Stoker, Paris and the Crisis of Identity

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The body of critical material available about Bram Stoker is confined almost exclusively to books and articles about *Dracula*. His two-volume *Personal Reminiscences of Henry Irving*, eight other novels, two collections of short stories and numerous shorter pieces for newspapers and magazines are largely forgotten. Information about Stoker's life is scant, due to his own reticence and a lack of primary source material. The state of his marriage, his sexual orientation, the exact nature of his relationship with Henry Irving, for whom he worked as manager of Lyceum Theatre for twenty-seven years, even the cause of his death appear unclear. Direct evidence for the influence of his life experience on his literary work is therefore lacking. However, Stoker *was* part of an Anglo-Irish late Victorian Gothic tradition of writing, and he shares with his fellow writers (Maturin, LeFanu, Bowen) a number of characteristics: fascination with the occult, in-depth explorations of the effect of terror on the psyche, repression and its return as the monstrous.

Terry Eagleton is one of a number of contemporary critics who see Protestant Gothic as 'the political unconscious of Anglo-Irish society, the place where its fears and fantasies most definitively emerge.'[1] Eagleton notes that the vast majority of Irish gothic is set outside Ireland, often in historically remote and geographically unknown environments. This deliberate distancing of experience is explained by drawing attention to the political and social isolation of the Anglo-Irish and to their precarious economic position, a situation calculated to induce a state of paranoia that is then worked out in the unfamiliar yet parallel landscape of Gothic fiction. Alison Milbank refers specifically to Stoker's sense of 'doubleness', 'as being both part of a quasi-imperial order and yet a victim of outside systems.'[2] David Glover, sees Stoker's Anglo-Irish anxiety manifest itself in a great concern with boundaries – national, political, and sexual.[3] Glover is speaking principally about *Dracula* but this idea can be examined equally well in one of Stoker's little-read stories, called 'The Burial of the Rats' in which both the necessity and impossibility of maintaining boundaries and therefore certainty is illustrated. Contrary to expectation, the geography of 'The Burial of the Rats' is not in fact either unknown or historically remote. It is nineteenth-century Paris, familiar as a tourist destination to the English through its literature, its arts, and its reputation for license and political unrest. Stoker uses this familiar landscape as a starting point from which to explore the underside of Paris, its gothic haunts and marginal populace, in a way that forces interrogation of contemporary views of class and sexual boundaries. In the process, late nineteenth-century anxieties about gender relations and imperial ideologies are also explored, as is Stoker's own problematic position as 'Irish' author.

I

The 'Burial of the Rats' was published in 1914, two years after Stoker's death, in a collection called *Dracula's Guest* compiled by Stoker's widow Florence. According to Harry Ludlam in his 1962 biography of Stoker, the story has at least a twenty-year history, being based on notes Stoker made on holiday in Paris in 1874.[4] The plot concerns a young man in Paris with time on his hands. He has been exiled for a year from London and from Alice, his fiancée, in order to prove his constancy to her and to her parents. He tells the reader that he soon exhausts the pleasures of pedestrian sight-seeing, and determines to explore the less travelled areas of the city, in particular its City of Dust, the nineteenth-century euphemism for its garbage dump. As Paris is large, the dump that serves it is described in topographical terms as a series of enormous hills and valleys, winding highways interspersed with quaint micro-communities. It is another country, metaphorically as far removed from the welcoming 'red glow' of Paris as is Siberia, and as little understood. Once in this alternative city, the traveller predictably gets into trouble. He seems irresistibly drawn to the place and each time he visits it penetrates deeper and deeper into its mysteries. On his final visit he wanders about for too long; he notices night coming on and he realizes that he cannot remember how to leave, or how he got in in the first place. He meets and has a long conversation with an old woman who seems to be in charge of the population. When it becomes clear that she has delayed him on purpose to allow her confederates time to surround and attack him, he flees, pursued by his attackers, who are actually ancient soldiers of the First Republic, alcoholic revolutionaries discarded by the city. He undergoes a hellish flight in the dark through stinking water and piles of garbage. Finally he reaches a gendarme station in the City wall (presumably Fort de Montrouge) and is saved, as much by the lights of the house of authority as by authority itself. The traveller never identifies himself, nor does he ever try to analyse his experience, except to say that he regarded his adventure at the outset as a sociological experiment: ‘And so I determined to investigate philosophically the chiffonier – his habitat, his life, and his means of life.’[5] In fact, the story reads like a Freudian case study, but one lacking the psychologist’s notes and interpretations of his experience. The most important questions are left unanswered. Why, for instance, does Alice’s family require proof (a year’s non-communication) of his intentions? Why is he repeatedly drawn to the Dustheaps? Partial answers to these questions might be found through looking at the context in which the traveller’s adventure is situated.

