

**The Aesthetics of Filth  
in *Sweet Thames*, *The Great Stink*  
and *The Crimson Petal and The White***

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**Abstract:**

Matthew Kneale's *Sweet Thames* (1992), Clare Clark's *The Great Stink* (2005) and Michel Faber's *The Crimson Petal and The White* (2009) are seemingly based upon a series of textual, cultural and sensorial oppositions: morality vs. immorality, respectability vs. crime, health vs. illness, perfume vs. stink. Nevertheless, these three novels call these antitheses into question by reflecting on the cultural construction of the paradigms of 'dirt' and 'filth', in all their declinations. According to anthropologists and cultural theorists, such as Mary Douglas and William Cohen, 'dirt' and 'filth' may be defined and approached as a 'matter out of place' that opposes social order and conventions, disrupting assumed hierarchies. In this respect, *Sweet Thames*, *The Great Stink* and *The Crimson Petal and The White* question traditional Victorian notions of bodily and moral purity (and impurity) on multiple levels. At the centre of these novel lies mid to late nineteenth-century London, the city of dreadful delight whose fight against filth was marked by ambiguities and paradoxes.

**Keywords:** Clare Clark, *The Crimson Petal and the White*, Michel Faber, filth, *The Great Stink*, Matthew Kneale, neo-Victorian London, *Sweet Thames*.

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London and its 'filth' are the real protagonists of Matthew Kneale's *Sweet Thames* (1992), Clare Clark's *The Great Stink* (2005) and Michel Faber's *The Crimson Petal and the White* (2002). From the mid to late Victorian age, when it acquired its status as cosmopolitan global city, London increasingly turned into a living and pulsating aggregate of people who prospered in its large elegant streets and starved in its squalid and dirty suburbs, an enormous conglomerate of human beings fighting for survival. Whereas in the 1870s (the setting of Faber's novel) London had almost succeeded in defeating cholera – thanks to the work of epidemiologists such as John Snow and of great engineers such as Joseph Bazalgette<sup>1</sup> – it still remained a city that engaged in a daily battle against physical and moral

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dirt. However, ‘dirt’ and ‘filth’ are far from being uncontested concepts. As Ben Campkin and Rosie Cox argue, “[scientific] definitions of ‘dirt’ and ‘clean’ are produced within particular historical and cultural contexts, rather than standing as objective truths” (Campkin and Cox 2007: 2). In this sense, ‘dirt’ and ‘filth’ represented for Londoners and for the Victorians more generally not just a sanitary problem but also a cultural construction, through which it was possible to define and confine unwanted subjects and behaviours that transgressed normative standards and cultural codes. In Foucauldian terms, each transgression of the (sanitary and moral) norm had to be surveyed, inspected and regulated through an institutional intervention. If the role of transgression is “to measure the excessive distance that it opens at the heart of the limit”, in displaying “its entire trajectory, [and] even its ambivalent origin” (Foucault 1977: 35, 34), the very act of transgressing demonstrates its cultural and paradigmatic mobility.

Accordingly, ‘filth’ in *Sweet Thames*, *The Great Stink* and *The Crimson Petal and the White* represents an “ambivalent” element that complicates and puts to the test hierarchies and antitheses that were largely taken for granted by the Victorian frame of mind, but which a postmodern perspective regards as mediating and perpetuating inequitable power relations. The novels penned by Kneale, Clark and Faber are seemingly based upon a series of textual, cultural and sensorial oppositions: morality vs. immorality, respectability vs. crime, health vs. illness, perfume vs. stink. Nevertheless, these three texts call such antitheses into question by reflecting on the cultural construction of their underlying paradigms of ‘dirt’ and ‘filth’, in all their declinations. In this respect, in typical neo-Victorian mode, *Sweet Thames*, *The Great Stink* and *The Crimson Petal and the White* deconstruct traditional notions of bodily and moral purity (and impurity), implicitly interrogating persistent associations between filth and poverty, and filth and female sexuality, which persist to this day. Whereas in Kneale’s novel, in his attempt to save London from the cholera infection by reforming its sewers, the engineer Joshua Jeavons realises that behind the supposed stability of family conventions lie unspeakable secrets, in *The Great Stink*, the former Crimean soldier William May has to plunge himself in the most filthy recesses of the city drains to find his own freedom and save himself from an unjust accusation of murder. Meanwhile Faber’s characterisation of Sugar, who is a prostitute, seems to negate the gender

stereotypes related to the figure of the ‘fallen women’ as emblems of moral and physical dirt and as a source of contagion.

*Sweet Thames*, *The Great Stink* and *The Crimson Petal and the White*, of course, are not the only neo-Victorian novels that feature references and allusions to dirt, so as to achieve what Roland Barthes defined as a ‘reality effect’ (see Barthes 1986). Many other artists, including novelists such as Charles Palliser in *The Quincunx* (1989), or more recently in Roland Polanski’s dark and grime-coloured adaptation of *Oliver Twist* (2005), recur to the ‘reality effect’, seemingly intent on making their representations of even the most controversial, appalling and disgusting aspects of the Victorian age more convincing. However, in contrast to other neo-Victorian texts, Kneale’s, Clark’s and Faber’s novels blatantly foreground the paradigm of filth. Hence, the allusions to ‘dirt’ and ‘filth’ serve not just as an aesthetic strategy, but convey the artists’ personal declination of Victorianism. At the centre of these three novels lies mid to late nineteenth-century London, a “City of dreadful delight” (Walkowitz 1992), whose fight against filth is both a sanitary and an ethical endeavour.

Moreover, the fight against moral and physical ‘filth’ allows for the pleasures of titillation, self-indulgence, and sensuality but also facilitates a process of self-awakening and conscience-raising in the novels’ protagonists and, indirectly, in the readers of these neo-Victorian fictions. Accordingly, the writers’ foregrounding of filth seems to pursue an ethical purpose (e.g. critiquing the persistent class and gender stereotypes linked to filth) and a more prurient one related to the ‘reality effect’, which in part seems to cater upon what Kohlke has defined as the “neo-Victorian sexsation” (see Kohlke 2008), based upon a voyeuristic interest in uncensored sexuality.

