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Acknowledgments

Working on a project about sewage over many years has been gratifying in some expected and unexpected ways. I have shared obscure sources and puzzled over nineteenth-century sanitary practices with colleagues, and I have had lively conversations about toilets and plumbing with near-total strangers. I made the requisite pilgrimage to the Paris Sewers Museum, and I received a private tour of the architecturally magnificent Abbey Mills sewage-pumping station in London. More important, I am fortunate to have been inspired and encouraged by many teachers, colleagues, family members, and friends.

Karen Chase and Michael Levenson filled many of these roles as codirectors of this project during its life as a dissertation at the University of Virginia. Their guidance and support were invaluable; likewise, their influence on not just this book but also my thinking about literature, history, and culture has been incalculable. Friends at Virginia vital to my success and my sanity include the remarkable women of the “diss group”—Amanda French, June Griffin, Elizabeth Outka, Lisa Spiro, and Virginia Zimmerman; Dickens seminar participants John Picker and Danny Siegel; and long-time supporters Raphael Shargel and Melissa Stickney. June, especially, talked me through more of this project than either of us probably cares to remember, and Virginia has remained my most trusted critic. Herbert Tucker and Cynthia Wall also read and offered their insights on my work at various junctures.

London, of course, has played a central role in the research and writing of this book. To Michael Levenson and Steve Cushman I owe the opportunity to spend two wonderful summers working with the Culture of London study-abroad program. I have fond memories of walking the city various summers with Margaret Croskery, Sonja Czarnecki, and Rosemary Gould. Ben Nithsdale of Thames Water very generously devoted a day of his work week to showing me the city’s drains, at Beckton sewage works and at the aforementioned Abbey Mills. In London, I also first met David Pike, whose expertise in underground spaces continues to amaze, and Joe McLaughlin, who in his roles as reader and advisor more than anyone helped me make the leap from dissertation
to book. Institutional support from the University of Virginia, the Locating the Victorians conference, and Lafayette College also made research in London possible.

More recently, the English Department at the U.S. Naval Academy has provided a more congenial and stimulating academic home than I could have ever imagined. Colleagues John Beckman, Allyson Booth, Anne Marie Drew, Fred Fetrow, Bob Madison, Charlie Nolan, Mike Parker, and Christy Stanlake have in their different ways helped keep me afloat. Mark McWilliams and Jason Shaffer (resident Shaw enthusiast) read parts of the manuscript and provided substantive criticism and advice. Ken Sabel helped with digital imaging. The Naval Academy Research Council provided summer funding, which enabled me to bring this project to fruition.

Many more people and institutions have helped make this book a reality. I am grateful to the staff of Alderman Library at the University of Virginia, Nimitz Library at the U.S. Naval Academy (particularly Flo Todd of Interlibrary Loan), the Library of Congress, the British Library, and London Metropolitan Archives. David Sanders at Ohio University Press has been enthusiastic about this project from the start, moving the book through the publication process with grace and efficiency. John Morris as editor and Sally Bennett as copyeditor both provided valuable assistance. I also appreciate the generous comments of the two anonymous readers of the manuscript for the Press; I hope I was able to do justice to their insights and suggestions through my revision. An earlier version of chapter 1 appeared as "From Cesspool to Sewer: Sanitary Reform and the Rhetoric of Resistance" in Victorian Literature and Culture 30, no. 2 (2002) and is reprinted with permission of the editors and publishers. I am also indebted to the organizers of and participants in a number of conferences where I was able to present my work, particularly the Middle Atlantic Conference on British Studies, Monuments and Dust, the Nineteenth-Century Studies Association, and the North American Victorian Studies Association.

Finally, I extend my warmest thanks to the Allen and Emerson families, especially Mary and Fred Allen for their love and generosity, Lottie Allen-Emerson for forcing me to stick to my deadlines, and Rob Emerson for his patience, good humor, and unwavering belief in me and my work.
Cleansing the City
The rapid development of London in the nineteenth century brought new challenges not only to the health but also to the social order and cultural identity of the metropolis. Epidemic diseases, such as cholera and typhus, swept through the city. An unprecedented volume of waste matter overflowed from cesspools, rotted in out-of-the-way streets, and flooded the River Thames. Growing numbers of poor residents, who found their house space contracting as the city modernized, took refuge in filthy, overcrowded tenements. And the economic and social divide separating respectable citizens from the debased lower classes grew ever wider. Emerging from these material and social conditions was the movement for sanitary reform. Under this banner, individuals and associations from fields as diverse as medicine, journalism, and engineering campaigned in various ways to improve the health and welfare of the city. They planned sewers and other public works, explored and wrote about the darkest corners of the metropolis, advocated for public
health legislation, and generally spread the gospel of sanitation: that cleanliness equals health, while dirt and disease equal death. The message was well received by educated members of the public, who became familiar with sanitary ideas not only through official reports but also through popular periodicals and novels. Part of the explanation for the appeal lies in the sensational nature of much sanitary literature, which offered a titillating glance at sordid places and immoral acts. But sanitary reform also spoke to generations of Victorians because of the confidence of its adherents and the scope of their claims. As the Reverend Charles Girdlestone wrote in 1853, "Health...is not the only gain which sanitary reformers aim at." Health was really the most humble claim of sanitary reformers; 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. Utopian visions aside, the achievements of sanitary reformers over the course of the century were substantial and significant. As a result of improvements in water supply and waste disposal, as well as in personal hygiene and nutrition, the death rate in England declined from 20.5 per thousand in 1861 to 16.9 in 1901. And by most accounts, London was a cleaner and healthier place to live at the end of the century than at the beginning.