The tale is set in 1850 but the narrator waits until 1895 to write down his account of his experience, forty-five years after the event. The date of 1850 is important in that it signals the period before Baron Haussmann’s ‘urban renewal’ of central Paris and its sewer and waste systems; it is an age of cholera outbreaks, flooding open drains and stench. Rupert Christiansen, in a study of Second Empire Paris notes:

> Paris in 1848 was volatile and anarchic, almost what sociologists today would call a ‘virus city’, expanding and responding with wanton unpredictability, beyond rational administration. Eight times within twenty years denizens of the working-class areas had thrown up barricades and shouted for revolution; epidemics of cholera had killed tens of thousands and the death rate was higher than that of London; crime spread in waves of comparably destructive effect; the traffic of carts and carriages was daily locked into a standstill along filthy, narrow streets.[6]

Christopher Prendergast, in *Paris and the Nineteenth Century* similarly paints a fascinating picture of the city, noting that its concern with what he calls ‘urban filth’ begins as far back as 1782, in which

> a collection of illustrious scientists from the Académie Royale des Sciences and the Société Royale de Médecine gathered around the cesspool of the Hôtel de la Grenade to experiment with a new antimephitic substance, whose inventor had claimed that it was capable of containing and destroying miasmic emanations. Unhappily one of the cleaners fell into the cesspool. M. Verville, an inspector of ventilators, tried to save the asphyxiated victim by means of artificial respiration, but immediately recoiled, crying ‘je suis mort!’, prematurely but not implausibly (Verville recovered from inhaling the breath of the stricken worker, but the worker himself was mortally afflicted).[7]

There are parallels that can be drawn between the account given above and Stoker’s literary representation of the same sort of activity in ‘The Burial of the Rats’. Clearly, what could not be avoided was vigorously, almost gleefully, investigated by both city authorities and amateurs like Stoker's traveller. What might also be noted is the early connection Prendergast relates between noxious emanations, disease, and the city. Further, an association can be made between the physical immersion of the cleaner in the source of his livelihood, and Stoker's obsession in 'The Burial of the Rats' with his character's complicated response to a similar environment. The traveller, having similarly taken up his 'social exploration' (103) of his chosen space, does not seem overly worried by the ignoble basis of his pursuit. What he does not acknowledge, however, is the impossibility of remaining 'clean' while engaged in such study. As such, we can see the traveller's case as representative of bourgeois society's encounter with filth – its own and that of its neighbours – and the seemingly typical attraction/repulsion dynamic that the encounter sets in motion.

II

Reformation of Paris's drainage system meant an improved standard of hygiene, along with the growth of the pleasant fiction so dear to the bourgeois that dirt did not in fact exist. But the symbolic nature of the river of filth running beneath Paris's beautiful streets, especially the giant receptacle under the Place de la Concorde, was not lost on writers such as Victor Hugo. In *Les Misérables* he writes of the sewer as

> the conscience of the town where all things converge and clash. There is darkness here, but no secrets. … Every foulness of civilization, fallen into disuse, sinks into the ditch of truth wherein ends the huge social down-slide, to be swallowed, but to spread. No false appearances, no white-washing, is possible; filth strips off its shirt in utter starkness, all illusions and mirages scattered, nothing left except what is, showing the ugly face of what ends.[8]

As Hugo suggests, it may be relatively easy to seal off the sight of dirt from the populace, but even the most efficient sewers occasionally smell. Prendergast notes

> For well into the nineteenth century, the epicenter of Parisian stench remained Montfaucon, the district of the city's abbattoirs as well as the site of the huge cesspools into which went not only the carcasses from the knackers' yards, but also vast amounts of the fecal matter of Paris. When the wind blew from the north-east, the smell, according to numerous contemporary witnesses, was insupportable; and, in one of those curious yet characteristic nineteenth-century mixtures of scientific and popular belief, it was widely held to be a carrier of disease and death (at the level of popular belief, the fact that Montfaucon had also been the site of public hangings reinforced the web of association).[9]

Prendergast says elsewhere that it proved impossible to stop the passage of rats between the sewer (Hugo's 'conscience of the town') and the city, in all its beauty and nobility.

London's waste system underwent a similar revolution, with similar boundary difficulties. Rats again proved most resourceful – breeding indiscriminately, disease-ridden, a constant reminder of the filth underpinning middle-class respectability. The Victorians were not slow to draw parallels between the rat problem and the problem of poverty in the great cities, and most importantly the perceived similarity between the poor and animals, particularly between the poor Irish and animals. Henry Mayhew in *London Labour and the London Poor* records that one of the workers he talked to described the sewers, constructed using Irish labour, as full of rats 'fighting and squealing ... like a parcel of drunken Irishmen.'[10] The rat is the connection between high and low, between the bourgeois body and its dehumanized waste products. And this is where Stoker's Irish connections become apparent in the story. In a series of attempts at describing the Paris dustheaps, the traveller says he sees them at one point as a sort of Bog of Allan, making explicit the connection between dirt and Ireland, and by extension the Irish sewer rats/workers referred to by Mayhew. Stoker's own ambivalence about his Irish roots materializes then in his traveller's anxiety about space and cultural identification.[11]

