

## APPENDIX 3

### The land impoverished by the sea [Victor Hugo]

Victor Hugo's flagship work *Les Misérables* was published in 1862. Precisely at the time when the sewerage controversy was in full swing. It pitted supporters of continuing to return sewage to the ground, (as was practised in the Paris region in the 19th century) against those who thought that all domestic “wastewater” should be evacuated via the sewers. In the novel, the theme of sanitation is addressed in the section entitled “La terre appauvrie par la mer” [The land impoverished by the sea]. This passage is regularly cited today in support of arguments for ecological sanitation and the agricultural use of human excrement. The text, with its mix of poetics and statistics, contains two particularly striking motifs. First, the city as a living organism. When the sewers of Paris are compared to an intestine, the city comes to appear as a large animal, with its digestive system mapped territorially. Second motif, the counterposed images of gold and manure – in other words, the production of added value and the reproduction of life.

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“Paris throws twenty-five million into the water every year. And this not metaphorically. How, and in what way? Day and night. For what purpose? Without any purpose. With what thought? Without any thought. Why do it? For no reason at all. By means of what organ? By means of its intestine. What is its intestine? It is its sewer system.

“Twenty-five million is the most moderate of the approximate figures given in the estimates of our specialist sciences.

“Science, after having groped for a long time, knows today that the most fertilising and the most effective of fertilisers is human fertiliser. The Chinese, we might say to our shame, knew this before us. There is not a Chinese peasant, as Eckeberg tells us, who goes to the city without bringing back, at the two ends of his bamboo, two buckets full of what we call filth. Thanks to human fertiliser, the earth in China is still as young as in the time of Abraham. Chinese wheat yields up to a hundred and twenty times the seed. There is no guano that can compare in fertility to the detritus of a capital. A great city is the most powerful of *stercoraria*. To employ the city to manure the plain would be a guarantee of success. If our gold is manure, on the other hand our manure is gold.

“What do we do with this manure-gold? We sweep it into the abyss.

“We send convoys of ships at great expense to collect the droppings of petrels and penguins at the South Pole, while at the same time the incalculable element of opulence that we have at hand is sent to the sea. All the human and animal manure that the world loses, returned to the earth instead of being thrown into the water, would be enough to feed the world.

“These piles of garbage at the corner of the terminals, these mud carts jolted at night in the streets, these horrible barrels of the road, these fetid flows of underground mud that the pavement hides from you, do you know what they are? They are meadows in bloom, they are green grass, they are wild thyme and sage, they are game, they are cattle, they are the satisfied lowing of the great oxen in the evening, they are perfumed hay, they are golden wheat, they are bread on your table, they are warm blood in your veins, they are health, they are joy, they are life. This is the will of this mysterious creation which is the transformation on earth and the transfiguration in heaven.

“Return this material to the great crucible and abundance will come out of it.

“The nutrition of the plains is the food of men. You are of course at liberty to waste this wealth, and to find me ridiculous into the bargain. That will be the masterpiece of your ignorance.

“Statisticians have calculated that France alone makes a payment of half a billion to the Atlantic every year through the mouths of its rivers. Note this: with these five hundred million one would pay one quarter of the national budget. The skill of man is such that he prefers to flush these five hundred million down the gutter. It is the very substance of the people that is carried away, here drop by drop, there in floods, by the miserable vomiting of our sewers into the rivers and the gigantic gathering of our rivers into the ocean. Each hiccup of one of our cesspools costs us a thousand francs. This has two results: land that is impoverished and water that stinks. Hunger emerging from the furrow and disease emerging from the river. It is well known, for example, that at this hour the Thames is poisoning London. As for Paris, in recent times most of the sewer outlets have had to be transported downstream below the last bridge.”

Victor Hugo, *Les Misérables*, 1862, p. 912.

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