What we have yet to recognize, however, is that sanitary reform generated a surprising resistance. The challenge of purification aroused an anxiety perhaps less widespread but certainly no less real than that aroused by filth. Sanitary measures, such as slum clearances, sewer construction, and road improvements, were necessarily disruptive of the routines and sensibilities of urban inhabitants. As we shall see, the disruption associated with purification was far-reaching because in altering the physical space of the city, it altered its social and symbolic meanings, too. This book focuses on sites of filth and sites of purity, both as they were imagined and as they were experienced. In doing so, it highlights some of the difficulties, discomforts, and fears associated not simply with pollution but also with purification—a process we are inclined to see as generally positive. It is concerned less with the aims and accomplishments of sanitary reformers than with the range of responses to and perceptions of what was essentially a new urban phenomenon—the concerted cultivation of cleanliness. How did urban inhabitants understand the reconstruction of the built environment occasioned by sanitary measures? What
kinds of imaginative responses were excited by these alterations, which affected both private and public landscapes? What do these often-ambivalent responses reveal about the everyday experience of modernization?

We can enter into these questions by way of a series of four articles titled "Some London Clearings," published in 1884–85 in All the Year Round, the weekly magazine begun by Charles Dickens and carried on after his death by his son. In the articles, the narrator acts as a guide, leading his readers through the twists and turns of labyrinthine London in search of relics from the city's past. In one piece he tracks down Milton's burial place, in another the medieval St. John's Gate in Clerkenwell, and in a third the former site of the French Protestant church in Soho. As he wanders, the narrator provides a running commentary on the people and events associated with certain places, many of which have disappeared or will soon disappear from the urban scene. Of course, as the title indicates, the occasion for reminiscence is "some London clearings," that is, the destruction of the old urban fabric to make way for wide thoroughfares, railway lines and stations, warehouses, and the like. Clearances of this sort had convulsed central London since the 1840s and were closely associated with sanitary reform because they destroyed and thus "purified" some of the most densely built, most densely populated, and dirtiest areas of the city. In the context of the series in All the Year Round, clearance schemes obviously threaten the historic landscape the narrator seeks to explore. Yet, paradoxically, they also serve as the impetus for urban exploration.

This dynamic plays out clearly in the third article from the series, focused on Eastcheap. The narrator chooses to explore the area for the very reason that it has recently undergone reconstruction. In the early 1880s, the Metropolitan and District Railway companies extended the line of the Underground eastward toward Tower Hill and, in the process, widened and improved some of the affected streets, including Eastcheap itself. The article begins, appropriately enough, with a journey on the new section of the Underground, "at this moment a new and startling experience" ("Eastcheap," 103). As the narrator leads his readers out of the station, he emphasizes the utter unfamiliarity of a scene once quite familiar:

And now everything is changed. For if you will trust yourself implicitly to some friendly guide . . . when you come out into the
Cleansing the City

open air . . . it is quite probable that you will fail to guess rightly where you are. For apart from the novelty of thus coming up to day-light in the very inner recesses of the City, there is a certain strange-ness and unfamiliarity about the scene. Here is a meeting-place of great thoroughfares, with a whirl of traffic from the various converging streams; but there is a feeling of space and roominess which is quite a new sensation in this part of the City. ("Eastcheap," 103)

The narrator takes pleasure in the novelty of open space and wide thoroughfares in such a busy, congested part of the city; however, he passes quickly from celebration of the new to nostalgic remembrance of the old, specifically, "the Eastcheap of Shakespeare’s times" ("Eastcheap," 104). There follows an extended reverie on the Old Boar’s Head tavern and the fictional characters — Bardolph, Nym, Pistol, Falstaff—who haunted it, although nothing of the structure remains. Similarly, entering Seething Lane, the narrator recollects that Samuel Pepys lived in the area, although literally there is "nothing very much to remind us of the days of Pepys at the end of this lane" ("Eastcheap," 107). He finds one link to the past in the shape of a solid red-brick house that Pepys "may have seen," but this link seems precarious not only because Pepys may (or may not) have seen it but also because the house sits in the midst of a ruin, the lone survivor among similar houses only recently destroyed. Ruin lends itself to reverie and to mildly expressed regret: "[N]ow no more shall domestic fires burn in those snug fireplaces . . . for here is an end of it all in a heap of old bricks and some ragged rafters" ("Eastcheap," 108). This is the shape of the new sanitary city: "space and roominess" on one side, "a heap of old bricks and some ragged rafters" on the other. The sanitary city is in a state of flux with destructive and constructive forces working in an uneven rhythm to yield a landscape never wholly new, yet never entirely old.

Since he focuses so much attention on old London, we might reasonably expect the narrator to lament its rampant destruction, and at moments he does. In the article on Clerkenwell, he marvels over the changes effected by the construction of Clerkenwell Road and regrets the disfigurement of St. John’s Square and some of the smaller streets leading into the square: "At the present date it is difficult to make out the ancient precincts of the priory, for the Clerkenwell Road has been driven right through the old streets and courts which might have given a clue to the former plan; and St. John’s Gate seems
to lead from nowhere to chaos." Of the adjacent Red Lion Street, he remarks, "[I]t is rather disappointing to find that the early numbers are missing, have vanished, indeed, into the open clearing, for we had hoped to find Number One still existing, the old Jerusalem tavern" ("Clerkenwell," 123). But as in the article on Eastcheap, the absence of the Jerusalem tavern does not hinder—and may even aid—the author's imaginative rendering of eighteenth-century street life: the recollection of those who once lived in the now-dismantled Red Lion Street seems to afford the writer ample pleasure and ample subject matter.

