p. 66).

Although this term commonly referred to homeless or vagrant children, in this context it articulates an anxiety about the potential for diseases from the peripheries of empire to infiltrate and infect the imperial centre. Cholera, for example, was also conceptualised as an invader from the East, and in the 1860s was almost exclusively referred to as ‘Asiatic’ or ‘Indian’ cholera. (*Sanitary Geographies*, p. 143). The wandering disposition of the ‘street Arab’ also made them ideal vectors for communicating disease. With each circulatory route they took through the city and beyond, they carried with them their pestilential influence. This underwrote anxieties that the habit of reading penny dreadfuls, like a miasma, could spread from a lower-class audience to the children of the middle and upper-middle classes too. Lord Shaftesbury, for one, warned that impure literature was ‘creeping not only into the houses of the poor, neglected, and untaught, but into the largest mansions; penetrating undiscovered into religious families and astounding careful parents by its frightful issues’.²⁹

For Victorians of the mid- and late-nineteenth century, juvenile penny serials were a convenient scapegoat. Middle-class commentators constructed an image of the penny dreadful as having a direct influence on (perceived) rising levels of juvenile crime. By presenting glamorised and sensational retellings of violence and delinquency, they theoretically encouraged their readers to mimic these same acts in their own lives. Harriet Martineau argued that this literature was one of ‘animal passion and defiant lawlessness’ and that:

Lives of bad people, everything about banditti anywhere, love stories from any language, scenes of theatrical life, trails of celebrated malefactors, love crime, madness, suicide, wherever to be got in print, are powerful in preparing the young for convict life. They operate in their degree as the spectacle of the execution of a great criminal does in exciting the imagination, and giving a glow of romance to a hard and sordid mode of life.

30

In fact, incidences of juvenile crime were relatively stable over the 1860s and, in some age groups, were falling. However, the image of the delinquent child posed a threatened the bourgeois ideology of childhood innocence. This, coupled with rising literacy among children made them in the middle-class imagination particularly vulnerable to the pernicious effects of bad literature. On the cusp of the 1870 education act, the Scottish publisher Alexander Strahan asked, ‘Is it worth while to agitate for compulsory education, if, when people have learnt to read,

²⁹ Lord Shaftesbury, quoted in Edwin Hodder, *The Life and Work of the Seventh Earl of Shaftesbury, K. G. Volume III* (London: Cassell, 1886), p. 469.

³⁰ Harriet Martineau, ‘Life in the Criminal Class’, *The Edinburgh Review*, 122 (1865), 337 – 371 (p. 347).

they will content themselves with such poor innutritious stuff?’³¹ Strahan was referring to plethora of penny serials that were on offer to a juvenile audience. Answering his own question, Strahan assented that audiences would consume literature of better quality if it was put within their reach. Bad literature, however, was better than no literature at all as it ‘furnish[ed] a taste for reading’. (Strahan, p. 470) Despite this small concession, to deem the penny serial ‘innutritious’ was to make assumptions about the purpose of literature. For children and adolescents especially, reading was perceived by the Victorian middle-class as a means of propagating positive moral development and cultivating young women and men who adhered to middle class societal mores. Juvenile penny serials on the other hand, with their delinquent protagonists and dubious sexual morality, epitomised a burgeoning transgressive manhood incompatible with being a ‘productive’ member of society (though as we will see, this was not always the case). The novelist Charlotte Mary Yonge suggested that instead of ‘Jack Sheppard literature’, (Jack Sheppard being a notorious eighteenth-century thief who was a popular figure in penny serials), boys should be given tales of ‘wholesome adventure’ which ensured that ‘heroism and nobleness [are] kept before their eyes’ and would teach them ‘to despise all that is untruthful or cowardly and to respect womanhood’.³² Such titles that fit this description were typically stories of traditional masculinity persevering against a hostile natural environment: *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), *The Swiss Family Robinson* (1812) and *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea* (1870). Unlike the ‘low-life’ dreadfuls of the NPC, their antagonists were not the identifiable figures of the police or upper class, but rather the world’s uncolonised territory.

Lucy Andrew writes that ‘The “penny dreadful” tradition saw boy protagonists and boy readers alike move from a position of submission to adult rules and role models towards one of quasi-adult independence, unchecked by moral legal and social codes’.³³ Without the oversight of parental figures or obligations to make a living in a traditional sense, they were able to forge for themselves a space beyond bourgeois pressures of respectability and societal obligations. More generally, the penny serial provided a means for young readers to escape the mundanities of their working lives, transposing them into a world of sensational melodrama. Though *The Wild Boys* promised to ‘satisfy the keenest appetite of those who love sensation’, it did not constitute nutritious reading, and could not encourage the healthy growth and development of its readers.

³¹ Alexander Strahan, ‘Our very cheap literature’, *The Contemporary Review: Volume XIX April–July 1870* (London: Strahan & Co., 1870), pp. 439–460 (p. 459).

³² Charlotte M. Yonge, *What Books to Lend and What to Give* (London: Nation Society’s Depository, 1887), p. 12..

³³ Lucy Andrew, *The Boy Detective in Early British Children’s Literature: Patrolling the Borders between Boyhood and Manhood* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), p. 14.

If reading was indeed analogous to eating, penny serials were akin to the empty calories of a lump of sugar, or worse, poisonous rubbish: the very embodiment of ‘bad taste’.

Strahan and Yonge exemplify one common approach to tackling the problem of the penny dreadful. They and others believed that circulating moral literature would naturally choke out and neutralise the circulation of juvenile penny serials. Religious societies such as the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge and the Religious Tract Society, and secular publishers like the Amalgamated Press, released periodicals that were in direct competition with titles by Edwin J. Brett and the Emmett Brothers. One example was the Religious Tract Society’s *Boy’s Own Paper* (1879) which professed to ‘combat evil by treating goodness as ordinary unq1emphasized decency and honesty’.³⁴ Henry Mayhew also pitched a juvenile serial of his own in the fight against dreadfuls writing in 1877:

I, for one, believe that the present state of the juvenile literary market is a disgrace to our common profession, and I am convinced that I have only to appeal to the foremost minds of the country [...] to assist me to provide a more healthy and refined form of mental food – even though it be for the young Gentlemen of Great Britain.³⁵

Like many of Mayhew’s projects however, it was never realised.

Others, such as the Society for the Suppression of Vice took a more censorial approach. This society saw one of its chief purposes as the suppression of ‘low and vicious periodicals’, boasting that over a few years it had brought ‘punishment by imprisonment, hard labour, and fine [to] upwards of forty of the most notorious dealers’ and had seized and destroyed an ‘enormous mass of corrupting matters’, mostly pornographic.³⁶ Some campaigners suggested that in setting their sights on the juvenile penny serial, they could utilise the already existing architecture of Lord Campbell’s 1857 Obscene Publications Act. However, because juvenile penny serials were rarely sexually explicit, this would be a difficult task; their writers were well aware of what would make them liable for prosecution. In *The Wild Boys*, the author knowingly referred to himself as one of the ‘stupid writers of wicked fictions in works issued by [the] unorganised society for the corruption of Christian knowledge’. (*Wild Boys*, p. 139) Lord Shaftesbury bemoaned the fact that ‘pernicious juvenile literature’ could not be suppressed by law or force. ‘They are drawn with so

³⁴ Quoted in Mark Moss, *Manliness and Militarism: Educating Young Boys in Ontario for War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 85.

³⁵ Henry Mayhew, quoted in Patrick A. Dunae, ‘Late Nineteenth-Century Boy’s Literature and Crime’, *Victorian Studies*, 22 (1979), 133 – 150, p. 146.