One finds a cultural expression of the traveller's state as bourgeois subject expounded in such works as Peter Stallybrass and Allon White's *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (1986), in which they examine how the middle class has constructed itself in the last two hundred years or so. Amongst other devices, they cite a complicated process of exclusion on the part of the bourgeoisie – chiefly exclusion of forms of popular culture like the fair or the carnival, as well as exclusion of geographical areas that house segments of society that threaten the middle class idea of self: the slum, the garbage dump. They focus in part on the nineteenth-century, the century of consolidation of the middle class, and not coincidentally, the century of preoccupation with sanitization of the environment and of the body.[12] The reforming, planning zeal of both the English and the French in the nineteenth-century is well-documented and it takes the form, as has been noted, of setting and enforcing boundaries. What is marginal is to be hidden, made invisible to the bourgeoisie. In bodily terms, what this exclusion entails is a rigorous purifying of dirt, or what is perceived as dirt. In fact, society is seen as a larger extension of the body, of the private sphere. Its populace is either dirty or clean (in both physical and metaphorical senses). And dirt is associated with disease, poverty, and not least with moral degradation or animality. We are reminded that the phrase 'The Great Unwashed' originated in England in the 1830s. Prendergast cites a Parisian parallel in the development of an

> *imaginaire du Propre*, where *propre* is to be understood as signifying not only 'clean' but also 'proper' in the sense of what, at least from the point of

> view of the propertied classes, properly belongs to the city as constitutive of its *identity*. Cleanliness carried the promise of uniform identity mastering the threat of alien difference, of a homogenized environment keeping dirt – and then by extension 'dirty' people – as potentially disruptive 'matter out of place' firmly in place, out of sight and smell. In the terms of this fantasy, the city acquired and retained identity in direct proportion to its success in ridding itself of 'impure' matter, on a spectrum from excrement to revolutionaries, perverts and foreigners.[13]

This construction implies but does not state explicitly the capitalist basis on which bourgeois identity rests. When one realizes that the trade in human excrement as a valuable fertilizer – a commodity – underpins a whole series of planning decisions regarding the city's disposal of its own waste, the connection between fascination with dirt (albeit for the profits rather than the product) and repulsion is even closer. Baron Haussmann, the Emperor's city architect, in his numerous campaigns for Paris' sewer reform, 'stopped short of recommending a system that would dispose of human excrement (the *tout-à-l'égout* was not agreed until 1894); powerful commercial interests were in play here: the value of excrement as commodity was in direct proportion to its solidity, and Haussmann declared himself to be of the non-dilution party.'[14]

The fascination of the Victorians with dirt extends beyond commercial interests. From Dickens to Mayhew, to anonymous Victorian pornographers, to public reports of slum conditions and the Irish, to Arthur Munby's diaries and pictures concerning his fetishization of Hannah Cullwick, to nineteenth-century tours of Paris' bone-laden catacombs and a whole genre of fiction dealing with the 'underworld', to some of Freud's case studies of sexual dysfunction – all are akin to what Stallybrass and White call 'a flood of writing *about* the slums which could be consumed within the safe confines of the home.' Writing, they say, 'makes the grotesque visible whilst keeping it at an untouchable distance'.[15] Language is the medium through which the Other becomes accessible, approachable.[16] But the actions of Stoker's traveller remind us that with approach comes the threat of contagion: sexual, moral and national. So, existing alongside bodily and societal exclusion and repulsion is an equally powerful fascination with all the segments and articles excluded. Fascination with disease, with human waste, with the working class poor, with the Irish, with the Other in all its forms.

As late as the 1930s travel guides to Paris were advertising visits to its 1500 kilometers of sewer lines, which 'provincial and foreign visitors are anxious to see':[17]

> Visits can be made between 1 May and 15 October on the second and fourth Saturdays of each month at a cost of three francs a head.
>
> The entrance to the sewers is from the Place de la Concorde, and visitors descend by a large iron trap-door in the centre of the pavement. Here a large boat, with accommodation for sixteen people, travels through the sewers,

> provided with a movable crescent fan pierced with holes to admit of the water flowing through. On being let down, this fan fits the rounded bottom of the sewer and pushes before it all the solid refuse matter that may chance to have accumulated and moved along its course, until a particular point is reached. Here the passengers disembark and take their seats in a number of small carriages also provided with fans, the wheels of which run along rails placed at the edge of the pathways on each side of the sewers. Each vehicle carries a lighted lamp in front of it, and is provided with a conductor. Blue tablets with white letters indicate from time to time the particular points of the city which the party are traversing. Occasionally, at a signal from the conductor, the passengers must duck their heads as they pass beneath the great iron stanchions which cross the roofs of the galleries. Suddenly a sharp turn is made and a silver flood of light is seen ahead. The journey is now at an end and the passengers are landed on the quay facing the towers of Conciergerie.[18]

This extraordinary passage concludes with the assertion that during the siege of Paris its *égoutiers* were armed and entrusted with defending the tunnels from Prussian troops looking for an easy entrance into the very heart of the city. The integral nature of the community's waste systems to both its tourist trade and defence is thus affirmed.

