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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the temporal dimension of waste in Henry Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor* as an instance of how modernity has produced a largely hidden domain of the non-identical and indeterminate. Through a consideration of the phenomena of uselessness, decay and poverty I argue that the temporal dimension of waste is constituted as a corrosive or malign 'Deadly Time.' In placing such emphasis on time directed towards death, I aim to show that Mayhew's undisciplined researches can be seen as a valuable source for understanding why modern thinking struggles to come to terms with waste.

Keywords

Waste; Poverty; Death; Indeterminacy; Negative Value

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John Scanlan

> Evil and foulness are accidents which follow on the making of things, just as rust on metal, or dirt collects on a man's body ... it is the lasting on of things made that causes evil to break out on them.
>
> - *Hermes Trismegistus*

Henry Mayhew has sometimes been referred to as an early sociologist, a claim made on the basis of his attempt during the mid-nineteenth century to understand the changes London had undergone as a result of industrial progress.[1] In his vast multi-volume *London Labour and the London Poor* (1861-62) [in citations hereafter referred to as *LL*] he set out to detail the extent of the trades that then constituted the city's life and economy. Perhaps it is the nature of these volumes which, lacking a central thesis and extending over thousands of densely-set paragraphs, has ensured that he – unlike near contemporaries Friedrich Engels and Charles Booth – has never been taken as part of the sociological canon.

Yet, it is arguable that much of the value that may be drawn from this work of Mayhew's is due to the very fact that he was not much of a systematic thinker; because what he found and what he became obsessed with throughout the development of *London Labour* is the stuff that eludes systems. As such it is a work that delves into the nature of the non-identical and indeterminate features of modern life. Here we find the leftover and elusive, the filth and waste, as well as the people, places and phenomena that seemed to have escaped the rational time of modernity. Where modernity, from its founding gestures and statements, sought to erase the worthless or unintelligible, it did so by establishing an exclusion zone which became a kind of dump for failures, defects and the dead (Bauman, 2005; Scanlan, 2005).

One interesting aspect of Mayhew's work today can be seen in how his lack of intellectual or academic discipline allowed him to be drawn into this dimension of the excluded. This was a space / place where time was not only at odds with the progressive order of modernity but was, furthermore, a route into some kind of terminal regress where malign forces were attacking modern values. It was here, in a London mostly hidden from bourgeois society, that his attempt to classify the city and its inhabitants became mired in the wastes of the modern world (Thompson, 1991: 259; Humpherys, 1984: 133-35). Mayhew may have lacked rigour in his endeavours but if, as Walter Benjamin suggested, it takes just such naivety to fuse connections between the waste products of the 'adult' world (the world of organised knowledge) then the attention paid to apparently valueless and intentionless things may yet yield surprising rewards (Buck-Morrs, 1991: 262; Buci-Glucksmann, 1994: 45-46).

From Mayhew, we see an instance of how the reliance of knowledge and understanding on 'equivalences', or on the identical – that which is susceptible to objectification and inclusion – will always determine a point of exclusion and blindness. In *London Labour* we learn, amongst much else, that progress does not liberate us

from a temporal dimension that persists beyond the abstract rational divisions of clock and calendar. Outside rational time Mayhew found 'wicked' and 'evil' phenomena that simply persisted, that 'lasted on' as both a temporal disorder and a malign force that gripped and attached itself to the city.

IDLING

A preoccupation with waste, which is uncommon, usually reveals itself to have a temporal dimension; to revolve around questions of ends, outcomes, or consequences. It reflects an awareness of something being squandered, if not also the unintended consequences of such a lapse. Whilst Christianity bequeathed us a notion of irreversible time, the idea of time's eternal flight (Calinescu, 1987: 63), it was a something that was given added impetus in the Middle Ages with the emergence of new means of marking and saving time (Le Goff, 1980; Dohrn-van Rossum, 1996). 'From the first half of the fourteenth century on,' as Jacques Le Goff observed, the idea of time running away 'became more specific and dramatic.' Thus, 'wasting one's time became a serious sin, a spiritual scandal' (1980: 50-51) Indeed, to be oblivious to time's passing, and to *waste* time, was, in the eyes of some influential figures of the day akin to a declaration of non-being which, as Le Goff notes, was neatly summed up in the teaching of a Pisan preacher named Domenica Calva, who had written that 'the idler who wastes his time and does not measure it was like an animal and not worthy of being considered a man' (1980: 51).

For Mayhew, the potential ruin of London is glimpsed in the form of such idlers: wandering and rootless men and women – the poor – who he estimated to consist of 'around 100,000 of the lowest, filthiest, and most demoralised classes' (*LL* 3: 397). These idlers represented to Mayhew and bourgeois society a teeming presence of useless and work-shy bodies, a fact that made his objective of classifying

London according to its productive trades endlessly complicated (Himmelfarb, 1984: 341).