³⁶ ‘Society for the Suppression of Vice’, *The Leisure Hour: A Family Journal of Instruction and Recreation*, 13 January 1872, p. 32.

much astuteness, and skill, and power, that the cleverest lawyer who ever lived, or who ever shall live, will never be able to draft an act of parliament that will make them illegal, either in composition or in circulation.’³⁷

This being said, at the height of the moral panic, there was one successful prosecution of a reprint of *The Wild Boys*. In 1877, C. H. Collette, the solicitor for the Society of the Suppression of Vice, took out a summons against George Farrah, then owner and publisher of *The Wild Boys* for selling ‘an immoral publication’. Four thousand copies had already been seized by the police acting under the Society for the Suppression of Vice’s instruction.³⁸ In the following days summons were also brought against a number of newsvendors who were found to have been selling the serial. Mr Flowers, the magistrate for the case, acknowledged that though *The Wild Boys* was ‘not as openly obscene as the books generally brought to this Court under Lord Campbell’s Act, still, perhaps, they were even worse in their effect, for they were sufficiently well written not to excite the same disgust as other books did’.³⁹ As a result, he agreed to have the newsvendors brought to court, though if they consented to having the seized serials destroyed and promised not to sell any more, they would only be subject to a fine of two shillings. Of the eleven newsvendors summoned, all but one agreed to have copies of *The Wild Boys* destroyed, most of them pleading that they were ignorant of its contents. The newsvendor John Wells, on the other hand, ‘indignantly refused to have the books destroyed, on the ground that he was not going to be treated like a child’, adding that ‘worse books were sold every day’. (*Times*, 13 Dec 1877, p. 11) The case was adjourned, awaiting the result of the case against George Farrah. The publisher eventually agreed in writing to the same terms as the newsvendors, ceasing production of *The Wild Boys* and destroying the stereotypes.

Meanwhile, John Wells, still smarting with the unfairness of his prosecution, returned to court in front of Mr Flowers. The exchange between them was first recounted in the *Daily Telegraph*, and later in full in the *Leeds Mercury* which was evidently tickled by its comic nature. Wells began by apologising for his ‘unseemly behaviour’ at the previous trial but soon began provoking Collette and complaining of a ‘false report’ of the trial making its way into the newspapers. Eventually though, he reluctantly conceded to the court’s sanctions:

DEFENDANT: What I was going to say is, that the “Wild Boys of London” has been sold for twelve years. I have had these books bound in cloth for 10½d, for a woman who

³⁷ ‘Pernicious Literature’, *The British Messenger*, February 1879, pp. 29 – 30 (p. 30).

³⁸ ‘Pernicious Boys’ Literature’, *Reynold’s Newspaper*, 9 December 1877, p. 5.

³⁹ ‘Police’, *The Times*, 13 December 1877, p. 11.

wanted to keep them for the benefit of her family. I admit it is filthy, but it is classical (loud laughter). In the Bible you will find the same things.

MR FLOWERS: Oh, I see what this means now.

DEFENDANT: Yes, and in scores of books. The publisher in Shoe-lane want to square it.

MR FLOWERS: If you go on much more I shall have you removed from court.

DEFENDANT: Then burn them!

MR COLLETTE: And you promise not to sell any more?

DEFENDANT: I would not sell such filthy things (loud laughter).

MR FLOWERS: I am very glad to hear you say so.

DEFENDANT: I am always glad to take your advice, your worship; you told me once that alcohol was the deadly drug of the country, and I took your advice, and have been a teetotaller ever since. (Laughter.)

MR FLOWERS: Very well, the; pay the 2s costs.

DEFENDANT: Oh, not that sir; I have only 2s in my pocket, and I promised to take my children home six pennyworth of oranges.

MR FLOWERS: You must pay the costs.

DEFENDANT: Then I have had enough of you. ⁴⁰

When John Wells was taken out of court, he was found to only have a single shilling on him. To pay the cost and avoid jail, he borrowed an additional shilling from a parish constable who happened to be in the court on other business. Performing in the court, John Wells displayed a self-conscious reflexivity – a knowledge that he was being re-written and re-shaped into a digestible narrative. But beyond the absurdity of this court case, it displays how what was ‘morally dangerous’ was always contested, always being reshaped to serve socially conservative politics.

Springhall argues that ‘If Victorian critics and moralists had taken the trouble to examine the publications of the NPC and its rivals without prejudice, they would have discovered that, far from recommending the values of a criminal or oppositional subculture, their ‘point of view’ was consistently aligned with support for the established order.’ (*Moral Panics*, p. 93) I, however, want to complicate the simple exoneration of the penny serial. Stories of progress and self-improvement were not compatible with a consistently exciting and surprising serial. In reading the serial from start to end, the trend towards ‘filth’, that is, sexual immorality, is evident. *The Wild Boys* begins as a relatively tame story which creates drama through comic violence but in

⁴⁰ ‘Boy’s Literature’, *Daily Telegraph*, 24 December 1877, p. 6.

later numbers though, it developed into more explicit titillating material: scenes of nudity, flagellations and adultery. Ralph Montreal, hitherto loyal to Lady Edith, takes up Savage Mike's mistress as his own; the burgeoning romance between the hardworking Dolphin and his employer's daughter is ruined by his decision to lie with an older woman; and Lady Isabelle, the subject of Lord Wintermerle's evil desires, is strung up half-naked and lashed. Though these motifs were not unusual for penny serials of the time, it was a clear departure from the original tone. This fact was recognised by the Society of the Suppression of Vice's Collette. In 1877 *Reynolds's Newspaper* repeated Collette's claim that 'at its first start the publication appeared to be perfectly moral, but after some numbers had been published, a very immoral story appeared, which became worse as the numbers appeared'. The 'moral' tone of the first numbers was a ploy to lure the public into a false sense of security, making them particularly vulnerable to the 'virulent' pornographic contents further on. (*Reynolds's*; 9 Dec 1877, p. 11) Though Collette's observations had no factual basis, they demonstrate the unsustainability of maintaining a balance between narratives of moral and material improvement, and continuing sensationalism. Eventually, one had to win out. The Wild Boys teeter between the act of recycling themselves into productive members of society or remaining as the city's 'surplus bodies'.

Contaminative Contact

The adolescent boys that made up the eponymous troop of Wild Boys exemplify the dregs of society, the surplus bodies of the poor which, in this case, have quite literally made their way to the city's excremental underbelly. With their home in the sewers, the Wild Boys are uniquely positioned to circulate themselves through all sectors of society – through the homes of the rich and through dens of criminality. Here, the sewer functions as a secret mode of transportation which allows them to sneak up through trap doors of buildings normally off limits to them. As Michelle Allen has noted, the sewer 'was perceived by many Victorians, paradoxically, as an instrument of disorder, of overwhelming environmental and social confusion'.⁴¹ As I explored in chapter 3, Mayhew and others conceptualised social categories as strictly hierarchical and inherently static. London's circulations of waste destabilised these categories. In the same way, because the sewers formed a network which connected most of London's homes, it collapsed the spatial dimensions of class. Such anxieties were reflected by John Hollingshead in *Underground London*, a collection of essays first published in *All the Year Round* in 1861. 'The sewerage system

⁴¹ Michelle Allen, *Cleansing the City: Sanitary Geographies in Victorian London* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2008), p. 36.

of the last fifty years' he wrote, 'has linked the whole metropolitan public together by vast underground chains'. He continued:

The central parts of London have to bear the gases generated by sewage from numerous surrounding neighbourhoods. A voice rises up in the City, with reason and indignation in its tones, and says loudly, "Here's a pretty state of things! In the days of cesspools, sir, every household had to bear only so much annoyance as it created for itself. But we have changed all that. [...] Sixty-nine separate populations, sir, numbering half a million of persons, send their refuse past our door, as regularly as omnibuses run from Paddington to the Bank. Day and night, sir we breathe an atmosphere tainted by those swollen underground streams, and have not even the poor satisfaction of sending some unbearable nuisance back.'⁴²

The walls of the household cesspool denoted self-reliance and privacy. The sewers on the other hand, a system of 'vast underground chains', fettered London's population in a non-consensual union. Hollingshead represents them as on the threshold of the home (running 'past our door'), infiltrating the bedroom with its invisible vapours. In the sewers, not only did the waste of the rich and the poor coagulate into one stinking mass but they potentially guided the 'disease' of London's typically poorer peripheral neighbourhoods into the upper-class centre. It was imagined as simply another thoroughfare which facilitated free and unbridled movement across class boundaries which were becoming increasingly more permeable.