In contemporary nineteenth-century accounts of sanitary reform, disease is personified.[19] It is something that can get *out* of the orifices of the slums, something that needs to be controlled. Prendergast speaks of the smell of the sewers as provoking a 'fear of putrid substance and pestilential vapours streaming into a defenceless city through cracks in the pavements, fissures in the walls and even the porosity of mortar'.[20] In 'The Burial of the Rats' it is the gendarmes who drive back the criminals with their filth into the darkness by shining the lights of authority and civilization on them. It is for this reason only that they enter into the City of Dust. It is not to come to the aid of the traveller, since he is already out. Their function is simply to force disease, animality and the poor back into their corral, as much as an expression of fear and unexpressed desire as of arrogance on the part of the bourgeoisie.

III

This will perhaps go some way towards helping us understand why the traveller goes to the City of the Dustheaps in the first place – as a Victorian observer, an ethnographer, a scatological tourist like Mayhew. His individual circumstances need illumination, though. As has been said, he is in Paris as an exile – from his family, from his loved one Alice, and from his community. It is significant that he says he can get no news of Alice from either his own or her family. She is untouchable, mute, and therefore insubstantial. As a touchstone for middle class respectability she is no longer available. His already shaky identity is further destabilized by his experience in Paris and it often appears as if he is desperately trying to write his own character into a romance or adventure novel, a novel which refuses to accept the inscription. He says that he prefers to think of his exile as a time of trial in which he hopes an adventure will prove his worth to Alice. Indeed, as he struggles with his fate he fancies himself in a medieval romance: ‘with the fighting instinct of the knights of old, I breathed my lady’s name …’ (113). But he is also plagued by anxiety, by a fear that something will happen to prevent his reunion with her, or that some accident will lead to an undefined failure. And it is in this spirit of anxiety that he seeks out the Dustheaps, every day going further and further into a land he is at pains to describe, and yet which continually eludes his powers of description, of naming and therefore of control.[21] So it is called at various times terra incognito, the source of the White Nile, the Sahara, the Kingdom of Dust, Ultima Thule, and, as I have already indicated, the Bog of Allan.[22] It is a boundary point between consumption and excretion, between desire and fulfillment and, interestingly, he says he pursues its secrets with ‘a keener energy than I could have summoned to aid me in any investigation leading to any end, valuable or worthy’ (104). There are two not necessarily conflicting ways of seeing the journey. It is, firstly, a personal quest and the story partakes of the tropes of romance and adventure, albeit with a grisly twist.[23] He seeks to ‘penetrate further’, to ‘trace dust to its ultimate location’ (104) which the story reveals as himself and his psychic unease with his identity as middle class Victorian, as bourgeois, sexual subject. The journey is also social in its wider implications; the world he enters is the underside of society, the world upside down, carnival. Carnival is *licensed* release, and the excess that forms its matrix is one of the things excluded by the bourgeoisie and one of the things that, having been repressed, returns as Other – the site and source of fascination, the *low* ‘internalized under the sign of negation and disgust’.[24] For instance, the living arrangements and codes of the inhabitants of the Dustheaps are described in great detail as an affront to the City. The traveller finds a bizarre ‘house’ comprising an enormous open wardrobe (giving the term *chiffonnier* a new twist) having six drawers, each of which forms a bed for an ancient soldier of the First Republic. All are absinthe drinkers, bleary-eyed and decrepit, and yet watchful. Incredibly, they follow the traveller and appear before him at various intervals, seemingly without him being aware that they are the same six. He cannot seem to *see* them as distinct individuals, any more than he can see the difference between the various dustheaps around him.