Across the series, the narrator acknowledges certain negative consequences of urban improvement, including the impact of clearances not only on historic places but also on the urban poor; for those parts of town targeted for destruction by both government bodies and private companies were invariably inhabited by the city's poorest classes. Cutting lines of communication through the slums made good financial sense (because the property was less valuable than most in central London) and good sanitary sense (because the known harbors of filth and disease would be eradicated). At the same time, these clearances displaced thousands of working-class inhabitants, who already had limited housing options. As we shall see, the recognition of the harrowing impact of reform on the working classes had become almost a cliché in journalism of the 1880s. In the articles for All the Year Round, the narrator in typical fashion raises the curtain on the often-uncalculated human cost of improvement, noting the forced migration of the urban poor, first, in the context of the Metropolitan and District Railways' expansion in the City, and in a later piece, in the context of the imminent creation of Shaftesbury Road in Soho. Standing near the City boundary, he explains in the first piece that Cripplegate has become "a very Lazarus gate, out of which the privileged City has turned its poor. Clerkenwell, St. Luke's . . . Hoxton, and Shoreditch, with Bethnal Green, form a solid mass of closely packed houses, amongst which the only people who really flourish are the publicans." And in the latter piece on Soho, he notes the sudden exposure of an ordinarily hidden way of life, as clearances penetrate the closely built spaces: "The old street, half of which has been lopped away, has a curious blinking, half-awakened aspect . . . full daylight streaming in where once was convenient gloom and obscurity. Many of the inhabitants are packing up their goods and chattels—the bundles of old rags

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and old rubbish out of which by some mysterious alchemy they have hitherto contrived to make a living." If only briefly, the narrator reminds us of the human beings who live amidst—and are swept aside with—the old rubbish.

I am not suggesting that the narrator makes a humanitarian argument against slum clearances, but I do think these observations reflect an understanding of the complexity of urban change. If, in any case, he were to make a case against clearances, it would most likely be on aesthetic grounds. He expresses regret over the disappearance of the "dingy old streets" of Soho, as with the old streets of Clerkenwell and Eastcheap, and he laments that "the effacing fingers of the Board of Works are passing over the ancient landmarks" ("Soho," 109). Nevertheless, regret should not be confused with opposition to "the effacing fingers" of progress. Indeed, the narrator admits that as much as he loves the picturesque flavor of Soho, still, "little may be worth preserving" ("Soho," 109). Nowhere in the series does he explicitly advocate preservation or call for a halt to progress. Furthermore, as we have seen, he is as ready to admire the fruits of improvement as he is to lament the lost past. It is with a flush of civic pride that the narrator looks out on the new thoroughfare of Eastcheap: "[A] fine, broad, open way," he calls it, "which now leads as a grand central avenue to the Tower" ("Eastcheap," 104). In addition to affording an impressive view of the Tower of London, the local clearings have opened up a view of the Monument to the Great Fire; the monument is "no longer lost among dingy courts and lanes, but looking as if it meant to take its share of what is going on the world, after its long retirement" ("Eastcheap," 104–5; emphasis added). The "dingy old streets" that are appealing in one context are in another merely obstructive; in an interesting twist, clearances made in the name of progress—the railway—also carve a path into the past, in the form of a monument to a defining event in London's history. For one urban observer, improvements entail a loss, but they also provide challenges that are not entirely unwelcome: the challenge to reconstruct an imagined past from small clues remaining in the present and the challenge simply to find one's way in a city defined by change. The narrator concludes the final installment of the series by accepting the inevitability of change but takes a tone that is unmistakably elegiac: "And so the work goes on, and when we come again the once familiar corner is a thing of the past" ("Soho," 312).

This ambivalent, multifaceted response to urban improvement takes us to the heart of this project. For in the pages that follow, I pay particular attention

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to responses that afford an alternative perspective on the reform question: that is, responses that challenge the widely held belief in the unquestioned efficacy and desirability of sanitary reforms. These responses generally reflect a middle-class perspective; the middle-class bias of the source material consulted for this study prevents us from hearing the unmediated voices of the working classes, even when the fate of the dispossessed is the explicit topic of inquiry. Yet within this limited middle-class register, the responses to reform are surprisingly diverse. They may, for instance, express nostalgic attachment to an urban landscape threatened by progress (as in the case of the pieces from *All the Year Round*); they may express anxiety about the effects that sanitary appliances and techniques have on middle-class family life; or they may express disillusionment with the efficacy of reform in improving the working classes. I do not mean to suggest that responses of this sort are ideologically neutral; on the contrary, expressions of both resistance and support for sanitary reform reveal a range of assumptions about poverty and social class, about the integrity of the individual and of domestic life, and about urban and national identity. One reason for examining the varied responses to sanitary developments is that they tell us a great deal about these assumptions. Still, it is important to recognize the highly imaginative, often idiosyncratic, character of much of the writing on sanitary topics: it cannot be reduced to a single ideological interpretation. It can, however, give us insight into the fears, frustrations, and delights excited by the daily experience of a city in the throes of modernization.

**The Danger of Dirt**

Exactly why conversations about dirt reflect so many concerns central to the experience of modernity has everything to do with the changed significance of filth and purity in the nineteenth century. In the literature of London life, images of filth are certainly not exclusive to the Victorian period. We need only recall Jonathan Swift’s indulgent evocation of waste imagery in “A Description of a City Shower” (1710) for confirmation: “Sweepings from butchers’ stalls, dung, guts and blood, / Drowned puppies, stinking sprats, all drenched in mud, / Dead cats, and turnip tops, come tumbling down the flood.” The resonant triplet concludes an ambitious catalogue of the animate and inanimate
refuse that competes for space in the London streets. Representations of foul water and filthy streets abound in eighteenth-century literature, from Swift’s “City Shower” to Defoe’s *Tour Thro’ the Whole Island of Great Britain* (1724–26) to Smollett’s *Humphry Clinker* (1771). But in the nineteenth century, the literary engagement with filth became more urgent, as filth itself took on more challenging material and social meanings.