To believe that society was set on an irreversible course of progress and improvement was also to hold that these people – the 'flotsam and jetsam' of progress, as that other chronicler of the poor, Charles Booth, would later refer to them (Booth, 1902-03, Vol.1: 145) – were curious exceptions to the norm, accidents of progress. For instance, if they worked, they did so in strange and economically unproductive 'trades', on the streets and amongst the stuff that was discarded as worthless. Additionally, vulgar habits and the absence of any sense of morality or religion merely compounded their difference (*LL* 1: 2), leading Mayhew to make a broad distinction between what he termed nomadic and settled 'tribes':

> Of the thousand millions of human beings that are said to constitute the population of the entire globe, there are – socially, morally, and perhaps even physically considered – but two distinct and broadly marked races, viz., the wanderers and the settlers – the vagabond and the citizen – the nomadic and the civilized tribes (*LL* 1: 1).

Whilst he was on the whole sympathetic to their plight, as Gertrude Himmelfarb notes, Mayhew's 'intercessions' on behalf of the poor would, 'paradoxically ... make them seem even more "brutish," a "race" apart' (1984: 356; Humpherys, 1977: 21; Cannadine and Reeder, 1982: 11). Yet, we might suggest that the truly significant aspect of the 'tribal' split can only be seen if we lay stress on the guiding idea of Mayhew's investigations which, in the words of the book's subtitle, was to provide a 'a cyclopedia of those that will work, those that cannot work, and those that will not work.' Thus the supposedly nomadic character of the lowest of the poor, in Mayhew, relates quite intimately to the value placed on time, and to one's subordination to the clock in productive work, as we see in the following passage:

> We ... are surrounded by wandering hordes ... paupers, beggars, and outcasts, possessing nothing but what they acquire by depredation from the industrious, provident, and civilized portion of the community (*LL* 1: 2).

For Mayhew, subordination to time through work bestowed upon the individual a host of other benefits and civilizing characteristics. Idling, by contrast, clearly suggested to Mayhew a kind of atavistic otherness or condition one might have found in societies that had yet to see the benefits of industrial modernity. London's 'vagrants,' for instance, were described as 'the English Bedouins ... the thoughtless and the careless vagabonds of our race' (*LL* 4: 22). As Gertrude Himmelfarb suggests, 'even the most compassionate' Victorian reader concerned by the miserable condition of poverty who glimpsed in these pages the 'extraordinary array of vice and crime' amongst the poor might end up rather more concerned with 'the ingenuity of [the] outcasts' than with the idea that they lived in circumstances that were not of their own making:

> [Any] cynical reader would surely be confirmed in his suspicion that there were people who would do anything, subject themselves and their families to any degradation, rather than put in an honest day's work (Himmelfarb, 1984: 341).

Yet, whilst the apparently intentionless movements of these 'urban and suburban wanderers' may have threatened varieties of disorder and violence on respectable society, it was equally believed that they invited ruin upon themselves by their wasteful use of time and physical energy, which was depleted in doing 'nothing whatsoever for [a] living' aside from 'moving from place to place' (*LL* 1: 2), becoming little more than a 'stream of vice and disease' (*LL* 3: 397). Wasted time

was also seen to be damaging in another important respect: whilst idleness spoke of a lack of productivity and suggested physical inertia, it was also taken as the symptom of a deeper character flaw. In an age popularly characterized in those Victorian values of thrift and hardworking honesty idleness became even more exceptional because of the contrast it presented with respectable bourgeois society, which could only see it as a disease that ate away at the self from within, as if the absence of definite external goals – intentions, obligations, or tasks – forced the self to consume its own being as the only remaining 'resource' capable of sustaining bodily motion.

For Mayhew there was no sense of freedom or autonomy in the vagabond life, merely a pointless wandering that looked to be lifeless, much as if idlers were automata without any guiding intelligence set on a course of self-destruction. Once in motion could it be that 'the mere act of wandering' effects a 'greater determination of blood to the surface of the body, and consequently a less quantity to the brain,' he wondered, asking if the physical body is 'thus nourished at the expense of the mind?' (*LL* 1: 2)

Even when placed under the control of a rational mind – subjected to work, for example – it was believed that the poor required further regimentation to quell any wasteful instincts. In *Technics and Civilization* Lewis Mumford tells of how factory owners had from the earliest days of industrial production outlawed timepieces, or tampered with factory clocks in order to control the activities of workers precisely because 'time dedicated to contemplation and reverie, time divorced from mechanical operations, was a heinous waste' (1963: 197).