What Stoker is doing here has a bearing on this problem of ‘sight’ in our traveller. If one definition of grotesque is that it is ‘the Other of the defining group or self’,[25] a second type of grotesque concerns the rejection of matter and ideology seemingly foreign to middle-class identity. This second grotesque is concerned specifically with boundaries and hybridization and is part of the self’s fantasy regarding the process of exclusion.[26]

Indissoluble from this argument is geography. In Stoker’s story the discerning capacity of sight is gone. The traveller cannot *see* his way. He is in unfamiliar territory; in cultural terms, the capacity of the bourgeois subject to objectify the Other recedes with his entrance to the site of the grotesque. Figures replicate, paths lead back on themselves or lead nowhere, the senses are overwhelmed and then useless. As in carnival, the 'right' order of things is reversed to the extent that the traveller fights desperately for a sense of himself as a controlling visual presence in the Mayhew mode. There is a body of contemporary writing about Paris' ragpickers (Stoker's chiffonniers) that confirms this sense of indeterminacy. Alexandre Privat d'Anglemont's *Paris-anecdote* (1854), for instance, is an account that takes the reader 'to a *quartier* that is scarcely recognizable as such, a "faubourg impossible", an indeterminate and perhaps unnameable *là-bas*.'[27]

The search for an ordered space and the fear of disorder is very much in line with Haussmann's vision of Paris as an urban manifestation of architectural purity: straight, wide, fresh boulevards offering unimpeded vistas of a commercially thriving metropolis. This can only be achieved by sweeping aside (and underground) the confusion of the old, of the inefficient and dirty. Christiansen quotes Victor Fournel mourning the loss of an organic unity as a result of Haussmann's planning: 'Paris had lost "the variety, the surprise, the charm of discovery which made a walk in the old city a voyage of exploration across worlds ever new and unknown, a changing, living physiognomy which marked each quarter like a feature on a human face."'[28] Stoker himself notes,

> Paris is a city of centralisation – and centralisation and classification are closely allied. In the early times, when centralisation is becoming a fact, its forerunner is classification. All things which are similar or analogous become grouped together, and from the grouping of groups rises one whole or central point. We see radiating many long arms with innumerable tentaculae, and in the centre rises a gigantic head with a comprehensive brain and keen eyes to look on every side and ears sensitive to hear – and a voracious mouth to swallow. (102)

But he cannot resist the temptation to connect mouth and anus and articulates a nightmare vision of Paris that includes its underside:

> Other cities resemble all the birds and beasts and fishes whose appetites and digestions are normal. Paris alone is the analogical apotheosis of the octopus. Product of centralisation carried to an *ad absurdum*, it fairly represents the devil fish; and in no respects is the resemblance more curious than in the similarity of the digestive apparatus. (102)

Sight, then, is obscured. The objectification of the Other proves difficult. Geography seems deliberately hostile. The result for Stoker's traveller is panic. In the midst of the Dustheaps he says, 'In my perplexity I wanted to see someone of whom to ask the way, but could see no one. I determined to go on a few mounds further and so try to see someone – not a veteran' (105).

And it is here that he encounters the apparently harmless old woman who is willing to talk to him and so help him find his way out of the Dustheaps. She seems harmless *because* she is a woman, past the age of desiring, past danger because past beauty. His questions to her about the history of Parisian rag-picking, about the Revolution and her own memories in relation to it turn her into a rude historian whose information will somehow legitimate his enterprise, elevate it beyond mere curiosity towards philosophy. It appears that as well as being a prostitute, the woman had been a sort of Dickensian Mme Defarge during the Revolution and was present at the taking of the Bastille. While she functions as the embodiment of the monstrous – unfeminine, unchaste and violent – she is also the most memorable character of the story. Certainly, the traveller remembers her well enough to recall her exact words forty-five years after the event. In keeping with carnival, she rather than one of the men is in control of the situation, a sort of pirate queen, as the traveller says, of a band of 'desperadoes as only half a century of periodic revolution can produce' (107).

The interpolated discourse the woman presents in the narrative comments on the anxieties the traveller has already exhibited, and makes manifest the connection between her state, both physical and social, and the state of the traveller, and by extension, Alice. She tells a story of herself as a young woman, a well-off prostitute who loses a valuable diamond ring down a drain.[29] She enlists the aid of the law in searching the sewers for it, finds it, but also finds horror palpable in the presence of rats in the depths. The real adventure she has comes *after* the finding of the ring, when one of the human sewer-rats as she calls them asks the police to look for a friend who has gone missing, and is quickly found, his bones still warm and picked clean by the rats. Ostensibly her telling of the story is a ruse to stall the traveller so that her forces can gather themselves to attack him, but, metaphorically, the story functions as a narrative device to make connections. First of all she puts herself in the position of the traveller, forcing an uncomfortable doubling of personality and purpose that ultimately includes the reader as voyeur. Like the traveller, she has gazed as a seemingly dominant presence at this alternate form of life and she could once call on the authority of the law to help her do so. The traveller's detailed remembrance of her story replicates in outline his own narrative; however, she also makes it clear that she has always been marginal to middle-class society, and that conjunction of her marginality and the traveller's centrality throws the respectability of his enterprise into doubt. Second, the explicit connection between wealth and dirt is insisted upon. She goes down into the sewer, and enjoys it, in her fine clothes. He explores the garbage heaps wearing tourist tweeds and his own diamond rings. Third, the link between human and beast is explored, as is the boundary world in which the body and its excretory functions is bound up with traditionally base and unclean animals: the pig and the rat. Fourth, the doubling of her diction and that of the traveller when talking about the City of Dust is quite striking. She says ‘it was a new excitement’ (110) to be wading through filth. The traveller too talks about the excitement the danger of his situation instills in him. She says at several points that she did not feel easy but had no fear in the sewers. He too says frequently that he does not feel easy but does not fear until the chase is on in earnest.