Consider, for instance, the following passage from Charles Dickens’s *Dombey and Son* (1848):

> Those who study the physical sciences, and bring them to bear upon the health of Man, tell us that if the noxious particles that rise from vitiated air were palpable to the sight, we should see them lowering in a dense black cloud above such haunts, and rolling slowly on to corrupt the better portions of a town. But if the moral pestilence that rises with them, and in the eternal laws of outraged Nature, is inseparable from them, could be made discernible too, how terrible the revelation! Then should we see depravity, impiety, drunkenness, theft, murder, and a long train of nameless sins against the natural affections and repulsions of man-kind, overhanging the devoted spots, and creeping on, to blight the innocent and spread contagion among the pure.9

The description of the progress of pollution and disease is fully informed by contemporary medical and scientific discourse: according to the miasmic theory of disease, people contracted infectious diseases by breathing the fumes generated by decomposing wastes. “Vitiated air,” invisible and diffuse, constituted one of the gravest dangers of urban life. In the passage, however, Dickens uses miasmic theory to its full metaphoric potential, imagining fetid matter and foul air not only as sources of disease but also as sources of the moral and social disorder of the city. In fact, Dickens suggests that “moral pestilence” is “inseparable” from physical corruption and that filth may, after all, be just another name for “depravity, impiety, drunkenness, theft, murder.” But the real horror of the passage lies in the idea of social transgression, of the unstoppable communication of a pestilence—moral or otherwise—from the poor to the rich. Miasmas are almost always imagined to travel from low “haunts” to “the better portions of a town.” From Dickens’s striking representation of urban
Introduction

pollution, we may infer a provisional generalization about the meanings of filth for the educated members of the middle class in mid-Victorian cities: the problem of filth was at once a physical danger (defined as such by an emergent scientific authority), a demoralizing influence, and a social threat; moreover, it was inextricably tied to perceptions and anxieties about the urban poor, who were themselves insufficiently contained.

We can link the newly acquired meanings of filth in the period to the urban environment itself and, more broadly, to the processes of modernization. By the middle of the nineteenth century, Britain had become essentially urban in character, as more people lived in towns than in the country for the first time in its history. London was at the center of this demographic shift and registered its impact at every level of experience. Its population grew from about a million in 1800 to over seven million in 1911. This growth paralleled other social and material changes that were astonishing to many Victorian observers. The city's geographic limits expanded in every direction as speculative builders aggressively developed the surrounding countryside. Ever more invasive railway lines above- and belowground increased Londoners' mobility and made possible the suburban expansion, but they also cut through neighborhoods and destroyed vast amounts of working-class housing. Along with the construction of new streets and docks, warehouses and office blocks, the railway contributed to the overcrowded and degraded living conditions of the poor, who despite demolitions and evictions generally remained within the central districts to be near their work. The social and economic gulf separating the respectable classes from the laboring classes thus found an analogue in increasing spatial segregation.

The rapid and uncontrolled development of London was not without its costs, placing as it did new pressures on urban space and resources. Certainly one of the more offensive costs was the high concentration of filth in the city: human, animal, and industrial wastes of an unprecedented volume flooded the Thames, collected in streets, overfilled cesspools and privies, and impressed themselves on urban consciousness. Historian Anthony Wohl succinctly articulates the urban equation: "[T]he accumulation of excrement . . . was the unavoidable by-product of urban growth." How to dispose of the accumulated waste was a problem that preoccupied the minds of countless reformers, engineers, scientists, and amateur sanitarians, but the problem acquired a
particular urgency because the retention of waste in the city was associated with disease and even death. Henry Morley, a regular contributor to Dickens's journals Household Words and All the Year Round, spoke for his generation when he remarked in 1858, "[W]e have discovered the great danger of dirt."16 This critical connection derived from the miasmic, or "pythogenic," theory of disease, which held sway in public health circles into the 1880s.17 Adherents of this theory pitted themselves against "contagionists," who maintained that epidemic diseases were spread by person-to-person contact; the "anticontagionists," in contrast, maintained that disease was transmitted by contact with a corrupt environment, specifically, with the poisoned air generated by decomposing matter.18 The exact nature of these airborne poisons was unknown and, moreover, of little interest to sanitary reformers, who focused their energies less on medical theory than on practical efforts to reduce the spread of disease.19 The campaign against dirt and, more specifically, against decomposition was thus based on an incorrect (or at least, incomplete) theory, but experience nevertheless seemed to bear the theory out. Major epidemic diseases, notably cholera, typhus, and typhoid, were on the rise in Victorian England, and these diseases did indeed flourish in filthy environments.20

Cholera was especially influential in determining the meaning of filth in the nineteenth century. Reaching England for the first time in 1831, it appeared again in 1848–49, 1853–54, and 1866–67.21 Part of the reason the disease caused such alarm was that it spread quickly and unpredictably through the population. Its victims were also struck down suddenly and very often with fatal results: during the first outbreak, over five thousand people in London and around thirty-two thousand across England died.22 As the German researcher Robert Koch discovered in 1884, the source of the disease is the cholera bacillus, which can be transmitted through contaminated water or excrement.23 Earlier in the century, however, its etiology was still very much debated. In 1854, the physician John Snow famously traced the outbreak of the disease in Soho to a water pump providing contaminated supplies.24 But this discovery did not prove conclusive for most in the sanitary and medical communities, and more general miasmic explanations continued to prevail. Wohl's finding that over seven hundred studies of cholera were published between 1845 and 1856 illustrates both the intensity of debate about the nature and origins of the disease, and the anxiety surrounding its appearance.25 In his discussion of cholera,
Bill Luckin makes the point that this kind of attention helped consolidate public opinion about the danger of dirt: “[T]he Victorian obsession with the infection and its causation was central to the full emergence of pollution as a major social problem.”