As Marx noted in *Capital,* the subjection of work to time also eradicated waste because the worker then 'handed over the product of an hour's work every hour' (1990: 1011). But whilst the clock became a tool of control that worked in the interests of efficiency it was also the case that 'the preaching of industry,' came to be symbolic of a greater ideological shift, namely the triumph of 'the Puritan ethic'

through industrial work. This was particularly true when the new modes of production were set against earlier, more rural, patterns of labour in which, Edward Thompson wrote, 'men [had] determined their own existence through bouts of intense labour alternated with idleness' (Thompson, 1967: 73). The Puritan ethic uniquely emphasized self-possession as an aspect of one's duty toward God, and attained the essence of its regulating power through the idea that wasteful endeavours therefore squandered God's time.

As Derek Sayer has pointed out, the obligations this entailed were not entirely perceived as an imposition, for the 'discipline of Protestantism not only restrains individuals, it also – and for the same reasons – [i.e., time-discipline] empowers them' (Sayer, 1991: 31). Just as the factory would regulate the individual's external environment of the workplace and the space beyond, the Puritan ethic would correspondingly provide another essential component of modern progress, an 'interior moral timepiece' (Thompson, 1967: 87). Here Calvinism, with its stress on individualism, was the perfect moral background for the emergence and rise of capitalism (Weber, 2001: 69; Dohrn-Van Rossum, 1996: 10). Thus, in *London Labour* the poor are not condemned as a class for laziness – there were deserving poor and undeserving poor – yet, at the same time, it is clear that the notion of wasted potential was tightly bound to the suspicion that a dislike of labour was always accompanied by flight from the constraints of regularity and a subsequent plunge into a motiveless and atemporal void. This would also explain why Mayhew was as convinced of the *moral* shortcomings of the poor as equally as he was struck by the obvious signs of deprivation he sympathetically witnessed in their often squalid surroundings.

In one such example, he remarked upon the 'apparent listlessness' and 'lazy appearance' of some street traders pitched up in a dirty street; a collection of lolling figures, barely driven into useless action by unknown motives:

> The boys at play were the only beings who seemed to have any life in their actions. The women in their plaid shawls strolled along the pavements, stopping each friend for a chat, or joining some circle, and leaning against the wall as though utterly deficient in energy. The men smoked, with their hands in their pockets, listening to the old crones talking, and only now and then grunting out a reply when a question was directly put to them (*LL* 1: 111).

Clearly, and unsurprisingly, Mayhew shared the Puritan view that the alleviation of poverty could only be effected by self-regulation in, and through, work. This is seen in the way laziness or simple physical inertia is taken for obliviousness to the time of the working world and thus indicative of moral decay or, even, as Stallybrass and White note, the far more damning condition of 'self-willed degradation' (1986: 132).

In moral terms the failings of the poor were not simply the product of their lack of economic usefulness, or the fact that they were unproductive. It was rather that an absence of regularity and pattern invited them to indulge the worst kind of pastimes as modes of living. For example, Mayhew observed 'the sellers of live animals' to be 'of a half-sporting and half-vagrant kind,' just the kind of men who preferred being 'after a loose end' to the honesty of work. As such, the business that sustained sporting entertainments such as ratting – which involved setting dogs upon rodents – could not be taken to be of a similar value to productive work because it was a vice of the 'sporting, trading, idling class' (*LL* 1: 224). Where work had a moral dimension, the sporting life of a dog trader, by contrast, contributed little to the firming up of character. Rather, it necessarily involved the squandering of time, Mayhew wrote, seeing as 'the idling' it involved was itself a 'part of their business':

> To walk by the hour up and down a street, and with no manual labour except to clean their dogs' kennels, and to carry them [the dogs] in their arms, is but an idleness, although, as some of these men will tell you, 'they work hard at it.' (*LL* 2: 48)

Such time-wasting is in a sense at one with the aimless sports themselves, diversions which, by comparison with almost all of the competitive and regulated sports that were first accepted in the nineteenth-century, could be characterized both by their lack of fixed temporal divisions or periods and by the absence of any emphasis on sporting virtues. And so, where a test of character would make a sport such as cricket a valuable use of time, here Mayhew believed only base motives could sustain the activities of idle sports. Pastimes like ratting, ferreting and dog-fighting were more associated with what would have existed in pre-modern fairs; gatherings, which, E.P. Thompson notes, were suppressed contemporaneously with the introduction of bells and clocks into daily life, and seen as anachronisms belonging to the temporal rhythms of a premodern age (Thompson, 1967: 90).