Matthew Kneale’s *Sweet Thames*, set almost twenty years before *The Crimson Petal and the White* and just before the cholera outbreak of 1848-49, opens by offering a synesthetic image of the city centred on stink and heaps of filth. Together with his assistant Hayke, who is measuring the current of effluents in the sewers, Jeavons illustrates his scientific and moral dream of freeing London from dirt, enjoying the “glory of a London unobstructed by effluent” and a “metropolis free from noxious odours affronting our nostrils, from unsightly deposits, from the miasma cloud of gases hanging above the rooftops” (Kneale 2001: 11). Jeavons is both a practical man and an idealist, who considers his fight against filth as a fundamental sanitary quest and a moral mission, as he repeatedly

underlines. Inspired by John Snow and Joseph Bazalgette, Jeavons is a perfect representative of what Michelle Allen has defined as the Victorian “gospel of sanitation”, with health as “the most humble claim” and aspiration of its advocates: “at their most ambitious, reformers promised to uplift a suffering urban underclass, to moralize the population and thus to herald in a harmonious social order – they promised the new Jerusalem” (Allen 2008: 2). Of course, these attitudes were sometimes more nuanced, since – along with the sense of disgust – Victorians cultivated an ambiguous fascination and attraction towards ‘dirt’ and ‘filth’ that is, in a way, analogous to today’s media politics of misery as regards the so-called ‘third world countries’. A peculiar Victorian phenomenon was the so-called ‘slumming’ (a term, according to the *OED*, first introduced in 1884), which offered tours of the most degraded areas of the East End (in particular Shoreditch and Whitechapel) for ‘respectable’ Londoners. The reasons behind this phenomenon were various, ranging from the collection of information for journalistic articles to mere curiosity, from charity to sexual craving (see Koven 2004), in a sense foreshadowing the complex and ambivalent reader expectations solicited by neo-Victorian fiction today.

In *Sweet Thames*, Jeavons’s relationship with his extremely reserved wife Isobella, the daughter of the influent consultant engineer Augustus Moynihan, seems to respect a preordered scheme. But Jeavons’s great expectations will be shattered after Isobella’s sudden disappearance, followed by his detective-like descent into the poorest and most filthy areas of London. Jeavons will therefore perform a two-sided search, “first, for the figurative origin of the cholera contagion and then, for the literal location of his missing wife” (O’Leary 2013: 82). In the course of this double quest, he will lose all of his certainties and economic stability, and gradually mingle with London’s outcasts. Unexpectedly, he will find himself at ease in the city’s filth, and in the company of toshers, scavengers and prostitutes, calling them “my new – and strange – teachers” (Kneale 2001: 210).

Clare Clark’s *The Great Stink* is set in the infamously torrid summer of 1858, when the smell of the city and of the Thames was so vast and overwhelming that it even forced the House of Commons to adopt countermeasures such as using curtains soaked in chloride of lime to hinder the spread of nauseating odours. The novel’s protagonist William May, who works in the Metropolitan Main Drainage Scheme Team appointed by the Metropolitan Board of Works (headed by Joseph Bazalgette), has a natural

inclination to venture into the city's most filthy areas. In the depths of London sewers, where material and cultural chaos rule supreme and where the Victorian attempts to control 'disorder' seem to have failed, William paradoxically finds his spiritual peace, so that "in the darkness beneath the wheels and hooves and the hobnails, knee-deep in the effluvia of the largest city on earth, his spirit found freedom". Surrounded by darkness and by "nothing but the sickening stink of shit", William takes his knife and starts cutting his arm in an extreme act of sadomasochism (Clark 2006: 10). In the city's subterranean depths, he gives vent to his 'cravings' – a consequence of his traumatic experiences in the Crimean battlefields – by inflicting self-injuries in a quasi re-enactment of the willful bodily violation and desecration of war.

The allusions to 'filth' represent an important element also in Faber's *The Crimson Petal and the White*, which may be viewed as a fictional investigation, not exempt from contradictions, on the issue of womanhood and female agency in the Victorian age (a theme that Kneale's text similarly introduced with reference to Jeavons's wife Isobella), in all of its declinations. On the one hand, the inclusion of uncensored descriptions of Victorian sexuality cashes in on what Christian Gutleben has defined as an "aesthetics of the unsavory" aimed at shattering "the decorum of Victorian fiction" (Gutleben 2001: 128, 131) and titillating (particularly male) readers' voyeuristic desires. On the other hand, the characterization of Sugar and Agnes Rackham, the wife of Sugar's punter, patron and later employer William, interrogates late nineteenth-century notions of female gender politics (although in an even more 'sensationalist' way than New Women writers such as Sarah Grand, Mona Caird and Olive Schreiner did), mainly through exploring the association between lack of respectability and moral and physical dirt. The prostitute Caroline, the first character to be introduced in Faber's novel, lives in the squalid quarters of St. Giles, in Church Lane, with its roofs "overcast with filth" (Faber 2002: 5). Caroline is shown performing a rudimentary form of contraception, during which she is squatting "over a large ceramic bowl filled with a tepid mixture of water, alum and sulphate of zinc" and repeatedly "saturates the plunger" in the belief that in this way "the man's seed is swirling round in it rather than in her" (Faber 2002:6). The scene presents images specifically related to cleaning and purification, but unexpectedly associates them with the prostitute, while dirt and contamination are linked to the male client, thereby

reversing the traditional conflation of prostitution and filth so typical of Victorian medical and social discourse. In this scene, as well as in other instances in the novel, *The Crimson Petal and The White* dramatises an intimate relationship between prostitution, dirt and cleanliness that Faber develops against the grain of traditional Victorian culture, according to which, as Judith Walkowitz notes, the prostitute, as “the quintessential female figure of the urban scene”, was regarded as “the embodiment of the corporeal smells and animal passions that the rational bourgeois male had repudiated and that the virtuous woman [...] had suppressed” (Walkowitz 1992: 21). Moreover, after the terrible cholera epidemics of 1831 and 1849, “sanitary reformers and writers on ‘moral statistics’ [...] identified the prostitute literally and figuratively as the conduit of infection to respectable society” (Walkowitz 1992: 21-22).<sup>2</sup> There was therefore an ongoing public debate on the relationship between the Victorian ‘Great Social Evil’ and the regulation of social and urban life, as well as between the physical sanitation of cities (so central to Kneale’s and Clark’s novels) and the ‘moral cleansing’ of the metropolis’s so-called fallen women.

While the Victorian practical sanitation issues are no longer as pressing today, the connection between urban regulation, moral public health and ‘sex work’ persists. As much is evidenced in repeated attempts by London councils to eradicate prostitution from their neighbourhoods as a “blight on the local environment”, for instance, by compulsory purchase orders on properties used by sex workers (Soho Council, qtd. in Silverman 2003: n.p.). Moreover, in the spring of 2012 the British press reported a disproportionate increase in London brothel raids and arrests of sex workers, in an apparent attempt to have “[p]rostitutes ‘cleaned off the streets ahead of the Olympics’” (Furness 2012: n.p.), while the threat of organised crime behind sex trafficking is repeatedly cited in justification of authorities’ targeting of migrant sex workers (see Smith 2013).

Like *The Crimson Petal and the White*, *Sweet Thames* features a prostitute named Kate who lives in St. Giles and who shares traits with Caroline (alcoholism) and Sugar (she is slim rather than voluptuous for a working girl), to the point of suggesting an eventual textual influence on Faber’s novel. Although Kate embodies the notion of (moral and bodily) filth, she offers Jeavons a form of affection and sexual satisfaction that his wife Isobella denies him. Kate’s ‘dirt’ embodies the ‘object’ – in Julia Kristeva’s definition – that which attracts and repels, the outcome of an

unbalanced male-dominated society and its unwanted refuse. For him, Kate “had become almost a habit in the preceding weeks”. Although after each encounter he decided that he should never return “to her squalid room, a few days usually proved enough for the remembrance of her skinny form to regain [...] an alluring enchantment” (Kneale: 92). In a way, the ‘abject’ comfort Jeavons finds in Kate prefigures the already mentioned succour he later finds among London’s outcasts.