The Wild Boys complicate these one-way journeys of waste through the city's sewers. Towards the beginning of the serial, Arthur Grattan is kidnapped by Savage Mike, who intends to do away with him by casting his body through the trap door of cellar into the black, inky waters of the sewers below. Far from the comfort of the Wild Boys' home, this sewer is unmistakably a channel of excremental filth, filling the room above with 'a dense vapour, laden thick with a stifling effluvia'. Just as Arthur is left to his fate however, he opens the trap door to find, 'A group of boys, dressed in tattered garments and wild of aspect, stood in the sewer, up to their knees in the black slime.' (*Wild Boys*, p. 53) After a fracas with Mat the Mongrel, the Wild Boys are able to bundle Arthur into the sewers, to then escape to the street. Whilst Arthur is deemed waste, and consequently condemned to become part of the city's faecal flows, the Wild Boys subvert these flows to their own advantage.

⁴² John Hollingshead, *Underground London* (London: Groombridge and Sons, 1862), pp. 85 – 86.

For the Wild Boys, to flourish in the sewers is in itself an act of resistance. This is articulated by a short exchange between the Dolphin and Dick in the boy's subterranean home.

“Wonder where you are,” said the Dolphin, “don’t you, Dick?”

“I do.”

“Then you’ll have to, for I’m blowed if I can tell you. We are underneath London somewhere, high and dry out of the way; perhaps we’re near the bank, and perhaps we ain’t; it all depends on where we happens to come out.” (*Wild Boys*, p. 8)

Buried deep underground, the sewers are strictly the opposite of ‘high and dry’. The Dolphin’s ironic reversal works in breaking down the established stratified social order where the elite were naturally placed at the top. Asserting that one can be – at least metaphorically – both above and beneath, high and low, envisions a city where these distinctions no longer have meaning. Here, the sewers are also emblematic of a distorted geography. Without the landmarks of the city above, the imaginative possibilities of place and space are opened up. In *The Wild Boys*, ‘coming out’ from the sewers is essentially a game of chance, with each trap door having the potential of opening up on danger, or fortune and luxury. The ragged bodies of the Wild Boys continually re-emerge like discarded waste, disrupting the closed spaces they enter.

As symbols of the sewers’ social chaos, the Wild Boys’ contact across class lines is characterised in contaminative, or even excremental terms. One of these moments of contact comes when the Wild Boys meet Arthur Grattan, a proud aristocratic adolescent. He is introduced to the readers as a model of white English refinement: ‘graceful and delicate in form [...] his face was almost of effeminate beauty, but his large hazel eyes were bold and full of fire, and his softness of features was redeemed by their clear decisive cut’. (*Wild Boys*, p. 22) Because of this, and his attitude of ‘little regard for the poorer community’, he is the perfect foil for the Wild Boys, the ‘wild arabs’ of the city. When he mistakenly wanders into the wrong part of town, a fight breaks out:

“Is you grinning at me?” asked the boy, getting up, and going close to Arthur with his hand converted into a very dirty fist. “Cos if you are I can take it out of you.”

Understanding the boy’s actions better than his words, and taking the former as either a threat or a challenge, Arthur pushed him aside with a haughty gesture, and strode on with a red flush on his brow.

“Yah!” came a derisive shot from behind. “Who starched yer collar? Whoo! Hi! How much for his goss?”

A piece of hard mud struck him on the cheek, and the wild crew danced round him like young Indians doing a war caper with a white captive in their midst.

“Go it, Pug; he hit you, he did; hit ‘im agin. Fetch him a clout in the hie. Don’t you be shoved about.” [...]

Another, stooping in the road, was getting a handful of soft, sticky mud, which he intended to smash right into Arthur’s ears, and a third one was stealing up behind with his fist raised, while the rest dodged and ran round Grattan, who, confused, but not frightened, was gathering his energies for battle.

“Ragged, vicious wretches!” he muttered, between his teeth. “I will teach them better manners.” (*Wild Boys*, pp. 19 – 20)

As the fight becomes increasingly fractious, culminating in a ‘tableau’ captured by a passing gentleman. This action is inherently theatrical in nature, with the street functioning as a stage where one can perform their social (and racial) identity. In this simple boyish altercation is a distillation of the dysfunctional and disordered social and imperial relationships at the heart of Victorian Britain. In crudely mimicking stereotypes of Native Americans, the Wild Boys here are dangerously foreign. Even their non-standard English mutates into (for Arthur in any case) unintelligible shouts and sounds. Arthur’s whiteness is easily soiled by the mud flung at him; mud which has the foul connotations of faeces. If excrement was, as Elizabeth Wilson writes, a metaphor and symbol of moral filth and the working class, the Wild Boys fight back by using their own dirtiness as a weapon, sullyng the very people that were attempting to eradicate them.⁴³ Driving binary opposites into close intimacy here, shows how contact can once reinforce the performance of social identity, by revealing the permeability of social categories. Like the appalled public ventriloquised by Hollingshead in *Underground London*, one cannot escape the contaminative circulations of the sewer’s waste.

Contamination then, is one of the driving forces of *The Wild Boys* – it propels characters outside rigid categories of class into a disordered world symbolised by London’s sewers. In fact, the entire plot of the serial is set into motion by a moment of contagion. Joseph Lane is a stolidly working-class builder and honest family man – at least until he contracts a moral disease from his workplace. His supervisor, strict towards his idle and discontented workers, seeks to remove them from his workplace to keep them ‘from infecting the rest with their own lazy complaint’.

⁴³ Elizabeth Wilson, *The Sphinx in the City: Urban Life, the Control of Disorder, and Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), p. 37.

(*Wild Boys*, p. 2) In spite of this, Joseph is exposed to their corrupting influence. The text lingers on the moment of contact between him and the unscrupulous Mat the Mongrel:

He was rarely without money, and he kept to Lane with a rough sort of vagabond fidelity, and the evil consequence began to appear in the alteration of the bricklayer's habits. He had been a man of remarkable sobriety, now he gradually fell into a drunken dissolute way that was not long in ruining the peace of his little home. (*Wild Boys*, p. 3)

Now tainted with this infectious disease, Joseph Lane and his family are inducted into degenerative cycles which draw them into the orbit of London's lower classes. Joseph's passage through the serial is emblematic of the meandering plotting of the penny serial. Owing to his drunkenness, he is drawn into company of criminals; he then is falsely accused and convicted of thievery. After serving a short term in prison Joseph is released and returns to his old work. His pride and new notoriety as a convict soon drive him to quit; he falls into criminal company again and takes part in a burglary of one of Lord Wintermerle's properties, narrowly avoiding apprehension by the police. Now repentant, he opens up a company with the stolen money. Then his now honest living is abruptly interrupted when he is taken into custody for his past crimes. When taken before a magistrate, the case against him collapses and he is acquitted. Free once again, he returns back to his former employer with the determination that he 'intend[s] to henceforth become an honest and better man'. (*Wild Boys*, p. 229). Joseph's oscillation between comfort and poverty, virtue and delinquency may just be an accurate depiction of the rambling and digressive paths that one takes to redemption.

Suicide and Rebirth

The Wild Boys' place within the sewers allows them to begin the process of self-transformation. Functioning as a symbol of the city's waste, they give themselves up to circulations which both renew and redeem. This optimistic representation of the transformative powers of the sewers is counterbalanced by Emily Munroe, whose narrative path exemplifies the ways in which these circulations can also disturb the natural rhythms of life and death. These diverging narratives begin with the Dolphin and Dick Lane at the banks of the Thames:

The two boys descended the steps of the London Bridge pier. Then the Dolphin paused to look cautiously round.

It was a cheerless, desolate view: the dark water of the river flowing onward, splashing with a plaintive sound against the motionless craft, and beating with ceaseless monotony at the walls of the silent wharves.

Dismal and dreary enough it was to chill the heart of the poor despairing who have so often looked with hopeless longing into its depths – dismal and dreary for all the houseless who gaze upon its blackness, and think of it as a refuge for the sorrowful world.