The point was that without a degree of autonomy – submission to a regulating principle or acquisition of the interior moral timepiece – these idlers would continue in the pointless habits of the rootless life, which were exactly what Mayhew believed deprived them of the power over their own futures and left them in the deadly grip of poverty:

> The Poor *are* poor generally from a want of self-reliance ... Any system therefore (however well intentioned) which deprives them of all voice in the management of their own affairs, can but tend to increase their helplessness and poverty, and to keep them the same perpetual slaves of circumstances (Humpherys, 1977: 140).

Undirected or apparently motiveless efforts, in this sense, were clearly also a waste. Idling was the source of dread on the part of a bourgeois society that sought to avoid the sight of the poor, but when faced with them would only see within their gaze the residents of some kind of Hell let loose as a nefarious force out to destabilize society. In the fourth volume of *London Labour*, Mayhew outlines an exhaustive classification of the 'workers and non-workers of Great Britain', which contains its own minutely detailed taxonomy of the idle. Within these gargantuan lists, it is notable that almost all of the sub-classes were characterised in terms of negative qualities or worthless potential. In this sense, the poor – 'lasting on' like rust on metal – seemed to symbolize a gradual deterioration of the good through the appearance and expansion of an alternative temporal reality.

The fear was that the social body might be weakened by their slow and gradual incursion into the respectable parts of society, something evident in the fact that upon closer examination they were often broken or deformed people. In Mayhew, we read of beggars that they 'pretend' to be destitute (they present themselves variously, he notes, as 'starved', 'unemployed', 'frozen-out', and 'distressed'); they are sometimes actually victims of a disaster that ruined their lives (they include amongst their number 'shipwrecked mariners', 'blown-up miners', and 'burnt-out tradesmen'); they are unfortunate to be possessed of useless bodies; bodies that are unfit for work (such people had 'real or pretended sores', 'swollen legs', or were 'crippled, deformed, maimed, or paralysed ... blind ... subject to fits', or simply they appeared 'in decline ... with bandages around the head') (*LL* 4: 23-24).

This variety of useless and unproductive bodies seemed to be an unintended consequence of modernity; of the fact that a booming economy attracted vast numbers of people to the new trades and factories in places like London. But the new reality required not broken and badly disciplined men and women, but able-bodied and conscientious workers who could integrate easily with the time-

regulation of new machines. Of course, it wasn't until machine technology and the division of production were taken to a new level of efficiency in the early part of the twentieth-century in the United States under the direction of Henry Ford that previously useless individuals, like those Mayhew catalogued, would find a place of work within new and highly differentiated methods of mass production. As Susan Buck-Morss noted, Ford's plan left no excuse for idleness and spoke of the triumph of modernity over human waste, something that was exemplified in the details of the Ford *Model T*'s production, which required:

> 7,882 distinct work operations, but, Ford noted [in his 1923 autobiography], only 12% of these tasks – only 949 operations – required 'strong, able-bodied, and practically physically perfect men.' Of the remainder – and this is clearly what he sees as the major achievement of his method of production – 'we found that 670 could be filled by legless men, 2,637 by one-legged men, two by armless men, 715 by one-armed men and ten by blind men' (Buck-Morss, 2002: 103)

DECAYING

The streets of Mayhew's London teem with all manner of dead and decaying matter. Filth, dirt, dust and putrid matter can be seen as sure evidence that time does not stand still; proof, indeed, that any lapse in the work and habits of cleaning and ordering that, it is often said, are the source of culture or civilization (Douglas, 1966; Bauman, 1997; Laporte, 1999) would see a tide of waste overcome us. This dead stuff seems to return us to some natural condition and, in its stubbornness, serves as an intrusive reminder of our own return to mere matter in death. It is partly through the exploration of London's filthy districts that waste matter emerges as central to *London Labour,* precisely because Mayhew looked in the

places normally avoided by his contemporaries. He went so deeply into the decaying reality of the city that in the end nothing coherent resulted beyond this sense of it mutating from the greatest city in the industrial world into some deformed and spectral dystopia. That Mayhew was overwhelmed by what he found is evident, Christopher Herbert suggests, in the near 'semiological entropy' of the four volumes of the work (1991: 219). In these pages, Mayhew piles detail upon detail to achieve a level of opacity that obscures the simple fact that an abhorrence of the excesses of waste drives his inquiries. Thus one may emerge from an encounter with *London Labour* believing that everything else, next to this general sense of the sovereignty of waste, is of secondary importance.

His journey into London's shabby underworld can be taken as a descent from an elevated, more detached – but not necessarily objectively accurate – position of social superiority. From the lofty heights of bourgeois perception, London was indeed a great city, the greatest of all, but the filth of the place, like Mayhew's knowledge of the shadowy world of poverty, revealed a different city, one in which time seemed to be perpetually running things down. As Mayhew implies, this reversal identified at once an intimate connection to the stuff of waste that was at the same time alienating. Human waste – the excremental – marks, at a subjective level, not only the expenditure of energy and the passing of one day after the next, but the unwelcome presence of decaying matter, which assumes a far greater significance at a social level:

> What society with one consent pronounces filth – the evacuations of the human body – is not only washed into the Thames [...] but the tide washes these evacuations back again, with other abominations. We Londoners drink a solution of our own faeces (*LL* 2: 385-86).