Fully connected with the challenge of excremental accumulation was another distressing “by-product of urban growth”: large concentrations of poverty. London may have been the wealthiest city in the world, but as the physician and sanitary reformer Hector Gavin insisted in 1848, “[A] mass of misery . . . fester[ed] beneath the affluence of London.” While many middle-class residents had the luxury of open space in the suburbs, the poorest of the working classes found themselves ever more crowded in the increasingly less residential central parts of the city. The living conditions of these inhabitants were notoriously wretched. Throughout the century, parish officers, doctors, reformers, and journalists obsessively described and redescribed the scene of urban poverty. Bare, dark, and filthy rooms with decaying walls and broken windowpanes; interiors crowded with ragged and ill-nourished human beings; putrid waste matter, fetid cesspools, and piles of reeking garbage in the courts and alleys—all figure prominently in these accounts. Not surprisingly, conditions of this sort were attended by a high incidence of disease and mortality, reinforcing stereotypical perceptions of the poor as both dirty and—in an age when dirt meant disease—dangerous. In Town Swamps and Social Bridges (1859), George Godwin, the committed social reformer and longtime editor of the architectural journal the Builder, traces the links in the chain connecting poverty, filth, and disease: “[W]here human beings are crowded together in ill-arranged dwellings; where the drainage is bad and the cesspool lurks; where refuse rots, the air is vitiated, or the water impure and scanty,—there cholera and fever . . . reign and slay.” The grammatical alignment of “human beings” with “drainage,” “cesspool,” and “refuse” is worth noting here, not only because correlations of this sort were frequent in writing about the urban condition but also because they indicate the difficulty of isolating the perceived dangers of urban life. Which was more troubling, cesspools or human degradation? Pollution itself or what it represented?

Sanitary reform emerged within this context as both an outgrowth of urbanization and a constituent part of it. The cholera epidemic was critical in the move to institutionalize sanitary reform in the 1830s and 1840s, and the earliest
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efforts of reformers were directed toward the challenge of preventing the disease. In Roy Porter's phrase, "Cholera concentrated the mind." At the heart of the sanitary movement was the conviction that such diseases were indeed preventable and that their prevention lay in the rational organization of the environment. The titles of two early documents of the movement—both published in 1838—indicate the philosophy quite clearly, if not succinctly: the physicians Neil Arnott and James Kay (later Kay-Shuttleworth) produced the "Report on the Prevalence of Certain Physical Causes of Fever in the Metropolis, which Might Be Removed by Proper Sanatory Measures," and Dr. Thomas Southwood Smith contributed the "Report on Some of the Physical Causes of Sickness and Mortality to Which the Poor Are Particularly Exposed; and Which Are Capable of Removal by Sanatory Regulations." The reports were initiated by Edwin Chadwick in his capacity as secretary to the Poor Law Commission, and according to Francis Sheppard, they "provided the blue-prints for the mid-nineteenth-century sanitary movement." For Chadwick, the most visible figure of the sanitary movement in its formative years, the environmentalist principle and, more specifically, the miasmic theory of disease helped shape a systematic approach to waste disposal in the metropolis. With the threat of cholera again imminent at the end of 1847, the Royal Commission on the Health of the Metropolis, headed by Chadwick, asserted that the best recourse against the spread of the disease was "sanitary arrangements . . . such as will secure the purity of the atmosphere, particularly by the immediate and complete removal of all filth and refuse." Removing waste from the city as quickly as it was produced and before the dreaded decomposition was allowed to begin was the imperative around which Chadwick's sanitary program was organized; the pipe sewer would be his central tool. Chadwick's technical approach to waste removal was in fact comprehensive. "Its central conception," according to his biographer S. E. Finer, "was that of an articulated service where water supply, house drainage, street drainage, and the main sewerage and the cleansing of streets should form a circle in which the motive power and mode of cleansing depended upon Hydraulic Power." We see in Chadwick's commitment to an integrated system of sewerage and to the removal of wastes by water the prototype of modern sanitation.

As technologically and administratively oriented as sanitary reform was, it was still a highly moralistic discourse with one eye trained steadily on the
urban poor. Indeed, the problem of poverty was central to Chadwick’s sanitary program, originating as it did in his work for the Poor Law Commission. According to Chadwick’s reasoning, since disease was a burden on the poor rates and a threat to productive labor, prevention of disease made good economic sense.33 The inquiries into prevention directed by Chadwick and undertaken by Arnott, Kay, and Southwood Smith focused on the most impoverished neighborhoods in London’s East End. The theory and practice of sanitary science were thus fully shaped by prevailing social assumptions about the poor. As Gerry Kearns has argued, “[T]he environmental approach did not completely displace other conceptions of disease in scientific or popular works. Disease, filth, and contagion retained moral and class-based connotations.”34 We see, for instance, in the thought of Southwood Smith a full investment in the moral dimension of public health reform—an investment that is not surprising given his dual roles as physician and Unitarian minister. It is worth reproducing here a relevant portion from his testimony before the Royal Commission on the State of Large Towns and Populous Districts (1844):

A clean, fresh, and well-ordered house exercises over its inmates a moral, no less than a physical, influence, and has a direct tendency to make the members of the family sober, peaceable, and considerate of the feelings and happiness of each other; nor is it difficult to trace a connection between habitual feelings of this sort and the formation of habits of respect for property, for the laws in general, and even for those higher duties and obligations, the observance of which no laws can enforce: whereas, a filthy, squalid, unwholesome dwelling, in which none of the decencies common to society, even in the lowest stage of civilization, are or can be observed, tends directly to make every dweller in such a hovel regardless of the feelings and happiness of each other, selfish and sensual; and the connection is obvious between the constant indulgence of appetites and passions of this class, and the formation of habits of idleness, dishonesty, debauchery, and violence; in a word, the training to every kind and degree of brutality and ruffianism.33

In the passage, Southwood Smith forges a causal link between the environment and morality: while a clean house “has a direct tendency” to produce
righteous minds, a filthy house “tends directly” to turn people into brutes. But the environmental argument is overshadowed by the litany of stereotypical descriptors applied to the urban poor: sensual, idle, improvident, dishonest, animalistic. The (bad) habits of the poor eclipse the unsanitary conditions that are Southwood Smith’s ostensible subject. The result is a near collapse of causality, and instead we get something closer to identification: filth, disease, poverty, and immorality are so closely bound that each term could easily serve as a metonym for all the others. Southwood Smith races from filth to brutality in the span of a single sentence, obscuring along the way the distinction between physical and moral disease and suggesting the expanded purview of the urban physician.