Clare Clark’s *The Great Stink* at first sets a series of antitheses in place, by identifying the character of William May with chaos and disorder (and hence, implicitly, with ‘filth’), and his famous employer Joseph Bazalgette with control. Indeed, Bazalgette repeatedly begs William May to recollect himself (since his hands continue to shake) because “an engineer brings order” (Clark 2006: 157). In this respect, it is important to bear in mind that the renewal of London sewers through the construction of a complex engineering system was not simply a great technological achievement that was intended at improving public health and good sanitary conditions. Rather, it had much wider cultural, political and ideological implications. As Haewon Hwang maintains,

[as] population density, industrialization and social fragmentation created fissures on the surface of the city, technology and engineering developed ways to control these anxieties by firmly burying them, literally and figuratively, underground [...]. [The] effective removal of filth and waste from the body of the city is essential in forging and maintaining social, psychological and cultural boundaries (Hwang 2013: 1-2, 19).

Nevertheless, *The Great Stink* presents a gradual disruption of the paradigmatic oppositions between order/disorder, cleanliness/filth, morality/immorality by showing that it is only in the dirty sewers and stinking tunnels running underground London that William May can save himself from the corruption and disorder of the ‘upper’ world, in which economic interests and rigid demarcations between classes continue to exist.<sup>3</sup> Sentences such as “[in] tunnels moral judgements were suspended” and “[the] strict and immutable precepts that governed the behaviour of those who walked directly over you [...] became fluid, elusive” (Clark

2006: 85) should be also read in the light of the socio-political background of Clarks' novel, published in 2005, when former Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher (who notoriously advocated a return to 'Victorian values') celebrated her 80th birthday. As for Kneale's *Sweet Thames*, this novel was published only two years after the end of Thatcher's government, and in the same year in which she retired. Both texts seem thus to suggest that sewers become an emblem of postmodern ethical and ideological relativity. As a consequence, readers are invited to similarly 'suspend' or reject their stereotypical assumptions about the Victorians and their (supposed) 'values'.

The basic assumption in *The Great Stink*, *Sweet Thames* and *The Crimson Petal and the White* is that the ancient Hebrew proverb 'cleanliness is next to goodliness' is no more than a cultural construction and, as such, susceptible to revisions. The proverb was presumably introduced in Britain for the first time by Francis Bacon and later adopted by John Wesley in one of his most famous sermons entitled 'On Dress' (1769), acquiring further medical, moral, social and political connotations in the Victorian age. Cleanliness of body was the quintessential expression of a purity of morality and behaviour, and hence indirectly of a respect for encoded social norms. In medical and journalistic debates, the theme of bodily health was accorded fundamental importance in questions concerning the protection and defence of political and social institutions (mainly the State and the family) against corruption. As Foucault underlines in his three-volume project *The History of Sexuality*, the body should be approached as the focus of a series of antithetical discursive procedures, and the locus in which these discourses are dramatised and juxtaposed.<sup>4</sup> In the protagonists' bodies in the three neo-Victorian texts discussed, however, these discourses are not just juxtaposed but collapsed and deconstructed. Rather than filth rewriting bodies as unwholesome and transgressive, clean and unclean bodies rewrite filth in terms of succor, desire, and agency, as when, in *The Crimson Petal and the White*, Agnes Rackham writes her diary with menstrual blood (see below).

The Victorian construction of a wholesome social body located in healthy cities, towns and villages entailed the social and political control over whatsoever form of deviation from the sanitary norm.<sup>5</sup> Social outcasts, criminals and prostitutes were therefore identified as the quintessential epitome of 'filth' (and, implicitly, of unclean 'alterity'), as well as the conduit of moral and physical infection. Like socialists, colonial subjects,

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Irish supporters of the Home Rule and suffragettes, they represented a factual menace for the bodily and political stability not just of London but also of the whole nation (and Empire), in particular in mid to late Victorian England. In this respect, ‘dirt’ and ‘filth’ were all-encompassing terms for a series of specific sanitary policies first aiming at sanitizing polluted areas (and improving health conditions), and then at expelling unwanted individuals – policies still regularly employed today by London and other UK city councils, especially as regards sex workers, as previously noted. It is therefore indicative that Jeavons in *Sweet Thames* at first identifies the stink of London’s sewers with criminality (and, conversely, perfume and cleanliness with respectability) according to a deliberate ‘separation of the spheres’, admitting that he “sensed the odours as in some way feeding the criminality above, acting as a fertilizer of evil” (Kneale 2001: 24). This is in tune with Alain Corbin’s assertion that the nineteenth century was the time in which sanitary reformers sought to divide the “deodorized bourgeoisie from the foul-smelling masses” (Corbin 1988: 55), akin to today’s gated communities, surveillance cameras and private security firms guaranteeing the pristine privacy of the exclusive properties of London’s elite. See for instance this resonant description of the “deodorized” community of Bow Quarter, East London:

Once you’ve been signed in and got past the gates and the security guards, you’re in a totally different world to the streets you’ve just left behind [...]. Bow Quarter is peaceful, quiet, litter and graffiti-free and, of course, feels totally safe. It stands in stark contrast to the noise, bustle and social mix found on the Bow Road at the end of the street [...]. As Mr Nicholls acknowledges, the residents don’t need to mix with the locals outside the gates. (Rice 2004: n.p.)

The publication of the *Report into the Sanitary Conditions of the Labouring Population of Great Britain* (1842) by Edward Chadwick, who inspired the character of Edwin Sleak-Cunningham in Kneale’s *Sweet Thames*, created a new awareness of the desperate hygienic conditions of a large part of the ‘labouring people’. Chadwick recorded, for instance, that in some areas distilled urine remained the only cleansing agent. Although Chadwick supported the creation of cheap ‘wash-houses’, where people

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could have a cold or hot bath for a few pennies, his support of the miasmatic theory and his idea that all dirty water from sewers should be discharged into the Thames contributed to the spread of the terrible cholera epidemics that affected London, in particular in 1854. Moreover, Chadwick's approach to sanitary reform was inspired fundamentally by moral questions rather than by medical research. The management of the Thames thus became a crucial topic in medical and public discussions and debates on cholera epidemics and sanitary measures, centred on questions of cleansing and pollution, while cholera itself gave real and symbolic expression to this fear of fatal contagion and, indirectly, immoral behaviour. A source of life and death (particularly because of cholera), of salvation and corruption, of richness and degradation, the Thames in *The Great Stink* becomes the geographical signifier of a long series of cultural signifieds:

At the bottom of the stink was the river. It stretched a good few streets back from the banks, in fact there weren't many places in the city you couldn't catch a whiff of it on a warm day, but in Thames-street it was certain as the ground you stood on [...]. The smell was solid and brown as the river itself. The water didn't know nothing of any modesty or shame. It wasn't going to hide its filth among the narrow alleys and rookeries in the lower parts of town like them in the Government might wish to. (Clark 2006: 12-13)

However, notwithstanding the attempt to separate the "deodorized bourgeoisie from the foul-smelling masses" (Corbin 1988: 55), this desired division is clearly untenable and breaks down in Clark's novel, since the stink is omnipresent rather than confined to the poor districts, and disrupts any opposition between (social) order and disorder. Only thanks to the intervention of Joseph Bazalgette, who is included as a central character in *The Great Stink*, and to the construction of a modern sewer network (begun in the late fifties, inaugurated by the Prince of Wales in 1865, and completed in the mid-1870s) cholera, and stink, were almost defeated (see Halliday 2007). But the enormous social disparities continued all the same.