But whilst waste appears to move in a manner totally detached from the intention to be rid of it, as a shadow of industrial life's circulatory motion – or, if the example of the Thames is taken as symptomatic, moves unexpectedly backwards to its source – the failure to overcome it symbolizes inertia rather than the circulation. In the city the dead stuff of material waste became a powerful force due to its ability to simply clog things up, to halt progress, as if the city was a huge malfunctioning toilet. Excremental waste that was flushed away instead of being spread on the land was also, as Christopher Hamlin has written, an affront to what many at the time took to be a 'cosmic sanitary dualism' in which the abundant and un-recycled waste was only one source of 'humanity's perversion of natural cycles' (1985: 383), a catastrophic intervention in the order of things.

The natural cycle of the material world was also upset by the 'enormous accumulations of rotting matter' which appeared everywhere and often unexpectedly: 'in stagnant sewers and cesspools, in heaps of garbage and excrement, in churchyards so packed with bodies that corpse parts continually surfaced' (Hamlin, 1985: 381-82). In *London Labour*, the reality of material decay is explained mainly in terms of how it hinders the free circulation of life; variously in creating blockages, in clouding out the sensory environment with supposedly miasmic stenches, or simply in terms of the dogged persistence of its 'lasting on' – stubbornly gripping surfaces – which at times threatened to bring London to a standstill.

The significance of the appalling condition of the Thames in mid-Victorian London, for example, was great; not only because it was symbolically central to the perception of the city's vitality (Nead, 2000: 16), but also because the river functioned effectively as the city's main sewer until the arrival of Joseph Bazalgette's new system for diverting sewage into a series of new underground tunnels before the wicked stuff could reach the Thames (Halliday, 2001). Prior to 1858 and the introduction of this new sewer, the stink from the river on a particularly hot day

could, and did, force the abandonment of business in the nearby houses of Parliament.

In fact there was an aura of decay everywhere – on the streets, and inside homes – in the air that people inhaled and in the dust that was blown around and thereafter carried everywhere on clothes; the microscopic matter and trace of the city's greater decay. 'London,' Mayhew noted, 'is a perfect dust mill' (*LL* 2: 124). Cast about by the galloping traffic of cabs and omnibuses, or blown by wind into gaps and crevices and onto rooftops, the dust might settle for a time on the city's many surfaces, only to be washed off again when it rained to mix up with the macadam surface of the roads, containing, according to Mayhew, 'as much filth as the soil water from house drains' (*LL* 2: 196). The smell of its decayed and lingering presence was worse: the streets, he said, smelled 'of dung like a stable yard' (*LL* 2: 196).

In fact, London *was* a kind of giant stable yard, with some twenty-thousand horses working in the city on a daily basis which, looking at it from the point of view of waste signalled that the passing hours and days were as visibly marked by piles of shit as by the divisions of the clock. What, Mayhew wondered, became of the 'vast amount of filth' these animals deposited on the streets? (*LL* 2: 196) The question had actually been considered already by the Board of Health, who found that 'much of the horse dung dropped in the London streets ... dries and is pulverised, and with the common soil is carried into houses as dust, and dirties clothes and furniture' (*LL* 2: 196). Thus, it is no surprise that by the end of the nineteenth-century product advertisements for soap then appearing on the city streets were explicitly associating progress with cleanliness (Stallybrass and White, 1986: 134).

For some, this stress on the healthy benefits of exercising some control over mutable life would have been all too apparent, yet it was equally representative of a

reality that the most destitute did not occupy. Mayhew noted, for example, that the city's dustmen were unusually healthy, often 'stout, jolly, red-faced' men:

> The dustmen, as a class, appear to be healthy, strong men, and extraordinary instances of longevity are common among them. I heard of one dustman who lived to be 115 years; another, named Wood, died at 100 (*LL* 2: 175).

The dustmen faced the reality of rotting London daily, yet still emerged relatively untainted by the malign force of decay because their work was characterised by regularity of routine and income. In echo of the Calvinist imperative, this was the kind of work that defeated the evils of idleness. By contrast, the worst examples of a life that unfolded in the most abject of circumstances indicated a total absence of the means and opportunity to harness time in order to defeat the evils of waste.