There was no one in sight

A policeman looking down from the bridge saw Dick and his companion wading through the mud, and thinking they were of those who exist by finding trifling articles in the pier slime, he passed on, and left them to their work. (*Wild Boys*, p. 7)

With its sluggish waters and quiet torpor, the Thames is far from the streaming currents of trade and peoples depicted in *London Labour*. The ‘silent wharves’ and ‘motionless craft’ are symptoms of a city in which healthy flow and circulation has given way to economic and emotional depression. In this respect, it is poignant that Dick Lane and the Dolphin are mistaken for mudlarks scavenging the river’s mire. It is as if the Thames, unable to swiftly carry goods to London’s docks, can only impotently wash rubbish onto its shores. Beneath the arch of a wharf, Dick Lane and the Dolphin meet Hallelujah Jack, another Wild Boy. Described as wearing ‘tattered garments, covered by mud’, he is initially indistinguishable from the excremental mud lining the river. He informs them of a woman he has pulled from the river, found almost drowned. By Hallelujah Jack’s description she is a ‘very purty creature; such tiny hands, and long hair as smells delicious’. (*Wild Boys*, p. 8) Much later it is revealed that this is Emily Munroe, the abandoned wife of Lord Wintermerle.

The figure of Emily Munroe draws upon nineteenth-century iconography of the fallen or drowned woman, particularly popular as a tragic subject for realist and Pre-Raphaelite art in the 1850s and 60s. We can think of John Everett Millais’ poetic *Ophelia* (1852), Paul Delaroche’s virginal angelic woman in *The Young Martyr* (1853) or Vasily Grigorevich Perov’s, stiff corpse laying on the shore of the Neva in *The Drowned* (1867). Typically, this trope characterised suicide, especially suicide by drowning, as the inevitable conclusion of the social descent that follows a loss of chastity and virtue. A woman’s fatal plummet from the bridge to the river crassly emblematised ‘downward mobility’.⁴⁴ However, imagery of the fallen woman also reconstructed suicidal narratives as a kind of rebirth. Hence, even after death their corpses resisted decay, instead remaining as beautiful, but inert bodies poised for consumption.

⁴⁴ L. J. Nicoletti, ‘Downward Mobility: Victorian Women, Suicide, and London’s “Bridge of Sighs”’, *Literary London: Disciplinary Studies in the Representation of London*, 2.1 (2004), <<http://www.literarylondon.org/london-journal/march2004/nicoletti.html>> [Accessed 25 February 2022], para. 10.

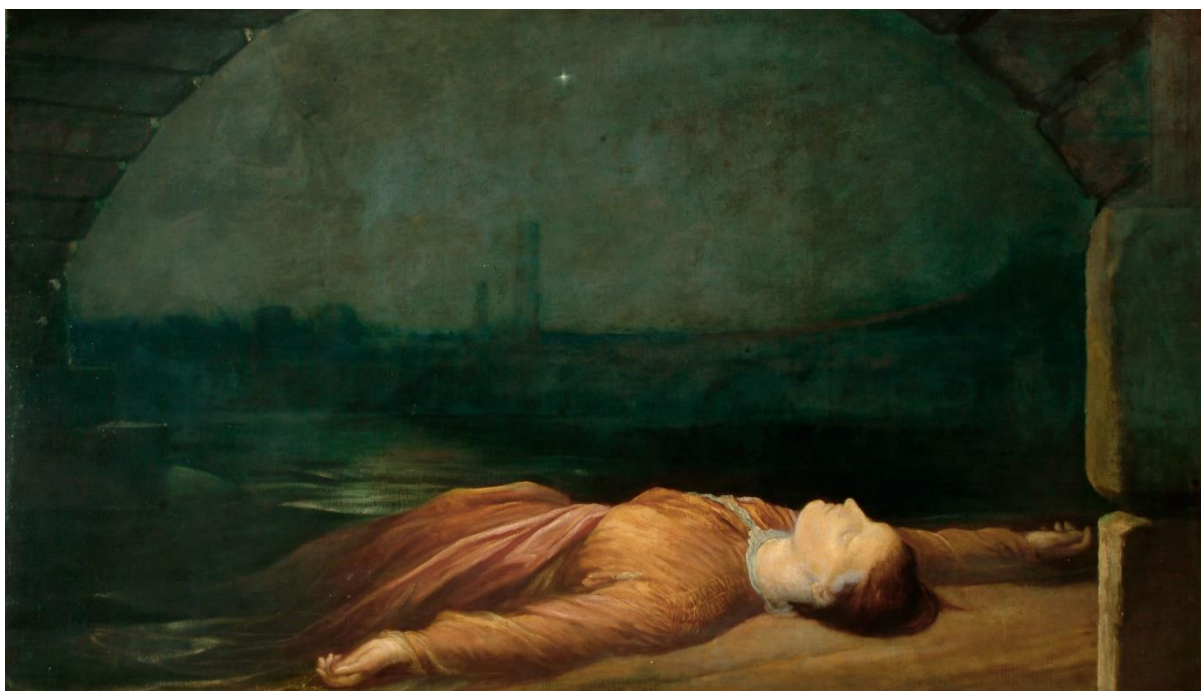


Figure 5.1: George Frederic Watts, *Found Drowned*, c. 1848 – 59, oil on canvas, 119 × 213 cm, Watts Gallery, Guildford

Another famous depiction of the ‘fallen woman’ portrayals was George Frederic Watts’ *Found Drowned* (c. 1848 – 1850). (Figure 5.1) This in turn was allegedly inspired by Thomas Hood’s pathetic poem *The Bridge of Sighs* (1844) which told the story of ‘One more Unfortunate, / Weary of breath, / Rashly importune, / Gone to her death!’.⁴⁵ Through careful strokes Watts depicted a woman’s dead body washed up beneath the arches of Waterloo Bridge. She is simply dressed in the garments of a servant, but her skirt, submerged in the dark flowing waters of the Thames wraps around her like a shroud. Otherwise, her body is unmarked both by the violence of her death and the muddy river water. She appears instead in a state of quiet slumber. The gentle luminosity of her face starkly contrasts the gloomy and indistinct cityscape in the distance. The scene is infused with religious symbolism – the arms outstretched like the crucified Christ and the distant star emerging from the smog. In *The Bridge of Sighs*, once the woman has been lifted from the river, the ‘muddy impurity’ of her past transgressions is washed clean: ‘All that remains of her / Now is pure womanly’. (*Bridge of Sighs*, l. 90; ll. 19 – 20). The dirty river is transfigured as the cleansing waters of baptism. However, it is hard to overlook that Hood’s ‘unfortunate’ is rendered virginal and beautiful only in her death, a state of ultimate passivity.

⁴⁵ Thomas Hood, ‘The Bridge of Sighs’, in *Selected Poems of Hood, Praed and Beddoes*, ed. by Susan J. Wolfson and Peter J. Manning (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 2000), pp. 146 – 150 (ll. 1 – 4). Further references to this edition are included after quotation in the text.