The traveller’s account of the woman points to bourgeois society’s judgement of her as morally bankrupt, an enemy to virtuous women, as her present position would seem to show. But she allies herself with the motives and moral standing of the traveller and thus calls into question his purity and his right to Alice’s love. Finally, the old woman is shown as the antithesis and still the sister of Alice. Alice is presented as beautiful, just as the old woman says she herself was, so that the reader’s contemplation of Alice as a human being leads inevitably to unconscious connections between the two women being made. The traveller is exiled from the physical presence of the beloved. Alice, as has been said, is untouchable, classical, bodiless and unrecorded. Language does not penetrate her fastness. We know that the traveller is forbidden to write to her. She has no orifices: no mouth, no genitals, and it seems plausible to suggest a Freudian reading of the story – where frustrated desire returns as Other, and where bourgeois identity is founded upon an awareness of exclusion. It is, after all, the physicality of the old woman that the traveller focuses on and that repulses him, particularly her mouth and its ‘leering grin’. He speaks of ‘the horrible square opening of the mouth like a tragic mask, and the yellow gleam of the few discoloured teeth in the shapeless gums’ (110). Alice as an entity disappears in (or perhaps merges with) the horror of the physicality of the old woman. Again, a nineteenth-century source provides a commentary on Stoker’s subject matter: Maxine du Camp, writing about the threat venereal infection posed to Parisian family values in the 1870s speaks of prostitutes as the cause of Paris’s imminent downfall:

> We are today faced with an Augean stable, into which people of all classes and conditions are hastening to pour their dung. Which Hercules will have the courage and the strength to clean out the sewer? Never has the gangrene cut so deep. It has touched the quick, and will go on, if we are not careful, to break up the whole body.[30]

Out of the old woman’s mouth will come the traveller’s death sentence; it is her laugh that will mock his heroic efforts, as he imagines them, efforts made on Alice’s behalf, and on behalf of romance. He says he can ‘read between the lines of her gruesome story’ (111). He understands her discourse and its implications for him. His attempt to wrest his narrative from its nightmare mode and into the less threatening one of romance, where he is the knight protecting an (absent) lover, attests to this. Alliance must be denied, but it can only safely be denied outside the boundary world, so he needs to get out. In fact, part of his terror seems to stem from the imminent collapse of the unstable domain around him; the insubstantial nature of its geography threatens the institutional structures that form his identity. Stoker's narrative then explores the place where ideology and fantasy conjoin: what Stallybrass and White call 'mapping the domains of transgression where place, body, group identity and subjectivity interconnect.'[31]

IV

In 'The Burial of the Rats' the traveller's humiliation (or perhaps his baptism) is complete when he is forced to swim like a rat in a river of filth, to swallow some of the water and to emerge as dirty as his pursuers are:

> My feet had given way in a mass of slimy rubbish, and I had fallen headlong into a reeking, stagnant pool. The water and the mud in which my arms sank up to the elbows was filthy and nauseous beyond description, and in the suddenness of my fall I had actually swallowed some of the filthy stuff, which nearly choked me, and made me gasp for breath. Never shall I forget the moments during which I stood trying to recover myself almost fainting from the foetid odour of the filthy pool, whose white mist rose ghostlike around.' (117)

And yet as this river, or bog, forms his escape route, he speaks of it as 'the most crystal stream to the parched traveller' (118). The story's use of bog imagery connects its themes to Anglo-Irish relations, both with England and with the increasingly slippery Irish tenantry. Stoker also uses the image of the shifting Irish bog extensively in his novel of the 1890s, *The Snake's Pass*,[32] his sole Irish-based novel, where it is seen both as a metaphor for the possibility of harmony and of instability; there is treasure hidden in the bog, waiting to be found by an Englishman, and at the same time the bog shifts uncomfortably. A contemporary review of *The Snake's Pass* noted that Stoker 'is perfectly overwhelming in his erudition in respect of the science of drainage …'.[33] David Glover notes that in Stoker 'there is a constant sense that the divide between the stable and the unstable is itself unstable, that the line cannot be held'[34] either in the psyche, as in 'The Burial of the Rats', or in politics. In this story immersion in the bog is fraught with humiliation and danger and the traveller's ultimate desire is to leave it behind, but only after he has delved as deeply as possible in what prove ultimately to be its secret pleasures.[35] As an interesting extension of transgression, this notion of immersion becomes part of the Gothic stock-in-trade at the end of the nineteenth-century. Stoker's conservatism demands escape from the dirt; several of his contemporaries might opt rather for an abandonment of the traveller to his fate.