Some, such as the so-called mudlarks, actually eked out a living in the most unpromising conditions and could be seen on the shores of the Thames at low tide, prospecting for the most unlikely treasures amongst the mud. According to Mayhew, they would 'scatter themselves along the shore, separating from each other,' and vanish from sight eventually 'among the craft lying about in every direction' (*LL* 2: 155). Here, lodged in the filth, they would find the stuff that refused to disappear. In the non-productive economy that seemed to unify the poor, all objects and materials, no matter how degraded or used, retained some kind of value – 'coals, bits of old iron, rope, bones, and copper nails.'

This was the detritus that might have fallen from the ships and boats on the Thames or had found its way into the river by some other means. Some items would be lost from the pockets of dredged-up corpses, which in themselves – and aside from any valuables they may have concealed upon them – were a source of income if one had a vessel in which to go fishing for them (*LL* 2: 155; Gallagher, 1989). For the mudlark, however, the only way to lay hands on this dubious treas-

ure was to wade through the mud, often until it was waist-high. The sight of these forlorn figures – 'poor fellows' as Mayhew referred to them – was one of utter abandonment before the simple need to eat, to survive:

> They may be seen of all ages, from mere childhood to positive decrepitude, crawling among the barges at the various wharfs along the river; it cannot be said that they are clad in rags, for they are scarcely half covered by the tattered indescribable things that serve them for clothing; their bodies are grimed with the foul soil of the river, and their torn garments stiffened up like boards with dirt of every possible description. (*LL* 2: 155)

The truth was that where the healthy and honourable dustmen got rid of waste, others seemed to become as one with it, thus ensuring its dogged, but spectral, presence in the city. From the muddy wastes of the Thames at low tide to the 'foul labyrinths' of London's sewer tunnels – of which we find the most detailed descriptions in *London Labour* – Mayhew was witness to the most curious aspects of a shadow economy whose existence depended on reviving or extending the life of what was previously taken to be beyond use: dead stuff (*LL* 2: 150).

This filthy and decaying aspect of the city pointed more generally to the possibility that the world might be caught in a kind of deadly time, a strange near-lifelessness that revealed the corruptibility of life in all its detail. Given the role of the poor in absorbing waste, it is unsurprising, then, that waste and decay were at the time highly popular metaphors for poverty (Harris, 1995). The most desperate of the poor were seen to be at one with decay, becoming a source of both dread and fascination. As the 'bourgeoisie produced new forms of regulation and prohibition governing their own bodies, they wrote ever more loquaciously of the body of the other,' the poor, which yet required to be inspected or surveyed as a means of protecting bourgeois life (Stallybrass and White, 1986: 126). To defeat filth and at-

tain mastery over one's body, of course, was to submit it to time in the form of the daily labours of washing, brushing, and trimming that the upkeep of one's appearance entails. To disregard self-care was to invite the chaos of this deadly time to take its toll on the body – through the untended growth of hair, dirt, and the development of offensive odors. At times Mayhew sees self-neglect as a kind of virus that travelled from people to the spaces they occupied and the buildings that housed and surrounded them (Stallybrass and White, 1986: 132).

Here disordered dwelling places falling into ruin and filled with rubbish illustrate the mutability of solid forms when abandoned to natural forces. Robert Pogue Harrison, who has written eloquently of the malign effects of time, the dimension between social rational time and death, suggests that ruins attain significance in the human imagination due to the way they can unnervingly locate us in a temporality that easily appears alien to human control and culture. Decay reveals 'what human building is up against – natural or geological time' and so its presence in, for instance, ruined or decrepit structures has a 'way of recalling us to the very ground of our human worlds, namely the earth' (Harrison, 2003: 3).

Without time spent on the upkeep of our surroundings, even the most solid seeming structures will not be able to resist time's deadly wasting motion, and thus in whatever guise decay makes itself apparent – from ruined buildings to organic garbage and human shit – it always signifies a failure to invest or master time and more generally to fend off death. Decay represents, if nothing else, extinguished spirit and thus the end of progressive time. On visiting the home of a bone grubber, Mayhew described a scene that connected life with the mastery of natural processes and death with a disordering and malignant temporal force:

> I proceeded to examine the premises. Nothing could be more dismal or dreary ... The floors were rotting with damp and mildew ... The walls were even slimy and discoloured, and everything bore the appearance of desolation. In one

> corner was strewn a bundle of dirty straw, which doubtlessly had served the bone-grubber for a bed, while scattered about the floor were pieces of bones, and small fragments of dirty rags (*LL* 2: 141).

LASTING ON

In Mayhew's London the diminished objects cast aside as worthless by the logic of capitalist production persisted in a strange domain of the obsolete but not yet dead, a time and place of material decline. In terms of the circulatory motion of the capitalist economy, these objects were representative of a blockage. This was old stuff that had to be gotten rid of. Thus an important aspect of Mayhew's descent into the world of the poor was to reveal the existence of a different kind of time – one that was nevertheless a result of modernity, of progress – in which nothing really disappeared and everything was available to be re-used, a truth no less evident today if one looks at the scavenging that goes on in largely unseen corners of the global economy.