Watts reproduces this in the all-too-perfect pose of his model. Though she is rendered 'pure' in preparation for a heavenly ascension, she is also theatrically poised for consumption by an onlooking audience. The framing curve of the arch, which became a familiar visual code for depictions of female suicides, closes upon her like a false sky.⁴⁶



Figure 5.2: Harry Maguire, 'The Discovery in the Sewer', from *The Wild Boys of London*, p. 17

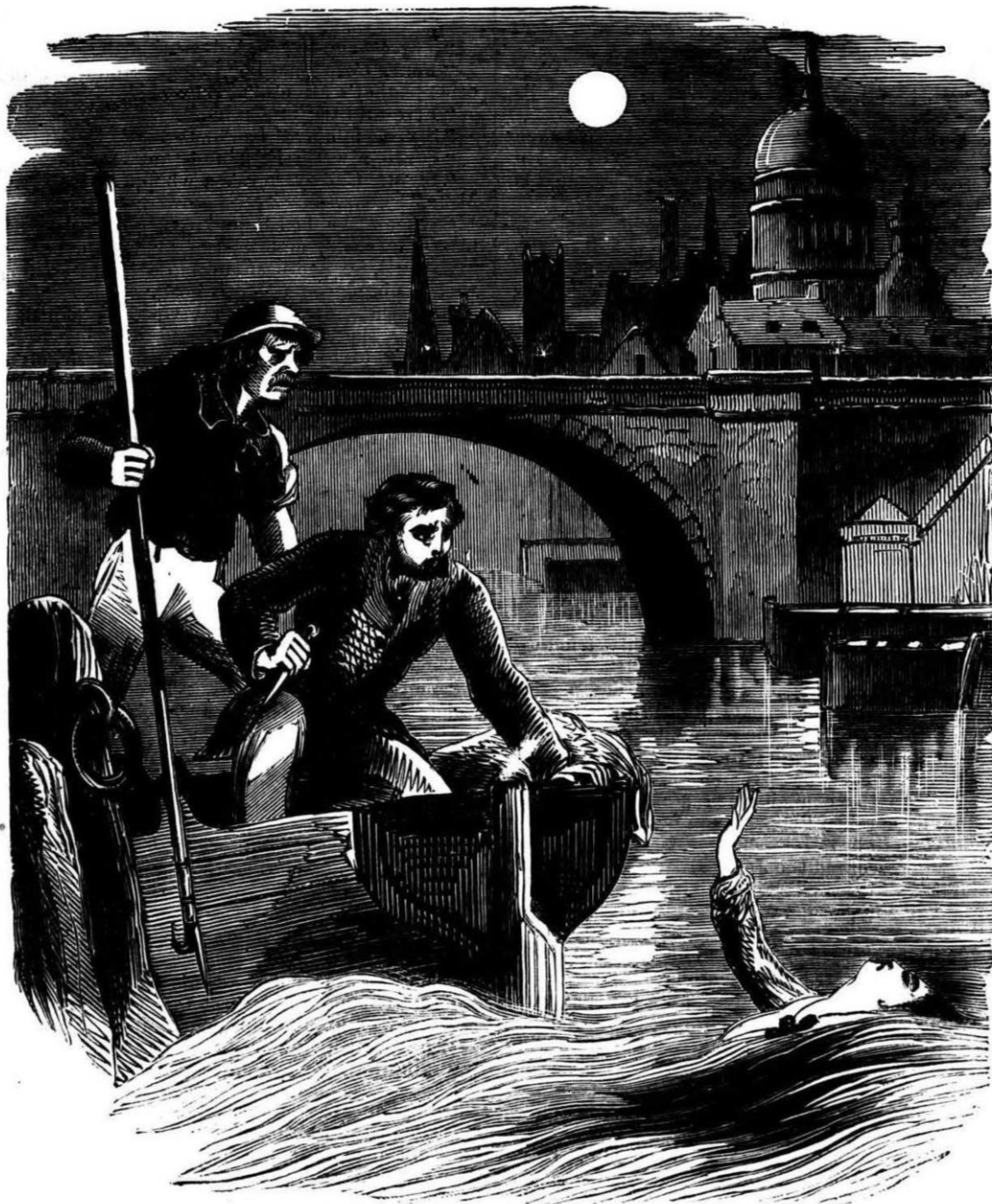
In *The Wild Boys*, Emily Munroe narrowly escapes the same deadly fate as Hood's and Watts' women. Nonetheless, she exemplifies how the redemptive narratives of fallen woman can mutate when relocated within the context of the sewer. The moment of her recovery was illustrated in ghastly detail in one of Harry Maguire's engravings. (Figure 5.2) This seems a dark mirror image

⁴⁶ Barbara T. Gates, *Victorian Suicide: Mad Crimes and Sad Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), p. 139. The image of the arch or arched edge is present in Halbôt K. Browne's illustration *The River* for *David Copperfield* (1849 – 50), Augustus Leopold Egg's *Past and Present*, no. 3, *Despair* (1858), Paul de La Roche's *The Christian Martyr* (1855), John Everett Millais' *Ophelia* (1851 – 52) and *The Death of Chatterton* (1856) by Henry Walliss.

of the placid iconography of *Found Drowned*. Here, instead of the arch of Waterloo Bridge, there is the ominous curve of the sewer fading into absolute blackness. A group of shabby looking Wild Boys, knee deep in sewage, cluster around Emily Munroe with mouths agape in shock. Half-submerged in the sewer water, her body hangs limp, her soiled clothes hanging from her thin form, her face is twisted in an expression of weariness. She does not have the same unearthly luminescence as Watts' woman but is harshly lit by the glare of a lantern. Though alive, she appears as a corpse. In the text, the narrator description lingers over her body:

Yet she was beautiful, in spite of it all. The clinging drapery revealed the contour of a body as perfect in creation as a statue; for no sculptor ever moulded a throat so white, full and swan-like, or a bust so high and richly curved; and her limbs, large, round, and delicately modelled, rivalled those of Venus in shape and grace. (*Wild Boys*, p. 35)

The narrator cannot resist the sexual titillation of a woman's passive and yielding body. But under this gaze she calcifies, becomes a material object. As such she is rendered a finding scavenged from the sewer by the Wild Boys, available not only for sexual consumption, but economic too. The Dolphin, at first repulsed by her emergence from the sewer slime, wonders that she hasn't yet been eaten alive by rats. But the narrator has already begun the work of reconstitution. Unlike *Found Drowned*, *The Wild Boys* refrains from reframing Emily Munroe's recovery from the sewers as a kind of redemptive purification. Instead, Emily is inducted into the urban cycles of disposal and reclamation, death and resuscitation – an iterative pattern which persists and reverberates throughout the text. Her first near-fatal plunge into the river and re-emergence in the sewers was her inauguration into the haunting narrative structures of the serial. After being found by the Wild Boys she mysteriously disappears without trace. The Dolphin perceptively reads this as a manifestation of the gothic supernatural: 'She's melted away like a ghost [...] We put her in the other room and she looked like as if she was dead; and when we went to see how she was getting on she was clean gone'. (*Wild Boys*, p. 10)



THE MURDER ON THE THAMES. (See next Number.)

Figure 5.3: Harry Maguire, 'The Murder on the Thames', in *The Wild Boys of London*, p. 273

This is not the only moment where Emily is cast into London's dirty waters. As a damsel in distress, she is continually thrust into the hands of her villainous husband, only to be rescued by Ralph Montreal, the serial's masculine hero. Moreover, these moments of mortal danger and sexual threat invariably take place in Grantham's vermin-ridden underground cellar, a space only a trapdoor away from the sickly odours and black waters of London's fetid sewers. Referring to Emily as a 'beautiful lump of iniquity', Grantham regards her as no more than troublesome

waste. The sewers, therefore, are a fitting means of disposal. (*Wild Boys*, p. 187) In *The Wild Boys*, this device propels the brisk momentum of its narrative, providing a predictable pattern ensuring its continuation. However, though each capture and rescue reliably returns Emily to temporary safety, she does not escape completely unscathed. Rather, she is subject to an encroaching dematerialisation. Stephen Grantham is baffled by her continual re-emergence, reading it, as the Dolphin does as a gothic premonition. He soliloquizes, ‘her life haunts me; I must find her and destroy her’. (*Wild Boys*, p. 284) Like the discarded waste of the sewers, she is resistant to complete eradication. Her murder then, must take on the role of an exorcism. In his last attempt on her life, Grantham conspires the lure Emily into a boat on the moonlit waters of the Thames:

At the same moment he grasped Emily by the wrist, and pointing to the waters, said, “Behold your grave!”

She was so stricken with the sudden fear, that the shriek she would have given died away, and she could only articulate one word,

“Stephen!”

“Say it for the last time!” he said savagely.

“Let it take you to Heaven or Hell, for your time has come!”

And he dragged her from her seat. [...]

The poor girl, paralyzed with terror, still clung to life for the sake of her child, and struggled with the best of her feebleness would let her. She saw a knife gleaming in her destroyer’s hand, tried with her little hand to stop the merciless blade from drinking her heart’s blood, but down it came, forced pitilessly into her quivering breast, and she sank down with the life tide gushing out.