The passage articulates more directly some of the possibilities that Dickens suggests in *Dombey and Son*. Together the two passages reveal the heightened symbolism of filth in the period and, more specifically, the way filth embodied the challenges of the urban condition. Indeed, sanitary discourse became an important vehicle for expressing concerns about the disorder associated with the Victorian city. As we have seen, urban disorder took many shapes, ranging from disease to immoral behavior to social subversion. All these problems were imaginatively traced to the massing together of a degraded population—the “great unwashed”—in an insalubrious environment. The city thus served as a breeding ground for dangerous people and activities, such as crime, alcoholism, prostitution, and political radicalism; moreover, because the city encouraged mobility, these dangers could not be easily isolated. To use a metaphor drawn from miasmic theory, quarantine was an ineffective stay against the pervasive epidemic atmosphere of the town. The anxiety excited by filth owed much to its association with the dangers of urban life. At the same time, this association must have served a useful imaginative function, since filth—unlike less tangible urban threats—could be collected and removed. Filth could be flushed.

Following anthropologist Mary Douglas’s important work on the symbolic function of pollution behaviors, we can recognize the dialectical relationship between filth and purity. As Douglas argues, dirt is “matter out of place” and, thus, part of a larger symbolic system of the “ordering and classification of matter.”36 David Trotter similarly associates waste with system (although in his study of nineteenth-century art and fiction, *Cooking with Mud*, he imagines an
For Trotter, waste is always symptomatic, signifying a failure of the system that produced it: “It testifies, in its very dereliction, to the power which cast it down and out.” This understanding of filth and purity as system—what William Cohen identifies as a “structural argument”—underpins my discussion of sanitary reform in the chapters that follow. Applying this approach to the Victorian context helps us understand how the specific and, at the same time, capacious definition of filth in the period gave rise to an equally specific and capacious definition of purity. Victorian filth, we might say, created sanitary reform; that is, the particular way in which the Victorians imagined filth lent itself to a way of imagining purity that took shape as sanitary reform.

Victorian filth signified urban disease in its widest sense—a failure of the urban system. In providing the cure, sanitation had to address itself equally to the urban system, to the entire spectrum of material and social disorders associated with the Victorian city. Sanitary measures, such as ridding the city of decomposing matter, eliminated filth figured as disease, but these same measures, by providing a “clean, fresh, and well-ordered” living environment, were imagined to eliminate filth figured as the improvident slum dweller. Sanitary reform was thus uniquely suited both to conditions on the ground and to the metaphoric meanings that had accrued to filth in the nineteenth century.

This idea of sanitary reform as a comprehensive solution to the multiply constituted problem of filth finds its fullest expression in the writings of Charles Kingsley, novelist, social reformer, and Anglican priest. Like Chadwick waging a war against accumulated waste, Kingsley conducted a lifelong campaign to redeem the social and spiritual condition of the poor by improving their physical condition. For Kingsley, the deplorable state of modern urban life—characterized by a demoralized working class increasingly alienated from a prosperous ruling class—was directly traceable to its sanitary condition. In the lecture “Great Cities and Their Influence for Good and Evil” (1857), Kingsley emphasizes this interdependence: “[T]he social state of a city depends directly on its moral state, and . . . on the physical state of that city; on the food, water, air, and lodging of its inhabitants.” What lends additional force to this otherwise-familiar argument is the context in which Kingsley expresses it: he draws this sanitary “lesson” from his boyhood experience of the Bristol Riots in 1831. The rather amazing implication is that clean air would have
Cleansing the City prevented such an uprising in Bristol, as it would in all such cities where the degraded population has "nothing to lose and all to gain by anarchy."40 The proposition accords to sanitary reform tremendous social power.

But if reform was able to promote the political and social health of the community, it was no less capable of fostering its spiritual health. As a clergyman, Kingsley made it his mission to foreground what had been traditionally repudiated by the church: the material conditions of life and the physical condition of individual bodies.41 In the introduction to his collection of sermons, Who Causes Pestilence? (1854), Kingsley maintains that it is a "sacred duty" to minister to the people's physical needs and "to go forth on a crusade against filth."42 Only by attending to the needs of the body can the needs of the mind and the soul be met. Yet sanitary reform was not merely an act of duty to one's fellow men and women; it was an act of righteousness demanded by God. Kingsley was not alone in this providential interpretation of reform. In fact, as Graeme Davison and Christopher Hamlin have shown, the sanitary movement was grounded in a natural theology that had been reframed in the early nineteenth century to address urban life.43 According to this view, the city, like nature, was a carefully contrived system, reflecting the providential order of the universe. Outbreaks of disease, the prevalence of slums, river pollution, and such were merely anomalies that could—and must—be rectified to restore the divine order (and divine favor). In "Charles Kingsley: The Rector in the City," Marc Reboul describes Kingsley's faith in the possibilities of reform as "the providential—if slightly utopian—means that could be used to by-pass social antagonisms and to create God's Kingdom on earth."44 For Kingsley and other Victorian sanitary reformers, the aphorism that cleanliness was next to godliness had taken on new meaning in an urbanized world.