The smothering sense of dead matter that was apparent in London was intensified into a different kind of by-product in the surroundings of other places Mayhew visited, such as the shoddy mills and factories of the North. In these hellish places, where the meagre life of discarded materials was stretched into a kind of endlessness, the workers are cast almost as the ghostly forms of some kind of otherworldly revenant, as if they were – like the materials that supplied their work – a collection of mere 'things', bodies, lingering on after death. Here 'waste and refuse materials' would be spun into a reusable material known as 'shoddy', deemed fit for service in the production of 'new' clothing. The stuff of shoddy was simply reconstituted from mountains of unwanted rags and then 'manufactured' anew 'by the tearing up, or rather the grinding, of woollen rags by means of loose willows, called devils' (*LL* 2: 29-30).

Looking at this kind of process from a contemporary perspective we might easily admire it as a process that seemed to set in motion a virtuous cycle of renewal and waste minimisation, but the truth was that as with any manufacture – whether from recycled or virgin materials – it produced its own residue; an atmosphere of 'choking clouds of dry pungent dirt and floating fibres.' Mayhew described a scene in which 'the dust and coarse filaments lie [around] as if it had been snowing snuff' (*LL* 2: 29-30). In the midst of the thick air were figures 'coated with flying powder', industrial modernity's living dead:

> They wear bandages over their mouths, so as to prevent as much as possible the inhalation of the dust. The rag grinders, with their squalid, dust-strewn garments, powdered to a dull grayish hue, and with their bandages tied over the greater part of their faces, move about like reanimated mummies in their swathings, looking most ghastly. (*LL* 2:31)

Like so many, their existence in the deadly time of industrial modernity would ensure that their lives would be prematurely cut short and, like the poor in general, as Engels wrote, hurried 'to the grave before their time' (1999: 107).

For all its reliance on waste material, the shoddy trade was a part of economic production proper. It delivered ostensibly new products. We must remember that in modernity the circulation of commodities becomes the lifeblood of economic exchange and consequently, as Christof Asendorf (1993: 31) notes, has knock-on 'vitalizing effect on people.' Thus, to be caught in a set of circumstances totally detached from the energising force of this economic circulation as most of the poor were, was, to be in the grip of deadly time. In Mayhew we can see just the opposite of vitalizing circulation in this other economy, which instead signals the absence of progressive movement, of the idea of things getting better for the poor.

Rather, what we see are mountains of dead stuff piling up without end. Take the following, his account of the items sold by a trader of used 'metal articles':

> Knives, forks, and butchers' steels; saws, hammers, pincers, files, screw-drivers, planes, chisels, and other tools (more frequently those of the workers in wood than of other artisans); old scissors and shears; locks, keys, and hinges; shovels, fire-irons, trivets, chimney-cranes, fenders, and fire-guards; warming-pans (but rarely now); flat and Italian irons, curling-tongs; rings, horse-shoes, and nails; coffee and tea-pots, urns, trays, and canisters; pewter measures; scales and weights; bed-screws and keys; candlesticks and snuffers; niggards, generally called niggers (i. e., false bottoms for grates); tobacco and snuff-boxes and spittoons; door-plates, numbers, knockers, and escutcheons; dog-collars and dog-chains (and other chains); gridirons; razors; coffee-mills; lamps; swords and daggers; gun and pistolbarrels and locks (and occasionally the entire weapon); bronze and cast metal figures; table, chair, and sofa castors; bell-pulls and bells; the larger buckles and other metal (most frequently brass) articles of harness furniture; compositors' sticks (the depositories of the type in the first instance); the multifarious kinds of tin-wares; stamps; corkscrews; barrel-taps; ink-stands; a multiplicity of culinary vessels and of old metal lids; footmen, broken machinery, and parts of machinery, as odd wheels, and screws of all sizes, &c., &c. (*LL* 2: 6)

Here are the abundant and now discarded implements of a tiny portion of modernity's productive apparatus, simply multiplying –palpably spreading and growing in number – as if taking on a life of their own. For the poor, the rubbish produced by the production of new goods, provided a source of otherwise hidden value. For Mayhew, desperate urban conditions – poverty – explained such a reversal of values:

> Many a thing which in a country town is kicked by the penniless out of their path, or examined and left as meet only for the scavenger's cart, will in London be snatched up as a prize; it is money's worth. A crushed and torn bonnet, for instance, or, better still, an old hat, napless, shapeless, crownless, and brimless, will be picked up in the street, and carefully placed in a bag with similar things (*LL* 2: 6).