“At last!” said Grantham, as he threw the pallid form into the river. “No help – no witness!” (*Wild Boys*, p. 291)

The erotic violence of Emily’s murder culminates in Emily’s final absorption into the waters of the Thames, the confluence of its tides with the gushing flow of her blood. With the undeniable ferocity of this attack, Grantham seems to finally disrupt the patterns of cyclical return. However, the serial functions through the logic that the networks of the river and sewer inexorably return their wastes to the shore. Emily once again is fished from the dirty waters of the Thames and returned to the plot. Ralph Montreal describes a mysterious man leading him to Emily’s barely living body:

“I accompanied him to a dirty house by the river side, and there, lying upon a low bed, I beheld a form I knew. The features were pale and ghastly, and upon the fair white breast there was a mark – a deep gash – where the murderer’s knife had been driven with deadly intent. The hand that wielded it was her husband’s!”

“Horrible!” said Margaret, with a shudder. “Is she dead?”

“Not quite. It appears the man who obtains his livelihood by working upon the barges, was out very late one night, and seeing a boat containing two men and a woman, he watched it, and there, aided by the pale moonbeams, he saw the defenceless woman stricken with a gleaming knife, and hurled into the sluggish stream.”

“Dreadful!”

“When the body sank to boat pulled swiftly from the spot, and the man, the silent witness of the merciless deed, being a bold swimmer, plunged into the water, and took the bleeding form ashore – took her to his home, and tended her to the best of his humble skill, and when the poor girl recovered sufficiently to speak, she begged of him to go in search of me, with the vague hope that I should be found, and would seek her child, who, poor little thing, is in the grasp of her murderous husband”. (*Wild Boys*, p. 319)

Emily’s rescuer bares a passing resemblance to Gaffer Hexam of *Our Mutual Friend* (1864 – 1865), a novel which was being serialised concurrently with *The Wild Boys*. He performs the same grim work as the dredgerman, reclaiming bodies from the Thames as salvaged goods. However, it is the river’s ‘sluggish stream’, the failure of the city’s dominant paths of flow, which allow this reclamation to take place at all. One could imagine an alternative scenario where the Thames carries Emily swiftly out beyond the limits of the city to be irrevocably lost. Unlike the redemptive powers of the Thames in Watts’ *Found Drowned*, the circulations of the river-sewer network unconsciously return their dead to the shore. Emily is invariably recycled back into the plot, a process which resembles the haunting of an apparition. Not only do her ‘pale and ghastly’ features denote a wan ghostliness, the second-hand revelation of her rescue is also a kind of displacement, a relegation to the to the borders of the text. To put it another way, as Emily dematerialises through her narrative circulations she is centrifugally flung further and further from the textual core.

In fact, this moment is the last in which Emily appears in the serial. After over three hundred pages of relentlessly cycling between peril and safety, she has finally exhausted her narrative purpose and can now, finally, quietly slip from view. In the end, her erasure lacks the same

solemn religious ritual and ceremony that granted the Victorian fallen woman her redemption. Instead, as a restless apparition she can never rest in death but can only be summoned and re-summoned for the (erotic) pleasure of her readers. In this way, the ‘same dead level of the smoothest and flattest conventionality’ that Wilkie Collins found so frustrating in the penny serial might not be indicative of death, but the constant slippage from the moment of death, the refusal for death to be inscribed, only continually deferred.

Though Emily is one example of the city’s turbulent cycles, the serial proposes alternative means of navigating these circulations. It suggests that to dip one’s toes into London’s sewage does not necessarily mean degeneration or de-materialisation. In navigating the networks of river and sewer, the Wild Boys are able to subvert the suicidal narratives embedded (or rather immersed) in the Thames. One clue pointing towards this fact is the Dolphin’s curious nickname. The origins of this are briefly attributed to his ‘restless activity of movement’. (*Wild Boys*, p. 5) It suggests that, like his animal namesake, he is particularly well adapted to manoeuvring the dirty waters of the Thames, resisting its oppositional flows. Aside from this, his nickname’s implications are less than sanitary. In nineteenth-century parlance, ‘dolphins’ were simple filtration systems which filtered Thames water through sand and sediment, thus making it more suitable for drinking. (What was not commonly known at the time, however, was that although these could filter out visible impurities, they could not eradicate the traces of excrement that were poured into the Thames by nearby sewerage pipes). Darin Graber reads this etymological connection as signalling the Dolphin’s eventual contact with the river’s polluted waters. (Graber, p. 763) However, it also intimates that even in his contact with pollution, he is ultimately immune to contamination, the same contamination that tainted Emily’s passage through the city.

The first representation of the Wild Boy’s contact with London’s sewers and foul waters is the journey from the urban overground to their subterranean home. The Dolphin leads the inexperienced Dick Lane to the wharves beyond London Bridge, where he prepares him for an aquatic descent into the Thames:

“Can you dive?” he asked of Dick.

“Like a fish.”

The Dolphin took a string from his pocket and fastened it round his ankle.

The other end he tied to Dick’s wrist.

“Foller,” he said, “and don’t be afeard.”

The last was an unnecessary caution, for there was not a more courageous lad in London than Dick Lane

He followed the Dolphin and the other without the least hesitation, though their proceeding was strange.

They walked deliberately into the water, and when in so far that it reached their chins, the Dolphin said, "Swim."

He struck out, Dick keeping close behind, going on until they reached a wharf beyond London bridge.

Jack paused.

Glancing his eye over the wall until it reached an iron staple driven in the brickwork, he said, "Dive."

They did so.

Dick felt the water gurgling over his head, and the pressure was almost more than he could bear but he held his breath.

Following an upward inclination of the string upon his wrist, he ascended.

"You can walk now," said the Dolphin; "it's a queer way of getting in doors." (*Wild Boys*, p. 8)

The visceral ordeal of Dick's journey simulates an experience of drowning, the final moments before fallen woman's demise. However, though Emily's plunge into the Thames is represented as the result of feminine hysteria, a surrendering of one's will to the flows of the river, Dick and the Dolphin walk in 'deliberately', with a decided intention and purpose. As such, their dive functions as a cleansing baptism in a way that Emily is ultimately denied. Dick arises from the river into the sewer a new man. "You can walk now" reads as a declaration of this re-birth and re-awakening, his initiation into the world of the Wild Boys. However, for Dolphin and the rest of the Wild Boys, this baptismal cleansing permits their perpetual defilement. Dolphin's off-hand remark to Dick represents his philosophy: "We gets wet, and we gets dry again; the mud makes us dirty, and the water makes us clean". (*Wild Boys*, p. 8) For the Wild Boys, the mud that they sling at each other in mischievous play, the flowery odour they absorb from rubbing arms with the bourgeoisie, or even bloody marks of violence, are washed off when they return, inevitably, to the sewer.

The Myth of Progress

In the serial, Ralph Montreal, Alfred Hewitt and George Meredith form an unlikely trio committed to stopping the wicked actions of Lord Wintermerle. As part of their plan, they sneak into the lair of Lord Wintermerle with the Grey Brotherhood, a secret organisation who has sworn to protect them. However, there is a deadly outcome to this attack. The Grey

Brotherhood fall to the arrows of Wintermerle's men. All that is left of the Grey Brotherhood is grim spectacle 'a dozen bodies, palpitating in suffering and blood'. (*Wild Boys*, p. 114) Having escaped to the banks of the Thames the remaining three are in a grave mood. Turning to his companions, Meredith sombrely reflects:

"It is an awful business altogether," he said, "that such things should exist in this grand land, the centre of civilization and social progress".