In the comprehensive vision of sanitary reform drawn by Kingsley, we find a clue to the movement's cultural and literary resonance. Sanitary reform gained a hold on the public imagination because while it addressed (and often cultivated) people's anxieties about the dangers of the city, it also offered a plan for alleviating these dangers. To return to Trotter's idea of waste as system, sanitary reform made a chaotic world intelligible: "Waste-theory makes it possible to understand the most intractable phenomena—ooze and slush, a prostitute—as the outcome of system: as malfunction, or surplus function, rather than random perversity or bad luck."45 In other words, sanitary reform served as a kind of framework for making sense of urban problems and urban
change, from the spread of disease to the growth of a suffering underclass, from
the profusion of filth to the decline of religious observance. These were failings,
but with the right adjustments to the urban system—the draining of cesspools,
the clearing of slums—they could be resolved. Moreover, as Davison contends,
sanitary reform succeeded as an idea because it had an “intellectual coherence”:
this coherence can be attributed to its grounding in natural theology, which
cast human and divine, material and spiritual elements in a unified narrative
of progressive change. Unlike educational, religious, or even political re­
forms, sanitary reform provided a clear and comprehensive vision of the city
in a time of great change. It offered the comfort that comes from certitude.

As compelling as this ideal vision of reform was and is, this book directs
critical attention to very different, often antagonistic, visions of and responses
to sanitary progress. These significant alternative perspectives have been
largely overlooked in historical and literary studies. Scholars have tended,
rather, to emphasize the power and reach of the sanitary movement, implicitly
regarding Kingsley’s, Chadwick’s, and others’ dedication to the cause of clean­
liness as characteristic of liberal Victorian attitudes. This emphasis reflects
the still-pervasive idea of the Victorian period as an age of reform, but perhaps
it also reflects a more fundamental conviction about the universal desirability
of modern sanitation and hygiene. Looking backward from a (Western) sani­
tary landscape happily provided with flush toilets and waterborne sewage,
we are more likely to appreciate the exertions of a Chadwick than the protest­
tations of an unknown pamphleteer who, for example, warns of the danger
of sewer gases infiltrating the home. It is one of the guiding assumptions of
this study, however, that the cry of the unknown pamphleteer has much to
teach us about the contested process of change in the Victorian city.

Matter in Place

As I have already suggested, the initiatives of the sanitary movement were in­
evitably bound up with ideas about the city and, more specifically, with ideas
about the organization and meaning of urban space. However else it mani­
fested itself in the culture, sanitary reform was necessarily a spatial phenome­
on. The problem of filth was conceived primarily in spatial terms: waste
matter accumulated in the city’s streets, alleys, and courts; sewage fouled the
Cleansing the City in the geographical heart of the city; and the poor crowded together in disease-ridden tenements, which were a blight on the urban landscape. The solutions reformers sought were likewise conceived in spatial terms: the construction of sewers and embankments would channel waste out of the city; model dwellings would provide healthful accommodation for the working classes; and slum clearances would create a more commodious city. What reform demanded was a fundamental reconfiguration and, hence, respatialization of the city. One of the aims of the chapters that follow is to demonstrate how in changing the shape of the city, sanitary reform altered the cultural meanings and human experience of it. For as the insights of cultural geography have taught us, space is meaningful: that is, spatial formations reflect and instantiate a range of meanings and values, from the cultural to the social to the political. As significant as the spatial dimension of reform is, however, few studies of the movement have looked seriously at the actual spaces of reform, at the impact of reform on the ground level. Literary critics have understandably privileged the textual and discursive in their work on sanitary reform. Joseph Childers and Nancy Metz, for instance, have contributed important work on the shared rhetoric and representational strategies of literature and sanitary reports, and Mary Poovey has explored the similar ideological commitments of the sanitary movement and domesticity. In this book, I provide a more comprehensive view of sanitary reform and its relation to the social and material life of the city by reconceiving the subject in terms of geography. A critical geography of reform encompasses at once the textual, the social, and the spatial, allowing us to see interplay among discourse, the social order, and the built environment.

In this emphasis on the significance of space, I have been influenced by the turn toward geography seen in recent literary and cultural criticism. The recognition now of the importance of bringing a spatial perspective to social and cultural analysis has its foundation in the work of Henri Lefebvre, Michel Foucault, and Edward Soja, among others. In *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre brings the insights of Marx to bear on the sustained study of space, which (like Marx's commodities) has a story to tell about social life. "Space," argues Lefebvre, "implies, contains and dissimulates social relations." It does so because it is at once the product, or outcome, of social life and the constraining medium through which social life takes shape. As Soja explains in *Postmodern*
Geographies, the idea of space as socially produced and, in turn, productive of social life and action runs counter to deeply held assumptions about the neutrality, or naturalness, of space. But, as he insists elsewhere, society cannot really be imagined outside of a spatial matrix (and vice versa): the process of spatial reproduction "gives form not only to the grand movements of societal development but also to the recursive practice of day-to-day activity." Space is thus not merely reflective but also constitutive of social experience. Foucault tends to imagine these spatial operations in terms of a disciplinary power. In remarks on Bentham's Panopticon, a technology of power that clearly operates through a specific architectural form, he describes space as an expression of might and an enforcer of moral behavior. While certainly one should recognize that the interests of the powerful are expressed and reproduced through space, postpositivist geographers have also been careful to allow for limited human agency. According to Trevor Barnes and Derek Gregory, "People can't make places be whatever they want them to be. . . . At the same time, the wider social structure is not all-determining, immutably fixing people and places."