Another chapter in the process of urban and social sanitation was represented by the Contagious Diseases Acts (1864, 1866, 1869), originally introduced to control the spread of venereal disease among enlisted men in

garrison towns and ports. According to the Diseases Act (also known as the DA), suspect women who could be mistaken for prostitutes (from the way they looked, from the fact that they walked unaccompanied at night etc.) could be interrogated, subjected to forced medical examination, and confined in 'Lock Hospitals' if found to be infected. Whereas at first the DA was conceived to stop venereal disease in specific areas, particularly after the passing of the 1866 Act (when the initial geographical boundaries of the legislation were expanded) the general impression of the Act was that it served to regulate prostitution through a political intervention. This caused debates and protests, most famously Josephine Butler's campaign to repeal the Acts.

In this context, apart from the sexual resonances and allusions implicit in the terms such as 'filth' and 'dirt' (adopted by Victorians as synonyms for sexual intercourse), prostitutes – already deemed conduits of moral and physical filth – menaced the limits (and roles) imposed by a capitalist-based society on the proper 'use' of the body. Whereas the bodies of wives were intended for reproductive means and as signifiers of social status,<sup>6</sup> prostitutes' bodies were intended for pleasure and profit, dealing in sex – physically and economically – in a totally transgressive way. In Lynda Nead's words, sex workers "represent all the terms within capitalist production", functioning as "the human labour, the object of exchange and the seller at once" and simultaneously standing for the "worker, commodity and capitalist", blurring these categories (Nead 1988: 99). In Faber's novel, for instance, Sugar identifies (and oversteps) all these complex aspects of prostitution, since she strategically uses her body to access William Rackham's capitalist pleasures and advantages, such as going to concerts, bathing daily, using expensive soap and perfumes, and buying elegant clothes. The presumed embodiment of 'filth' thus usurps the role of the (outwardly) respectable entrepreneur, Rackham, whose business of producing soap symbolically links him with cleanliness and probity. Accordingly, *The Crimson Petal and the White* raises questions that are still highly relevant today. Now as then, sex workers "display their sexual and economic values in the crowd – that social element permanently on the edge of breakdown", as Anne McClintock argues, "thereby giv[ing] the lie to the rational control of 'deviance' and disorder" (McClintock 1992: 73).

Social, economic, medical and moral issues were strictly connected to modernisation plans by Victorian engineers and politicians, since there

was a strict relationship between the rising population and the production of a larger amount of dirt needing to be dealt with. It has been estimated that the growth rate in Britain in the nineteenth century almost reached 140 percent, with the number of prostitutes rising to 80,000 by the end of the century (see Nead 2000). Put differently, dirt and filth are products of the modernisation of cities, while at the same time representing the dark side of urbanisation and progress. Accordingly, those people living on the edge of society were traditionally identified and described with terms alluding to dirt, refuse and sewers, and compared to contaminating ‘peripheral’ elements that had to be expelled from the healthy ‘centres’ of modern London (and English) life.

The streets of London were thus scanned, inspected, studied, mapped and surveyed as if they represented the veins, muscles, sinews, and limbs of a body that could become potentially tainted. London citizens in particular became the living cells of this immense urban body, in whose most concealed areas filth prospered and menaced to infect the central organs. Peter Stallybrass and Allon White write that “the bodily lower stratum” is “transcoded” into the city spaces, in particular into its lower depths, namely “the slums, the labouring poor, the prostitute, the sewer” (Stallybrass and White 1986: 125). The ‘peripheral’ areas of London were said to be inclined to dirt and vice, whereas the ‘central’ shopping areas of the city were described and perceived as a healthy environment that could – or should – be accessed only by respectable citizens. Writing in *Temple Bar* in 1864, George Augustus Sala alluded to the “abominable little labyrinths of tenements crowded and huddled up together, to the perpetual exclusion of light and air, and the consistent fostering of dirt, disease and vice” (Sala 1864: 335). On 21 November 1846, when Britain was still fighting against cholera, an anonymous article in *The Lancet* explicitly linked prostitutes to contaminating sewers and to the ‘peripheral’ quarters inhabited by the poorest classes, suggesting the necessity of a state intervention on these matters (that would arrive a few years later in the form of the Contagious Diseases Acts):

Sooner or later the public authorities must investigate the [prostitutes’] condition with as much care as they are about to do with cesspools, and the other collections of refuse left in the slum of our cities. The period cannot be far distant,

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when all engaged in the sanitary condition of our population must become aware of the physical contamination arising from the neglect in which prostitutes are at present to remain. (qtd. in Trotter 1988: 75)

It is useful to compare the words included in *The Lancet* and by Sala with the narrator's reflections in *The Crimson Petal and the White*, particularly when his perspective merges with Sugar's through the use of the free indirect speech. Despite her 'fallen nature', Sugar is in fact described in the course of the novel as an ordered, clean and respectable-looking lady who easily accesses London's most airy, healthy and privileged 'central' areas:

But being a small woman has its small advantages, and she claims one of them now [...]; ladies must wear [gloves] at all times, until safely indoor. Sugar is dressed like a lady, therefore she must of no account bare her extremities in public [...].

Follow Sugar now into the great open space, the grandiose vacancy of Regent Street [...]: a declaration that in the bright future to come, places like St. Giles or Soho, with their *narrow labyrinths* and tilting hovels and clammy, crumbling nooks *infested* with *human flotsam*, will be *swept away*, to be replaced by a new London that's entirely like Regent Street, *airy, regular and clean*. (Faber 2002: 42-43, added emphasis)

Sugar's characterisation in *The Crimson Petal and the White* negates the stereotypes associated with the figure of the prostitute, in particular as regards her elegant appearance, her love for reading (and writing), and her personal care. In particular, the narrator comments on the expenditure of her clothes, one of the most visible markers of class, though in Sugar's case deceptively so: "Even by the standards of the West End, the quality of Sugar's dresses is remarkable; in the squalor of St. Giles, it was astonishing" (Faber 2002: 35). The first sexual encounter between William and Sugar is indicative in this respect. After having drunk too much, William falls asleep in Sugar's room at Mrs Castaway's, the brothel run by

her mother in which Sugar lives, since forcibly apprenticed into the trade by her parent. When he wakes, he realises that he has soaked the bed-sheets with urine (an event that uncannily evokes Sophie Rackham's later bedwetting).<sup>7</sup> Sugar then treats him like a soiled infant, cleaning him of his own filth: "with a brushed cotton cloth wrapped around one hand like a mitten, she mops and dabs him dry" (Faber 2002: 116). Thereafter, she has her first sexual encounter with the 'cleansed' middle-class gentleman. Faber here provocatively reverses the traditional view of prostitution, regarded as a dirty and dirtying practice. Traditional Victorian gender and social roles are transgressed: the male capitalist entrepreneur who produces soap and perfumes is dirty (William), whereas the 'filthy' prostitute is clean (Sugar).