When the traveller is eventually extricated and goes back to the City of Dust with the gendarmes he finds that the old woman has been murdered and then eaten by the rats. Her bones are still warm and a dagger is found lodged between her ribs. Certainly the narrative punishes her for her attempt at crossing the boundary, for using language to draw the attention of the traveller to the alliance that exists between them. The narrative also punishes the ancient soldiers in a rather pathetic act aimed at salvaging the dignity and authority of the middle-classes. The traveller says, 'I felt in that moment that I was in some measure avenged' (125). They are arrested by the gendarmes and marched smartly forward to the edge of their domain. 'The Burial of the Rats' concludes then with the image of a precise military column, the gendarmes leading the old soldiers, now prisoners cowed into submission by their superior organisation. The emphasis is on lights in the dark night, the symbols of the city, of bourgeois institutions and the restoration of order, but only at the cost of leaving the world of disorder, of carnival, intact, and of maintaining the fiction that the boundaries have been set up yet again.

V

The traveller seems to have had no other adventures worth recalling from his exile, and he makes it clear that Alice was eventually won as his wife. His lack of commentary on his experience with the margins of society and of the mind does not however negate its importance to the development of his psyche. In 'The Burial of the Rats' the traveller's encounters with society's outcasts: the faded revolutionaries, the survivors of Waterloo, the rats, the former prostitute, the chiffoniers, are symbolically central to his social and sexual position.

Stoker transposes then an Anglo-Irish view of the poor and the body to the terrain of France and attempts to work out there – in a 'safer' nightmare world – ambivalence towards this process of middle class exclusion, implicating himself in the process. In addition, a safe geographical translation of his experience to Paris metaphorically removes the stain of his own fascination with dirt from the land and person of Alice. In the story, the traveller's assumed superiority as fighting Englishman ('I knew that I was big and strong, and they knew it, too. They knew also, as I did, that I was an Englishman and would make a fight for it ...' (108)) and his 'natural' abhorrence of former Revolutionaries is thinly disguised ethnocentrism, his transgression of ethnic and social boundaries conflicting with his arrogant aloofness from the waste products and sites his own society produces.[36] Similarly, the association of Alice herself with waste products is denied, but it cannot be totally repressed. Like Conrad's Marlow, the narrator here cannot help but notice similarities, even if unconsciously, between his class or country and the one he sees as so alien, so Other. The ramifications of this repulsion extend towards colonialism and class war. The ostensible fight for dominance in 'The Burial of the Rats' is between ethnic groups – or the human and the dehumanized – and between nations. In the process, though, comes a reassessment of the psychic fitness of the combatants to rule, and a reexamination of the very lines of demarcation between ethical points of view in a world where moral boundaries are breaking down.[37] This story suggests an unconscious desire for assimilation, disgust at that desire and ultimately separation of the self from the source of anxiety, the bog in all its manifestations and historical guises.

Notes

1 Terry Eagleton, *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger: Studies in Irish Culture* (London, 1995), p. 187.

2 Alison Milbank, '"Powers Old and New": Stoker's Alliances with Anglo-Irish Gothic' in William Hughes and Andrew Smith (eds), *Bram Stoker: History, Psychoanalysis and the Gothic* (London and New York, 1998), p. 14.

3 David Glover, *Vampires, Mummies, and Liberals: Bram Stoker and the Politics of Popular Fiction* (Durham and London, 1996), p. 23 and *passim*. See also Seamus Deane, *Strange Country: Modernity and Nationhood in Irish Writing since 1790* (Oxford, 1997).

4 Harry Ludlam, *A Biography of Dracula: The Life Story of Bram Stoker* (London, 1962), p. 92. Daniel Farson's 1975 biography is equally vague about the genesis of the story, noting simply its plot and suggesting that the model for Alice might have been an early infatuation of Stoker's – an actress named 'Miss Henry'. Daniel Farson, *The Man Who Wrote 'Dracula': A Biography of Bram Stoker* (London, 1975), p. 100. See also Phyllis Roth, *Bram Stoker* (Boston, 1982).

5 Bram Stoker, 'The Burial of the Rats', in *Dracula's Guest* (1914; Dingle, 1990), p. 103. Subsequent references will be given in the text.

6 Rupert Christiansen, *Tales of the New Babylon: Paris 1869–1875* (London, 1994), p. 96.

7 Christopher Prendergast, *Paris and the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford and Cambridge, Mass., 1992), p. 75. Chapter Four, entitled 'Paris Underground', makes fascinating reading.

8 Victor Hugo, *Les Misérables*, trans. N. Denny (London, 1980). Quoted in Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (London, 1986), p. 141.