The insights of humanist geographer Yi-Fu Tuan are particularly relevant to this problem of the individual's relation to social space. In *Topophilia*, Tuan emphasizes the experiential aspect of geography, that is, the way people perceive and experience place—a phenomenon he calls "topophilia." Tuan's sustained engagement with questions of feeling and value, enjoyment and attachment, in relation to the environment has encouraged me to focus on the experiential dimension of Victorian sanitary history, to describe that elusive area where public works and private feelings meet. If Tuan's work reminds us to take seriously feelings about space, then the work of spatial theorists helps explain why such feelings can run so hot: there is a great deal at stake in the disposition of space. As Soja conceives it, the process of social reproduction is continual but not seamless. He describes lived space as a "competitive arena . . . for social practices aimed either at the maintenance and reinforcement of existing spatiality or at significant restructuring and/or radical transformation." This claim helps us make sense of the competing responses to sanitary reform, expressions both of support and of resistance. These responses, which center on the organization of urban space, ultimately express competing visions of social life and competing cultural values.
As part of the emphasis on the spatial dimension of reform, the pages that follow also reflect a commitment to the particularity of place. Many literary critical discussions of the city treat urban experience in general terms, often privileging certain theoretical concepts, such as the crowd, the flaneur, or urban spectacle. As useful as these discussions may be, we can achieve a more nuanced understanding of city life by recognizing the multiplicity of places that constitute the city and by approaching each place with a respect for its singularity. As Joseph McLaughlin explains in the context of his analysis of Joseph Conrad’s novel *The Secret Agent*, “While it is certainly not incorrect to think in terms of a somewhat abstract opposition between the office and the street, we must also remember that for Conrad these were not mythic abstractions; instead they were specific buildings (Scotland Yard and Charing Cross Station) and streetscapes (the Strand).” Preferring the specific to the abstract when writing about the city requires us to take seriously the minutiae of history, literature, and geography, such as the precise route that a character takes in a novel or the material and symbolic significance of being upriver versus downriver. When we attend to particular places and to the ideas and conceptions of such places, we come closer to understanding the felt experience of the city at a given moment. We also begin to appreciate that the process of urban change—or, in this case, sanitary development—affected people in very different ways depending on their spatial and social locations.

Critical to this textual and experiential study of London’s sanitary life is the joining together of a rich variety of documentary materials, from the archival records of the Metropolitan Board of Works to the cartoons of *Punch* magazine, from special-interest periodicals such as the *Builder* to illustrated weeklies such as the *Graphic* and *Illustrated London News*. At the same time, the Victorian novel plays a central role in the book. We can understand this role by invoking once again the language and insights of cultural geography. From this perspective, literature is not exempt from the processes of social and spatial formation; on the contrary, literary productions continually emerge from and re-enter the social and material field. At the same time, literature is capable of critiquing these very processes by creating new visions of space and society that may challenge prevailing ideas. In other words, these new conceptions of space, or imagined geographies, can be important sites of resistance. These assumptions inform the extended discussions of Dickens’s *Our
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*Mutual Friend* and George Gissing's *Nether World* in chapters 3 and 5. Both novels are expressly concerned with the problem of filth and the pursuit of cleanliness in London; both explore the possibilities and limits of social, moral, and spatial regeneration; and both engage with these issues through the representation of urban space. As attuned as they are to material conditions, the novels offer imagined geographies that privilege the human experience of urban improvement and that recognize the emotional resonance of urban space. These and other novelistic reconceptions of space, then, afford an alternative way of seeing and perhaps redefining the city. They may reflect a felt disorientation, they may restore the integrity of a devalued place, or they may imagine a place not yet created.

From Resistance to Disillusion

Each chapter addresses the social challenge and imaginative resonance of filth and purification within the context of one of several key sanitary initiatives: waste disposal, river purification, and housing reform. The first chapter reveals the surprising resistance to reform excited by the London sewer. Although the developing sewerage technology seemed to exemplify sanitary progress, many social observers represented the underground network of pipes as an instrument of social chaos, threatening the ideals of spatial division and social hierarchy in the urban context. In the second chapter, centered on debates about the pollution and purification of the Thames in the 1850s and 1860s, I focus on expressions of resistance to the Thames Embankment, one of Victorian London's most celebrated engineering achievements. Despite the wide support the Embankment received, many observers lamented the loss of an eccentric and vital riverside culture that the Embankment was imagined to displace. Chapter 3 continues the discussion of the polluted river in the context of the imagined geography of the Thames in Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend*. In his great novel of the period, Dickens unsettles the prevailing negative perceptions of the river: although the novel places a high value on moral and material purification, it also deliberately exploits the imaginative energy of filth. While the first three chapters highlight moments of resistance to reform, chapters 4 and 5 record a more pervasive disillusionment with reform that
Cleansing the City was characteristic of attitudes later in the century. Chapter 4 traces this disillusionment to the perceived failure of housing reform policies and initiatives in the 1870s and 1880s, as well as to more pessimistic ideas about poverty and social change, influenced by social Darwinism. We find a similar pessimism about the capacity of reform to reclaim the lives of the urban poor in Gissing's *Nether World*, the central text of chapter 5. Although Gissing's views about reform have often been dismissed for their conservatism, they are significant because they represent an important cultural shift: by the 1880s, even committed reformers had begun to recognize that the aims of improvement did not always achieve the desired ends.

This point about the shift in attitude toward sanitary reform, from optimism to pessimism, from idealism to disillusionment, requires qualification. Certainly, resistance to sanitary measures in the middle decades of the century was real enough, but it is fair to say that apocalyptic visions of the sewer or loving evocations of the filthy Thames reflected a minority view. Despite recurrent expressions of resistance, the sanitary movement inspired considerable optimism during the period roughly from the 1840s through the 1860s. Reformers from Chadwick to Kingsley unequivocally affirmed the far-reaching and beneficent influence of sanitary improvements on the health and welfare of the populace, and to a greater or lesser degree, their lay audience accepted the redemptive powers of purification. After about the 1860s, however, doubts about the efficacy of sanitary reform to do more than cleanse the streets had begun to enter the debate with greater frequency and insistence. Interventions in the built environment had a dramatic effect, but did they produce the desired effect? Slums were cleared, streets widened, and sewers built, but were the poor better off physically and morally than they had been? One of the defining principles of sanitary reform and the source of much of its imaginative resonance was the understanding that urban improvement and human improvement were complementary processes. Indeed, purifying the environment and uplifting a potentially dangerous underclass were conceived as a unitary mission. But in the latter decades of the century, the mission began to seem less coherent. Public health reform was still important, but it was not seen as the only, or even necessarily the best, means to help a poor family escape the demoralizing influence of the slums: emigration, suburban relocation, and a host of other schemes were advocated by social reformers. At the