Elsewhere too *The Crimson Petal and the White* scuppers Victorian assumptions and stereotypes: William, the representative of the upper classes (who has become the successful manager of Rackham's perfumeries), is the 'contaminating' element, whereas Sugar is repeatedly associated with purity and physical cleanliness:

"The city is a filthy place," Sugar affirms, unobtrusively wrapping her body in a milk-white dressing gown. "There's muck on the ground, muck in the water, muck in the air" [...].

William, buttoning himself into his shirt, appraises her fresh face, her bright eyes – her white gown.

"Well, you look very clean to me, I must say."

"I do my best," she smiles, folding the creamy sleeves across her breast. (Faber 2002: 248)

Despite her skin condition (probably a form of ichthyosis that she manages to treat, partly thanks to William's products), Sugar's face is "fresh", her eyes "bright", her gown is "white" and her sleeves are "creamy".

In the case of Matthew Kneale's and Clare Clark's novels, the so-called 'social outcasts' and those dismissed as the lowest members of society likewise are the only characters depicted in positive terms. These include prostitutes, vagrants, mudlarks, toshers and all those who earn their living thanks to the refuse of London's sewers, such as Long Arm Tom in *The Great Stink* or the three scavengers included in *Sweet Thames*. In contrast, the most respected members of society, such as Augustus

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Moyniham in *Sweet Thames*, are emblems of moral and physical corruption. It is therefore doubly ironic that Isobella, Jeavons's angelic and sexless wife who falls victim to her incestuous father, is obsessed by cleanliness and purity:

Our home was, at least, wonderfully clean. My wife kept it so, with fireplaces swept, tables polished, and windows freshly wiped; free of all but the most lately arrived film or soot. It was her fancy to do so; it was her passion. (Kneale 2001: 25)

Unbeknownst to her husband, however, Isobella's compulsive cleaning seeks to expel not the dirt of the city and its degraded poor, but the corrupting violation of an intimate family member and pillar of the community.

Isobella's respect of the behavioural codes of the 'angel in the house' and her domestic battle against filth reflect the typical ideological association between clean houses and unstained familial morality that was advocated in publications such as *The Illustrated Family Almanac* (1849), which Kneale's novel puts to the test. It is useful here to quote the testimony of Southwood Smith (one of the undertakers of the inquiries into the prevention of diseases directed by Edward Chadwick) before the Royal Commission on the State of Large Towns and Populous Districts, according to which "[a] fresh, clean, and well-ordered house [has] a direct tendency to make the members of a family sober, peaceful, and considerate of the feelings and happiness of each other [...] whereas a filthy, squalid, unwholesome dwelling [...] tends directly to make every dweller [...] selfish and sensual" (Southwood Smith qtd. in Allen 2008: 13). Yet in Kneale's neo-Victorian fiction, it is the wholesome middle-class dwelling that contains the vilest sensual corruption and breaks the most primal of taboos. The sacred hearth is brutally demythologised, and the exaltation of bourgeois cleanliness paradoxically provides the means for 'invisible' filth to flourish.

The same might be said of the Rackham home in Faber's novel. It is no coincidence that Faber chooses to focus on the lives of a producer of soap and perfumes, William Rackham, and one of his products' consumers, Sugar, who, being a prostitute, is in turn 'consumed' as a commodified

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product. Indeed during the 1890 – the years during which Faber’s novel is set – when the sewer system was working at full speed and the hygienic conditions of the middle classes were definitively improving, there was an enormous increase in soap sales, to the point that Victorians consumed approximately 25,000 tons of soap a year. The question of ‘filth’ progressively moved from the management of London sewers to the management of human corporeality, especially of the bodies of the city’s prostitutes and social outcasts. In the context of the rampant commodity capitalism (of which ‘cleanliness’ and ‘hygiene’ are a by-product), Sugar’s characterisation as exceptionally hygiene conscious goes against the grain of cultural stereotypes and gender roles. Sugar’s attitude transgresses the neat lines separating respectability and sin, family life and extramarital sex, cleanliness and dirt. Whereas the “sacrament of soap offers a reformation allegory whereby the purification of the domestic body becomes a metaphor for the regeneration of the body politic” (McClintock 1995: 214), Sugar’s hygienic relationship with her body calls these cultural assumptions into question, throwing into sharp relief the corruption of her ‘betters’, who make up the body politic and employ discourses of purity to deflect attention from their own mirroring in vice. At one point, Sugar is described watching Giacomo Meyerbeer’s *The Huguenots* (1836) in the Royal Albert Hall, mingling with respectable gentlemen and gentlewomen:

Of course she knows she’s surrounded by people who would, if the truth of her station were obvious, edge away from her in fear of being polluted. She is filth in their midst. Never mind that plenty of these decent ladies resemble prostitutes a good deal more than *she* does; never mind that this throng is full of Mrs So-and-Sos who are garishly dressed, whiffy with scent, scarred with powdered blemishes – still it’s *she*, unfailingly demure and freshly washed, who’s the secret obscenity here. She might as well be a mound of excrement fashioned into human shape. (Faber 2002: 368)

Sugar is well aware that she is reputedly a dirty subject, associated with filth and “excrement”, despite the fact that her pristine appearance is also more modest than that of her supposedly ‘pure’ counterparts. Yet she also functions as a mirror for the period’s hypocritical moral duality: the façades

of London's 'respectable' lives likewise hide secret obscenity, as Clark's, Kneale's and Faber's novels demonstrate.

In this view, the three novelists' insistence on the paradigms of dirt and filth may be interpreted through the filter offered by anthropologists such as Mary Douglas in *Purity and Danger* (1966) or, more recently, by academics and cultural theorists such as William A. Cohen. Douglas's notion of dirt shares many elements with Kristeva's reflections on the 'abject' in defining processes of marginalisation and exclusion. In Douglas's study on the social meaning of dirt (and on the relationship between 'sex pollution' and 'bodily corruption'), she argues that dirt is essentially disorder: "[there] is no such thing as absolute dirt: it exists *in the eye of the beholder*" (Douglas 1966: 4, added emphasis). The culturally disruptive quality of dirt is that it "offends against *order*" (Douglas 1966: 36; added emphasis). In turn, William A. Cohen has developed Douglas's views within a wider cultural framework, stating that filth "represents a cultural location at which the human body, social hierarchy, psychological subjectivity and material objects converge", thus bringing together "interests in bodily waste, cultural refuse, and figurative dirt, considering the power of culturally mandated categories to exclude and repress" (Cohen 2005: viii). In Kneale's novel, for instance, after the disappearance of his wife and the failure of his engineering projects, Jeavons is forced to live in the most squalid periphery of London's underworld, turning – in Mary Douglas's phrase – into a "matter out of place" (Douglas 1966, 44) like the social outcasts he befriends, who offer him shelter and help. Emblematically, the destitute engineer will discover the real source of cholera infection (like John Snow) and the real motivations behind his wife's sudden disappearance. His investigations inside (and his alliance with) London's "matter out of place" will finally save the city from the bacteria infection and save his wife from an ever more tragic destiny. This seemingly happy ending, however, implicates Joshua Jeavons further in 'filth' (this time related to crime), since he covers up his wife's murder of his incestuous father.