"Social bosh," said Montreal, "there is no sign or token of social advancement that has not its counter-check. The grim skeleton of poverty lurks behind the velvet robe of wealth, crime beneath the face of innocence, lust beneath the semblance of purity. Come now, there's a discourse in morality for you; all true and very pithy." (*Wild Boys*, p. 114)

Through Ralph, the author articulates a scepticism of Victorian ideals of the steady march towards progress. Poverty and crime are situated 'beneath' the respectable exterior. Located in the sewers, the Wild Boys are quite literally 'beneath' the city's surface and thus aligned with its immorality and want. On insisting on close proximity of London's two faces, Ralph not only highlights the dark underbelly of progress, but the potential for the low – the poor, the criminal or the unchaste – to become prosperous, good and respectable. The serial suggests that life is characterised by cycling between these opposing poles.

For the Wild Boys, as the narrative of the serial continues their presence in the homes of the middle and upper classes is not the result of espionage or mischief but is authorised by their own rise in class and respectability. Such is the case for the Dolphin. His early attempts at social progress, are at best ephemeral. He comes into possession of fifty pounds, given to him by the villainous Lord Wintermerle in exchange for information on his presumed drowned wife. This money, which is shared amongst the rest of the Wild Boys is used to purchase the accessories and garbs the Dolphin associates with the upper-class – this consisting of hair oil, and some 'showy, but very inferior clothes' bought at great expense from a cheap clothes emporium. (*Wild Boys Book 1*, p. 82) In addition, he chooses to change his name, not just from 'the Dolphin', but from his birth name. The following is a conversation he has with Schooly Bright, a sober-minded and thoughtful Wild Boy who has received a modicum of ragged-school education:

"What makes you think of changing your names?" asked Bright.

"Only 'cos it sound better. Shouldn't like a gal to call me Sam; Its vulgar."

"What name would you like?"

“Something spiff. Can’t yer find one in a book or on a play-bill; sich as one as will crack a feller’s jaw to speak and nobody couldn’t spell?”

“I’ll try to think of one.”

“Do; make me sound like a lord.”

“De Villiers is a good name.”

“So it is.”

“They have it in all the books and lots of plays.”

“Can you put a handle to it?”

“Yes; say Adolphus de Villiers.”

“Adolphus de Villers! A luxury, isn’t it?” (*The Wild Boys*, p. 83)

Choosing a name is done with the same cavalier attitude as shopping for new clothes. Rather than denoting a fundamental transformation of identity and class, the Dolphin adopts a disguise, a superficial cladding concealing his ruffian roots. His new name is a ‘luxury’, a commodity that can be bought if one just has the money for it. The books and playbills that are the inspiration for Dolphin’s new name were likely pulpy French romances which flooded the literary market and were, like the penny serial, notorious for their sensationalism. In the absence of a formal schooling, the Dolphin’s education is drawn from the pages of publications like these, a fact which Dick chastises him for:

“I wish I know’d as much as you, Dick. How did you manage to pick it up?”

“Mother taught me the most, and I read all the books I can get.”

“So do I; sich rattling tales, too – ‘The Black Phantom; or, the White Spectre of the Pink Rock.’ It’s fine, it is; somebody’s killed every week, and it’s only a penny.”

“That is not the sort of book I mean,” said Dick. “Mother does not like me to read them.”

“Why?”

“She says they have a bad influence.”

“Who’s he?”

“That means a bad effect.”

“Don’t know him, neither.”

“You would, if you read proper books.”

“So I will. You leaves tuppence at the library and they lends you wolume; ‘Turpin’s ride to York’, or ‘Paul Clifford.’ – a highwayman, he was.”

Dick shook his head again.

“Wot?” asked to Dolphin, in great surprise, “ain’t they the sort?”

“No.”

“That shows how much you know. Why, they costs ever so much to buy, and all the nobbs reads them.” (*Wild Boys*, p. 7)

In using middle-class talking points around the penny serial, *The Wild Boys* gives more than a wink to its potential critics, parodying fears that these kinds of text could indeed negatively shape their young readers’ lives. The self-referentiality of this moment, however, reveals the extent to which the penny serial pre-determines his future. As a character within the text, he more than anyone is bound to the genre’s sensational narratives. The Dolphin’s voracious consumption of juvenile penny serials however not only reveals ‘bad taste’, but a limited world view - one which recycles stock narratives from the ‘old exhausted mines’ of the circulating library. For the Dolphin, his reading informs his own falsified history which he fashions for the benefit of Lucy Miller, a proper young girl he takes a fancy to:

“I was left upon a doorstep,” said Sam, trying desperately to be more lucid. “You see, my father was a lord.”

“A lord?”

“Yes.”

“Lord who?”

“That’s where the mystery is,” said Sam. “But he was. And I was kidnapped by a wicked old gipsy wot used to tell fortunes to the servant gal and steal all the silver spoons.”

“Dear me,” said the young lady, growing more interested. “Kidnapped by a gipsy?”

“Yes. I was a child asleep, and the gipsy was a kidnapping. She stealed me away till I growed up, that’s wot made me so brown [...]

He was getting dreadfully confused, and anything that came first found utterance before he was aware of it.

The young lady was so astonished that she could not speak.

His style of speech was incomprehensible.

“I ran away,” he said, after a pause, during which the thought suggested itself that he was not progressing rapidly into favour; “I ran away, and became a Wild Boy.”

(*Wild Boys*, pp. 85 – 86)

This tale of an abandoned orphan child from a wealthy or noble family who has been stripped of his rightful inheritance is one which underpins much of the drama in the first part of *The Wild*

Boys; Arthur Grattan, who the Wild Boys have some interaction with, is the lost heir of Wintermerle. This narrative formula was a mainstay of NPC serials and endemic in other popular Victorian fiction. (Mayhew asserted in *London Labour*, that penny bloods were full of tales of ‘gipsies turning out to be nobles.’ (*Labour*, p. 26). Springhall argues that this only serves to reassert orthodox Victorian morality and hegemonic middle-class values.⁴⁷ It implied that birth and blood were indeed reliable indicators of character. The Dolphin, however, cannot rewrite his racialised otherness. He unconvincingly attempts to persuade Lucy that his ‘brownness’ is the result of influence, rubbing off on him like filth from dirty surroundings. However, the Dolphin’s attempt at redefining himself fail. Even in imagining the narrative of his life, he must return himself to the position of a Wild Boy. His inability to make these tropes function as fantasy reveals how they were inevitably unsuccessful at articulating a vision of class mobility.

Despite his first faltering attempt at bettering his societal position, the Dolphin does eventually secure a stable line of work. Following the advice of Schooly Bright, he weasels his way into an apprenticeship with Lucy Miller’s father, a kind-hearted saddler. Here, the Dolphin proves to be a willing pupil, eager to oblige and determined to become ‘a respectable member of society’. Rather than the shabby garments he dons when first attempting to play-act as a member of the upper-class, he is given ‘a clean white apron’ which he fastidiously keeps clean with much pride and care. (*Wild Boys*, p. 149) Not only does this signify a shift towards the cleanliness associated with the middle class, it is a clear departure from the Dolphin’s former philosophy of cyclical (but unintentional) defilement and purification. The apron must ritually be kept white in order that he can maintain a consistent presentable façade.

During the course of his apprenticeship, the Dolphin is able to recycle himself into a ‘well-grown and well-behaved youth’. (*Wild Boys*, p. 269) His employer likewise recognises in him ‘that sterling stuff which makes our English *men* – the energetic and intelligent workers who have made commerce the giant power it is’. (*Wild Boys*, p. 270). Rather than roving the streets without purpose – expending energy without material return – his bodily and mental power is captured, disciplined and utilised by the capitalistic machine. Once settled in his new position he is afforded the luxuries of respectability: courting Mr Miller’s daughter Lucy, a good salary of five shillings a week, and further access to the homes of his upper-class clientele. Likewise, his nickname is discarded in favour of the more respectable ‘Sam’. ‘Forget your wildness, and look forward to what you may be’ Lucy instructs him. (*Wild Boys*, p. 269) Dolphin’s individual

⁴⁷ John Springhall, “‘A Life Story for the People’? Edwin J. Brett and the London “Low-Life” Penny Dreadfuls of the 1860s, *Victorian Studies*, 33 (1990), 223 – 246, p. 245.

mobility – his ‘wildness’ – is re-imagined as social mobility, in which he operates within social mores and structures rather than circumventing or (quite literally) undermining them by means of the underground network of sewers.