9 Prendergast, p. 77–78.

10 Quoted in Stallybrass and White, *Transgression*, p. 133.

11 As an aside, it might be useful to remember Freud's case study of the Rat Man. Freud notes that his patient sees rats as symbols of one of the things he dreads most: syphilis. Whether or not Stoker read Freud is unclear, but psychological studies of characters are certainly part and parcel of Stoker's work (compare Stoker's treatment of the psychiatric patient Renfield in *Dracula*). The similarities between Stoker's traveller and his anxieties and Freud's patient are quite interesting. The Rat Man's relation of his early sexual experiences with women invariably pairs dirt/disease with sexual desire. Stoker's traveller exhibits a similar set of characteristics in that he is both excited and troubled by his fascination with the dustheaps, and with the profession (former prostitute) and physical appearance of the old woman he meets there.

12 See Anthony Sutcliffe, *The Autumn of Central Paris: The Defeat of Town Planning, 1850–1970* (Bath, 1970), p. 14, on the development of embankments along the Seine: 'the great cholera epidemic of 1832 frightened the middle classes ...'. The result was accelerated improvement of the sewer system.

13 Prendergast, *Paris*, p. 79.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 77. Victor Hugo calculated that the trade in excrement was worth 25 million francs per year to the city (Prendergast, p. 89)

15 Stallybrass and White, *Transgression*, p. 139.

16 'Language, in short, points to the other across a gap unbridgeable except by the suspect projections of reading.' Garrett Stewart, *Dear Reader: The Conscripted Audience in Nineteenth-century British Fiction* (Baltimore and London, 1996), p. 347.

17 Harold Clunn, *The Face of Paris: The Record of a Century's Changes and Developments* (London, 1933), p. 313.

18 *Ibid.*, p. 314

19 Stallybrass and White, *Transgression*, p. 133.

20 Prendergast, *Paris*, p. 77.

21 The text asserts, in Garret Stewart's phrase, its 'semantic instability'. Stewart, *Dear Reader*, p. 379.

22 The Bog of Allan is a geographical depression in the north central counties of Ireland. Stoker's comment is as follows: 'There were a number of shanties or huts, such as may be met with in the remote parts of the Bog of Allan – rude places with wattled walls, plastered with mud and roofs of rude thatch made from stable refuse – such places as one would not like to enter for any consideration, and which even in water-colour could only look picturesque if judiciously treated'. (p. 104) The popular association of the Irish with bogs is long-standing: traditional 'peasant' dwellings as described above, 'bog-trotters', the OED's reference to bog as 'toilet' reinforce the dirt-excrement-Irish equation referred to in Stoker's work.

23 See Nicholas Daly, 'Irish Roots: The Romance of History in Bram Stoker's *The Snake's Pass*.' *Literature and History*, 4:2 (1995), 42–70 for an account of Stoker and late imperial adventure fiction.

24 Stallybrass and White, *Transgression*, p. 191.

25 *Ibid.*, p. 193.

26 'in which self and other become enmeshed in an inclusive, heterogeneous, dangerously unstable zone.' *Ibid.*, p. 193.

27 Quoted in Prendergast, *Paris*, p. 85.

28 Victor Fournel, *Paris nouveau et Paris futur* (Paris, 1865), quoted in Christiansen, *New Babylon*, p. 94.

29 Rupert Christiansen quotes the Prefect of Police, Charles Lecour, deploring the proliferation of prostitutes in Paris: '"They are everywhere", he wrote in 1870, like rats or revolutionaries: "in the brasseries, in the *cafés-concerts*, the theatres and the dancehalls …"' p. 88.

30 Maxine du Camp, *Paris, ses organes, ses fonctions es sa vie* (Paris, 1869–75), 6 vols, quoted in Christiansen,*New Babylon*, p. 91.

31 Stallybrass and White, *Transgression*, p. 25.

32 See Nicholas Daly 'Irish Roots', and David Glover *Vampires*.

33 Anonymous review of *The Snake's Pass*, *Punch* 99 (6 December, 1890), p. 269. Quoted in Carol A. Senf (ed.), *The Critical Response to Bram Stoker* (Westport, Conn., 1993), p. 53.

34 Glover, *Vampires*, p. 48. See also Daly, *passim* 'Irish Roots'.

35 Garrett Stewart provides an interesting gloss on the traveller's obsession with the dustheaps (though Stewart is speaking about Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*): 'This is the way you see yourself in the late Victorian gothic: not as an ontological perversion (deformed double, devolving portrait, mesmeric alter ego, sepulchral bat-man), but as fascinated by all such aberrations to the point of self-disfiguring (self-decentering) perversity' (p. 359).

36 Following the example set by *Les Miserables* and consistent with his own view of Irish politics, Stoker sees revolutionary action – past or present – as inevitably leading to individual and societal degradation. See Glover, *Vampires*, *passim*.

37 See Glover, *Vampires*, p. 20.

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