In contrast, in *The Great Stink*, the traumatised former Crimean veteran May, unjustly accused of having assassinated the brickmaker Alfred England – whose real murdered was Hawke, a seaman also known as "The Captain" – will be condemned to become "matter out of place" for those around him (save his lawyer Sydney Rose, who believes in his innocence).

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Decried as an individual dangerous to himself and others, May will be sent to an asylum, the place in which the ‘discarded’ subjects of civilisation and progress are contained and silenced. In some respects, May’s destiny is mirrored by Agnes Rackham’s vicissitudes in *The Crimson Petal and the White* (she is similarly destined to be sent to an asylum, although she is finally saved by Sugar). The Hounslow private asylum in which William is locked up “did not require patients to be formally certified as insane”, and “had long been favoured by decent families who wished to be saved awkwardness and embarrassment” (Clark 2006: 231). Only after a long investigation by his lawyer, and with the unexpected help of Tom the tosher, will May be able to demonstrate his innocence, saving his reputation so as to come back to his beloved wife and to his botany drawings. London thus appears an unredeemable place at the end of *The Great Stink*, to the point that William and his wife Polly will be forced to leave the city and Joseph Bazalgette’s gigantic sanitary plans behind in order to live a better life. The scandal and corruption,<sup>8</sup> which lead the real villain Hawke to kill Alfred England, will soon be forgotten. As the narrator ironically suggests, the reformist project of saving London from ‘the great stink’ will go on regardless:

Hawke had quickly been replaced and a team of first-rate men assigned to his successor. Despite the scandal, the Commission continued to have the vigorous support of Parliament and of the people of London. Their work would continue without delay. And without William. (Clark 2006: 351)

The epilogue to Clark’s novel suggests that ‘progress’ and ‘reform’ become self-perpetuating systems without any necessary morally improving import or end in sight. London basically needs its dirt to continually reinvent itself – even at the cost of ‘disposable’ lives.

At the beginning of *The Crimson Petal and the White*, Agnes Rackham is described as the embodiment of moral and bodily cleanliness, the ‘angel in the house’, in direct contrast to her binary opposite, the unclean fallen woman Sugar. Agnes is “a high-Victorian ideal [...] a paragon of porcelain femininity, five foot two with eyes of blue; her blond hair smooth and fine, her mouth like a tiny pink vulva, *pristine*” (Faber 2002: 130, added

emphasis). Rejecting the Victorian idealisation of (silenced) wives, however, Faber implies that it is exactly Agnes's adherence to the norms regulating upper class women's upbringing and marriage – religious observance, sexual ignorance, modesty, meekness, etc. – which lead to her hysteria and religious/spiritual hallucinations. Indeed, the attitudinal model represented by Agnes's self-sacrifice and self-oblivion was reputed by Victorian writers and educationalists as the perfect attribute of the women of England.

Agnes's mental disturbance represents another figuration of dirt as "matter out of place". It is therefore unsurprising that William's wife should establish a peculiar relationship with Sugar, mistaking her for a guardian angel sent by the imaginary "Convent of Health" of the Holy Sisters, a place of absolute peace, bliss and silence. Like other surveyed 'aliens' (prostitutes, suffragettes, racial subalterns), Agnes is subjected to a form of panoptical control by Dr Curlew, the epitome of Victorian "sexual science" (see Russett Eagle 1989). In visiting Agnes regularly, for instance, Dr. Curlew practices genital investigations, which were a common practice in the study and cure of female hysteria at that time.

"The pain," Doctor Curlew is saying just then, "lies entirely in the resistance."

He wipes his fingers with a white handkerchief, pockets it, bends down to try a second time. She makes him work hard, does Mrs Rackham, for his fee. (Faber 2002: 164)

In this excerpt, the wiping of Dr Curlew's fingers resonantly evokes his sense of something unclean, yet Agnes's uncleanliness paradoxically also becomes productive as the source of the doctor's work and hence of his income and wealth ("She makes him work hard [...] for his fee").

Agnes's story recalls the vicissitudes of many Victorian women who were educated only to be submissive wives and mothers. William Rackham's wife alternates between her desire to be accepted in social circles (submitting herself to rigid diets and wearing fashionable clothes) and her outbursts of 'madness' during social meetings. Whereas on the one hand she seems to accept a normative self-regulation – according to which, in Foucault's view, control and discipline are 'internalised' – on the other hand, she enacts an extreme form of rebellion against those limits. Agnes's

body (like Sugar's) is at the centre of Victorian gender norms and regulations as a physical, moral and even economic product that has to be used and transacted as either/both 'clean' and 'soiled' goods. For Foucault, "the political investment of the body is bound up [...] with its economic use: it is largely as a force of production that the body is invested with relations of power and domination"; consequently, the body "becomes a useful force only if it is both a *productive* body and a *subjected* body" (Foucault 1979: 26, added emphasis). In this view, Agnes's body is both 'productive' (she has given William a legitimate heir) and 'subjected' (she is almost incarcerated in her residence at Cheapstow Villas and destined to be locked up in an asylum, if Dr Curlew has his way). Once Agnes's 'purity' is definitively compromised by her mental health issues, she becomes discardable as a metaphorical unproductive 'dirt', which threatens her husband, her daughter, and all the social community around her with contagion.

Kneale, Clark and Faber include explicit or implicit references to a great series of documentary and literary sources that contribute to create a convincing cultural and historical background – one not simply aiming to evoke a sense of nostalgia (or worse, an aestheticised recreation of the nineteenth century), but to radically re-vise assumed notions of the Victorian age through a dramatised and politicised aesthetics of filth. This aesthetics situates the "matter out of place" at the center of each novel instead of relegating it to the margins and shadows of the text. Moreover, it depicts this sordid matter as the product of the middle and upper classes and their ideologies and desires, rather than the outcome of the actions of the 'unclean' lower classes and social outcasts. For instance, through the description of Sugar's past memories as a child sold into prostitution by her mother, Faber alludes to the terrible phenomenon of child prostitution, which was silenced or only slightly hinted at by nineteenth-century novelists and/or characters, including Dickens's Nancy in *Oliver Twist* (1839). Faber probably had in mind what happened in 1885 to the journalist William Stead. In order to investigate this squalid human market, Stead purchased Eliza Armstrong, the 13-year-old daughter of a chimney sweeper for £5, writing up his account of the transaction and his denunciation thereof as 'The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon' in the *Pall Mall Gazette*. Other critics have noticed the influence of Henry Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor* (1851; 1861) on *The Crimson Petal* and *The White*, *The*

*Great Stink* and *Sweet Thames*, the latter of which is even specifically dedicated to Mayhew. According to Louttit, “Faber’s narrator [...] resembles a slightly disgruntled tour guide”, whose aim is “to introduce the reader, in Mayhew-like fashion, not to the world of the poor but to the underworld country of the Victorian past” (Louttit 2006: 331). Nevertheless, Kneale’s, Clark’s and Faber’s depiction of London is arguably more in tune with a quasi postmodern realism, rather than a grotesque Dickensian approach to rendering the city’s murky alleys and its criminal underworld. In one sense, these novels evoke the style of Victorian novelists-cum-social-commentators such as George Gissing in *Workers in the Dawn* (1880) and *The Nether World* (1889).