According to the text’s own logic, according to which ‘there is hope for those born in the lowest depths of degradation’, the Dolphin’s social ascent should serve as the natural conclusion of the serial. Theoretically, once the Wild Boys had transformed their dispossessed bodies into useful subjects of society, they would have fulfilled the narrative’s function of recycling waste into valuable matter. According to David L. Pike ‘the clean-at-heart boys - those worthy of being salvaged from the sewers – are eventually filtered out and rehabilitated; the dirty-to-the-core ones are shipped off to Australia, which often functioned as a continental garbage dump in the Victorian imaginary’.⁴⁸ Though Pike is quite right in recognising the colonial metaphors at work in *The Wild Boys*, he inaccurately renders its messy plot which consistently resists such neat conclusions. The Wild Boys’ rehabilitation or irredeemability has little bearing on their eventual fates. As the first book comes to an end, the author rapidly and rather abruptly brings about the downfalls of the cast, creating the groundwork for the second book in which a large portion of the cast are transported to Australia. It is worth emphasising that the Wild Boy’s transportation does not spell the end for their adventures. Rather than being labelled waste which can safely be ejected from the narrative, like all waste in the serial, they continue to be a source of anxiety. The text has taught us that death and annihilation are impossibilities.

Though the Dolphin is one of the few Wild Boys that remain in England, the last few page of the first book of the serial work frantically to bring about his downfall. Mr Miller, his employer is ruined due to speculation in bad stocks, sells his saddling business, and then retires to the countryside where he promptly dies. Simon Plackett, the new owner of the business, is a cruel and villainous man who treats Dolphin with callousness. Lucy, meanwhile, is sold by Simon to a former admirer, with the more than implied threat of imprisonment and rape. This all unfolds over one slender chapter. In the second book, the Dolphin is returned again to the roving semi-criminal life of the Wild Boys. He starts up an illicit affair with Simon’s strong-willed and sensuous wife, precipitates his (accidental) killing, and abandons the innocent but now poor Lucy to pursue a life of prostitution. Dick and Joseph Lane, after their rises and falls in class, fade out of the narrative. In the bumpy plotting of *The Wild Boys*, narratives rarely conclude, but either run

⁴⁸ David L. Pike, *Subterranean Cities: The World beneath Paris and London 1800 – 1945* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), p. 208.

their course either until all narrative options have been exhausted, are quietly abandoned or cycle tirelessly through the same tedious storylines.

To faithfully follow through on the narratives of progress set out at the serial's opening would be to drive it towards a natural end, and thus bring about its completion. Subverting these narratives was a means of maintaining the economic viability of the text by prolonging the sense of adventure for its young readers. According to E. S. Turner, 'Wage slaves had no intention of spending their scanty leisure reading about wage slaves'.⁴⁹ In becoming respectable, not only did the Wild Boys move closer towards the realities of many of its readers, but they also moved closer towards dull conventionality. Though Dolphin shakes off the shackles of socially condoned propriety this was not compatible with the ruffian and adventurous spirits that the Wild Boys originally displayed. Like the boys themselves, the narrative meandered through different spaces and scenarios without producing a moral tale – a productive end. Instead, it recycled what was familiar and discarded what had been exhausted of its narrative worth. Its serial form produced a repetitive homogeneity, where everything must eventually return to the sewers.

The characters of *The Wild Boys* are trapped in structures in coerce them to repeat the same actions and the same ascents and downfalls. Having exhausted the narratives of social ascent, like the myth, the serial, the serial 'can only continue by a dint of self-repetition'. Perhaps some of its popularity lay in the fact that although it told stories of sensational adventure, it articulated a familiar frustration with difficulty of social ascent and the grinding monotony of maintaining constant motion.

⁴⁹ E. S. Turner, *Boys Will Be Boys: The Story of Sweeney Todd, Deadwood Dick, Sexton Blake, Billy Bunter, Dick Barton, et. al.* (Faber & Faber: London, 2012), p. 52.

Conclusion

The nineteenth-century ideology of circulation unravels, multiplies and mutates. It is tempting to talk about it in terms of failure, a dead idea picked over and pulled apart. Rather, we see it recycled into new literary forms. For the authors of period, circulation was more than a strictly sanitary phenomenon; it functions as a useful way of thinking about transformation, redemption, redundancy and enclosure. It created systems which pre-determined the trajectories of matter, people and objects and complicated ideas of progress and production. The limits of the concept of circulation create narratives which recoil back on themselves. They play with ouroboric forms which push them towards an uneasy dynamic symmetry in which opposing elements are counterbalanced against each other – progress, decay, order, disorder, closure, openness.

In this way, circulation begets diverse effects. If Ward could control and contain the meanings of waste by use of a tidy metaphor in his sanitary activism, Mayhew's London is bloated with wastes, burdened with the fluctuating forms of its subjects and objects. The city is alternatively a progenitor or slave to systems of circulation, comprised of networks which codify transformation in infrastructure and technology, or a site shaped by frenetic evolution and devolution. For *The Wild Boys of London* and *Little Dorrit* too, ideas of productivity chafe against each other. In the former, individual graft and failing infrastructures allows one to recuperate urban wastes, while in the latter the circulatory economic systems are revealed to be no more than self-consumptive fictions. Circulations models a recursive kind of redemption where one is continually washed-up on the shore of the Thames or drawn back in the uproar and hubbub the London street. Yet for all of their divergences, these texts engage with, and push against the potentialities of endless reuse.

The spectacular rise of predictive language models in the past year has opened up new ways of generating waste literature. Trained on a corpus of over 8 million documents, Chat-GPT rearranges and recycles these words into intelligible texts. Mimicking the creative work of writing where writers 'reuse, pilfering from earlier texts in a second harvest for a new poetic banquet', it calls into question how we trace these patterns of reuse in AI-generated texts amongst their almost impenetrable intertextuality.¹ Texts unfold themselves automatically and dispassionately, effacing their antecedents. It models what Barthes saw as anonymising effect of writing: it is 'the

¹ Susan Signe Morrison, *The Literature of Waste: Material Eco-poetics and Ethical Matter* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 151

destruction of every voice, every origin'.² These generated texts also tend towards an uncanny sameness – what Wilkie Collins may well have termed the ‘dead level of the smoothest and flattest conventionality.’³ Researchers at Rice University have warned that in the growing undetectability of AI texts there is a real risk of autophagous in generative AI – self-consuming loops where its training sets are polluted by its own outputs. In such circumstances, the future outputs of generative models gradually degrade – tending towards homogeneity and stereotype.

4

Yet such technological systems live in the material world and interact with and disrupt environmental circulations. The large data processing centres which enable the training and operation of generative AI models not only require vast amounts of electricity, but hundreds of thousands of litres of water to cool its components.⁵ If nineteenth-century pundits drew connections between the production of superfluous or ‘trash’ literature and contaminated material economies of the London streets, we now can identify environmental damage driven by large-scale consumption and production of digital texts. Still, Chat-GPT features in numerous breathless think pieces on its revolutionary environmental potential. It sits, uncomfortably, at the intersection of contrary, diverging cycles. Like the Victorians before us, we grapple with the paradoxes of progress and a world which feeds upon itself.

² Roland Barthes, *Image Music Text*, trans. by Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977), p. 142

³ Wilkie Collins, ‘The Unknown Public’, *Household Words Vol. XV/III* (London: Bradbury & Evans, 1858), pp. 217 – 222 (p. 221)

⁴ Sina Alemohammad, Josue Casco-Rodriguez and other, ‘Self-Consuming Generative Models Go MAD’ (2023), <<https://arxiv.org/pdf/2307.01850.pdf>> [accessed 3 August 2023]

⁵ Pengfei Li, Jianyi Yang and others, ‘Making AI Less “Thirsty”: Uncovering and Addressing the Secret Water Footprint of AI Models’ (2023), <<https://arxiv.org/pdf/2304.03271.pdf>> [accessed 3 August 2023]

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