Beyond the scavenging that took place on the streets the redemption of wastes was carried on behind closed doors by a variety of often opportunistic conmen, such as those involved in the dubious business of 'translating' shoes. 'Translating' was an interesting description of their work because of the contemporary associations it had with a time beyond time, with the transport of the dead 'to heaven without death.' Thus, again, waste is out of joint with rational time and the supposedly terminal effects of obsolescence. It lasts on. These remade shoes – patched up with paper, painted, and then buffed with polish – seemed to be given new life but would likely 'go to pieces on the first wet day' (Booth, 1902-3: Vol.2, 61).

Amongst the staggering variety of materials recycled in this economy, the most interesting of all was perhaps the substance known as 'pure'. The value of this 'pure' – which was simply dogshit – resulted, somewhat paradoxically, from its cleansing and purifying properties, which saw it utilized in tanyards to dress, or 'purify,' leather (*LL* 2: 143). Within what one might assume to be the rather limited universe of dogshit, there was enough trade in the material to ensure that tanyards had established some differentiation of value according to the particular types of the unlikely currency. Thus, as Mayhew records, 'the dry limy-looking sort fetches the highest price ... as it is found to possess more of the alkaline, or purifying properties; but others are found to prefer the dark moist quality' (*LL* 2: 142).

It seems odd now, some one hundred and fifty years later, that 'pure' had generated a level of semi-criminal activity amongst its collectors:

> Strange as it may appear, the preference for a particular kind has suggested to the finders of Pure the idea of adulterating it to a very considerable extent; this is effected by means of mortar broken away from old walls, and mixed up with the whole mass, which it closely resembles (*LL* 2: 142).

One might wonder if such material would have been rescued and put to use without the existence of the 'nomadic' and 'uncivilized' poor. Those collecting dogshit on the streets were children and helpless old women who could find no other means of sustenance. They helped sustain an economy that emerged as a by-product of industrial production and the domination of technology over nature. Industrial modernity left in its wake the wastes that, if nothing else, reveal how production liberated from natural environmental conditions or seasonal constraints could generate products as accretions of time, which could be stored up, used and discarded regardless of the temporality of needs.

Yet, whilst the poor occupied this world of waste there is an essential contradiction at the heart of their role in Mayhew's London, and this emerges because it seems that amongst the heaps of the broken and useless – the stuff of waste – nothing material actually seemed to disappear. Precisely because of the exclusion of the itinerant and street-trading poor from economic circulation, waste is what sustains them. The street folk of *London Labour* all form part of an ad hoc system that is seen to continually absorb untold varieties and huge quantities of dead matter, and in which the temporal dimension of industrial capitalism becomes essentially meaningless. This was for the simple reason that to trade in rubbish was to derive value from the valueless and thus to remove objects from the control of rational time, which was marked by novelty and obsolescence. Curiously, Mayhew failed to

see that the poor, in a way, almost imitated the universal compensation of nature in which there was no waste (*LL* 2: 161), because within the context of bourgeois values poverty was merely the source of 'evils', which in the modern world are recast in the form of undesirable phenomena and unintended consequences. But whilst nature could be seen to creep back up on society in the form of waste, it was no less symbolized by the unruly elements of a population who seemed to obey no human-made law, but instead represented the failure of society to tame certain 'natural' instincts and to impose rational time. Thus, in the expanses of Mayhew's London and the voluminous pages of *London Labour* waste also signifies the limit of his attempt to objectify the city according only to a finely detailed examination of its 'workers and non-workers'.

In the end, Mayhew could only render London coherent by exiting the underworld and removing himself further yet from the dirty reality by taking in the less confusing view presented by a balloon journey across the city. 'It is an exquisite treat,' he wrote:

> to perceive the previous confusion of the diverse details assume the form and order of a perspicuous unity; so does the eye love to see the country, or town, which it usually knows only as a series of disjointed parts become all combined, like the coloured fragments of the kaleidoscope, into one harmonious and varied scene (Nead, 2000: 79).

Yet, revelling in the illusion of harmony was to risk the illusion a world with no dirt, no traces, and no clues as to its existence, nor to how it was made. But, as Mayhew's willing confrontation with the realities of poverty revealed, it was society's imperfection that was real, and it was the making of things, the creation of this new modernity, that produced a shadow waste world that would 'last' on in deadly

time. It gripped the social body as a malign growth and thus identified progress also through its accidental products and unintended consequences.

NOTES

1. Mayhew's *London Labour* has chiefly been of interest to historians, although *Encyclopaedia Brittanica*, for instance, cites Mayhew as a sociologist. Elsewhere, *London Labour* generates some interest as an example of ethnographic method (Green, 2002).

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