Along with *Sweet Thames* and *The Great Stink*, *The Crimson Petal and the White* is a novel that creates a textual dialogue with the Victorian textual and empirical past on multiple levels. Faber uses various sources in order to give readers a comprehensive and ‘synesthetic’ experience of late-Victorian London through a great quantity of texts (novels, poems, periodicals, historical documents), material objects, paintings, photographs, and even smells and perfumes, in an attempt to offer a thorough ‘sensorial’ reading experience. For this reason, Silvana Colella asserts that *The Crimson Petal and the White* is “redolent of historical odours. From cheap, democratic perfumes [...] to the smell of excrement and bodily fluids, odours feature prominently in the postrealist agenda of Faber’s historical narrative (Colella 2010: 86). Faber’s deliberate attempt to reproduce and recreate almost plastically the world of his characters is exemplified in a particular scene that depicts a ‘dirty’ Agnes, who has fallen to the ground in a narrow and squalid alley not far from Bow Street. Agnes has just left the entrance-hall of the Royal Opera House after having verbally assaulted a “Mrs So-and-So” (Faber 2002: 393). The symbol of Victorian marital purity is depicted now as a soiled madwoman who trembles in front of Sugar, whom she assumes to be her guardian angel:

Mrs Rackham lies sprawled face-down and dead-still, in the muck and the grit. Her skirts glow in the dark like a mound of snow that has miraculously survived the coming of Spring [...].

Mrs Rackham twitches like a cat haunted with dreams, and her limbs flail feebly in the dirt [...].

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“Dear Heaven, I-I’m...*filthy!*” she shudders. “I’m covered in *f-filth!*” Her tiny hands flutter ineffectually over her bodice and fall into the lap of her soiled skirts. (Faber 2002: 394-395, un-bracketed ellipses in the original)

In this case, while Agnes might regard herself as ‘filthy’, the reader, like Sugar, is invited to view her with sympathy rather than abhorrence. Indeed, the comparison of her (soiled) skirts to a glowing mound of miraculously unspoiled snow emblematically encapsulates this contradiction.

Sugar’s and Agnes’s characterisations in *The Crimson Petal and the White* defy traditional categories, since both may be figured as an expression of dirt as “matter out of place”, in the sense that their nonconformist femininity is viewed as a pathological condition according to Victorian social views and culture. Moreover, Sugar’s and Agnes’s destiny shows that the borderlines separating ‘centralised’ domestic life (figured as an emblem of moral cleanliness) and ‘peripheral’ corruption and dirt could be easily transgressed and turned upside down. Sugar, for instance, is more maternal than Agnes – in particular as regards Sophie – whereas Agnes embodies the most extreme form of rebellion against social rules and conventions, despite her gentlewomanly physical appearance and marital status. Although Faber is not exempt from contradictions and ambiguities in describing the condition of late-Victorian women through a prevalently male gaze, as Nadine Muller has remarked (see Muller 2012), his novel provocatively associates two characters (the prostitute and the devoted, religious wife) that seem, on the surface, to be antithetical.

Finally, Agnes’s condition is reputed as unbearable and scandalous in “the eyes of the beholder” (to borrow Mary Douglas’s words), that is, by William and by the members of London’s high society. On the contrary, Faber’s readers are implicitly invited to view her as a complex pathological case that needed to be better understood and cured, rather than simply locked up into an asylum. Like Agnes, William May in *Sweet Thames* is repeatedly judged and blamed by the very people who (like William Rackham in *The Crimson Petal and the White*) are far from being examples of moral purity. In the course of a quarrel during which May confronts Hawke on the issue of brickmaking and on his responsibilities (like Agnes indirectly does with her husband, by refusing her role as perfect mother and wife), Hawke reacts by labeling William as “matter out of place”,

somebody who should be accordingly expelled: “You’re a deviant, May, a freak of nature. Do you hear me? You disgust me. You’d disgust any right-minded, God-fearing Christian” (Clark 2006: 115).

Agnes’s diary and notes, entitled “*The Illuminated Thoughts & Preternatural Reflections of Agnes Pigott*” (Faber 2002: 551), which Sugar reads in secret, include multiple references to the crimson colours alluded to in the Tennysonian title of Faber’s novel, in particular in the descriptions of blood. Agnes’s compositions are a mixture of treatises on spiritualism (so popular in the late-Victorian age) and religious manuals, filtered through the perception of an increasingly mentally unstable person. In reading Agnes’s diaries, Sugar is attracted to the fourth volume, which “dates from the early years of Agnes’s marriage to William”, and begins with a description of demonic harassment, “decorated in the margins with hieroglyphical eyes scrawled in clotted menstrual blood” (Faber 2002: 767). Another page of Agnes’s writings includes “a smear of dried blood in the shape of a crucifix [...], a thick matter, incorporating a stiff clot at the point of the crucifix where Christ’s head might be” (Faber 2002: 558). Agnes’s diary does not simply impress Sugar with its content, with pages and pages devoted to Agnes’s fight against the ‘demonic’ Dr Curlew and to her imaginary visits to the Convent of Health, but also with the way in which she writes it, paradoxically conflating spirituality with the ‘filth’ of “clotted menstrual blood”. What might be termed Agnes’s ‘body writing’ simultaneously highlights her desperate need to give voice to her confused feelings and conflicting emotions and acts as an implicit indictment of Victorian patriarchal culture. According to Kym Brindle, “Faber merges the diary text metaphorically with the female body to illustrate a metaphorically buried life recorded in literally buried diaries” (Brindle 2013: 18). In this respect Sugar, the social outcast and filthy prostitute, becomes the perfect reader of Agnes’s tormented confessions, since from her vantage point she understands that Agnes’s derangement “is aggravated by the social and medical authority that seeks to contain and control her” (Brindle 2013: 18). Blood, and menstrual blood in particular, is a recurring image in *The Illuminated Thoughts & Preternatural Reflections of Agnes Pigott*. It represents another figuration of dirt as “matter out of place” or, to use Julia Kristeva’s terminology, of the abject as “the demoniacal potential of the female” (Kristeva 1982: 65). Like dirt (especially faeces), menstrual blood is described by Kristeva as a polluting object that calls into question the

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patriarchal symbolic system of signification. For this very reason, any disturbance of order, constituting a threat to the system, has to be silenced or excised (as when, in Agnes's case, William decides to have her locked up in an asylum). In this way "the masculine, apparently victorious, confesses through its very relentlessness against the other, the feminine, that it is threatened by its asymmetrical, irrational, wily, uncontrollable power" (Kristeva 1982: 65, 71-2). Abject dirt thus becomes imbued with the power of resistance and subversion. Problematically, however, it continues to be linked primarily with *women's* bodies in Faber's novel, though not exclusively so (as evident from the earlier cited example of William Rackham's first encounter with Sugar).

Like other neo-Victorian texts, Kneale's, Clark's and Faber's aesthetics of filth does not simply offer a 'sensationalised' view of Victorian London – although Faber has sometimes been accused of offering a deliberately voyeuristic approach to uncensored sexuality. Rather, these novels create uncanny affinities between the way we live now and the way they lived then. In *The Great Stink*, the description of London's frantic and chaotic life on the streets is not altogether different from that of the twenty-first-century city:

The shop windows screamed in one thousand garish colours and the doors of the theatres stood open, their gold and scarlet mouths inhaling a swarming mass of people. The road was locked with vehicles. Cabs jostled for position. [...] Drivers bellowed to one another, a pandemonium of pleasantries and rebukes. (Clark 2006: 324)

Today, the concern with filth has largely moved from underground to above ground, focused not so much on sewers and water, but on litter and waste disposal, exhaust emissions, and industrial pollution, with corresponding recycling campaigns and 'Keep London Tidy' initiatives. Yet public discourses surrounding dirt and filth have not yet lost their moral subtexts or inimical associations with female bodies. Sex workers in particular are still treated as "matter out of place" to be controlled and expelled from certain neighbourhoods. Not least, London councils have resorted to using Anti-Social Behaviour Orders ('Asbos' for short) to ban prostitutes from soliciting or loitering, so that women formerly fined for these offences now

risk the possibility of up to five years' imprisonment (Aitkenhead 2002: n.p.). The on-going ideological battle around notions of 'dirt' and city reform is also evident in debates surrounding gentrification, as in Soho. In 2014, a group of prominent actors and artists wrote an open letter to Mayor Johnson asking him to help preserve the district's character after the forcible closure of Madama Jojo's, an established drag and cabaret club, following "a violent altercation" resulting in the club's license being revoked (Alexander 2014: n.p.).

*Sweet Thames*, *The Great Stink* and *The Crimson Petal and the White* dramatise the paradoxes and persisting resonances of different nineteenth-century notions of filth, so as to offer a revised perspective on the lives and experiences of those living on the margins of the sanitised and 'cleansed' London, then as now. In a way, the narrators of Kneale's, Clark's and Faber's novels turn into toshers and scavengers searching for valuable (textual) materials in the filth and refuse discarded by the Victorian canon:

The stench defied description, causing in me waves of nausea – even though I breathed through the cloth of my frock-coat – while drips of vileness constantly fell upon my clothes; my only clothes. What if the gases in the air should ignite in a fearful explosion, as they had in the Fleet Street sewer? (Kneale 2001: 211)

Like Jeavons in *Sweet Thames*, the more these neo-Victorian narrations delve deep into London's underground spaces (and those of nineteenth-century culture), the more they show that it is not just the past that is buried in the present, but that the opposite also holds true. By raising issues that are still relevant today, in particular related to the apparent discrepancy between the new social outcasts (as victims of neo-capitalist politics) and the wealthy minority that lives in London's gentrified spaces, *Sweet Thames*, *The Great Stink* and *The Crimson Petal and the White*, like other neo-Victorian fictions, foreground the paradoxical notion that the present too often remains mired and stuck in the past.

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**Notes**

1. John Snow was an English physician and one of the fathers of contemporary epidemiology. He discovered the source of cholera not in London's insalubrious air or in its 'miasma' (as was commonly supposed at the time) but in an infected water pump in Broad Street (now Broadwick Street) in Soho in 1854. Joseph Bazalgette was the chief engineer in the Metropolitan Board of Works in London, which was created to manage and solve the problem of sewage disposal. Although Bazalgette's building of an intersecting sewer network that avoided contaminations of the Thames river was not originally intended as a solution to the cholera outbreak (the first aim was to reduce the unbearable 'great stink' that plagued Londoners), it inevitably helped in limiting the epidemics.
2. Lynda Nead underlines the Victorians' association between prostitutes and 'dangerous' and contaminating filth. These women were indeed represented "as part of the refuse and dirt of the streets, the decomposing animal waste which produced atmospheric impurities and disease" (Nead 1988: 121).
3. Commenting upon the ambivalent relationship between upper and lower London in Kneale's *Sweet Thames* and Clark's *The Great Stink*, Rosario Arias asserts that "[by] paying attention to pollution and cleanliness both in a literal and figurative sense, these novels establish the interdependence of surface and underground, suburb and sewer, thus dissolving the spatial boundaries of the city of London, understood as a diseased body" (Arias 2010: 154).
4. It is important to remark that the relationship between a healthy mind and a healthy and a clean (social) body, which was fundamental in the Victorian 'épistémé', was extensively discussed – in implicit or explicit political tones – in the pages of *The Lancet* and in such publications as Thomas Laycock's *Mind and Brain* (1860), Henry Maudsley's *Body and Mind* (1871) and *Body and Will* (1880), and J. Milner Fothergill's *The Maintenance of Health: A Medical Work for Lay Readers* (1874). In the latter, for instance, the author writes that uncleanliness "of mind and body act and react, and perfect health of one is incompatible with an unhealthy state of the other" (Fothergill 1874: 25-26).
5. Pamela Gilbert connects the management of the social body with questions of citizenship and with the Condition of England, underlining that "[the] development of this discourse identified the healthy body and healthy desires as the basis of political firmness" (Gilbert 2007: 3).
6. Agnes Rackham's case in *The Crimson Petal and the White* is, in this respect, emblematic, since she is simply considered as the means through which Rackham can have a legitimate heir, and she is introduced and 'displayed'

on public occasions as a doll-like and obedient wife. However, Agnes's outbursts and hysteria will put all of these assumptions in question.

7. John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) features another peculiar encounter between a prostitute and Charles Smithson, which concludes with the male protagonist "vomit[ing] into the pillow beside her shocked, flungback head" (Fowles 1987: 273-274), after having discovered that the prostitute's first name is the same as her 'forbidden' love, Sarah Woodruff. I would like to thank one of the anonymous *NVS* reviewers for having suggested this analogy.
8. Like *Sweet Thames* and *The Crimson Petal and the White*, also Clark's novel is based upon recognisable historical sources and events. As Lee Jackson remarks, "[the] construction of Bazalgette's intercepting sewers, and associated works, was not entirely without incident, plagued by problems with contractors, from bankruptcies to allegations of corruption" (Jackson 2014: 98).

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