‘Houseless — Homeless — Hopeless’: Crises of Home and Homelessness in the Late-Victorian Imagination

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Introduction

The centrality of home in ideological discourses of the Victorian period has been discussed amply.[1] Closely connected to concerns of domesticity, gender relations, and imperialism, the home has been understood as a central locus for the construction and performance of individual, familial, and societal identities. As Andrea Kaston Tange posits in her illuminating study on the intersections between architecture and identity, this specifically holds true for the Victorian middle class, whose “culture itself relied upon domesticity — both domestic ideals and the creation of a physical home — to create a fiction of a stable, knowable, homogenous middle class” (2010: 8). The fictitiousness of a truly uniform Victorian middle class does not oppose Susie Steinbach’s declaration of class as “meaningful social reality” (2016: 124), it rather substantiates Kaston Tange’s argument that “while careful management of physical home spaces was predicated on a middle-class need to uphold the boundaries that helped define both class position and gender norms within the hierarchies of Victorian culture, efforts to fix those boundaries often revealed their flexibility” (2010: 18). This flexibility, or mutability, of boundaries came to be more keenly felt in the closing decades of the nineteenth century, when Victorian Britain came to be permeated by a persistent sense of crisis — embodied in the term *fin-de-siècle*, a perceived sense of loss, instability, and impending doom that shaped Victorian society’s self-understanding (Stokes 1992: 8). This pervasive cultural and social pessimism also manifested itself in discourses surrounding home and domesticity.

Societal apprehensions surrounding the changing nature of the domestic sphere have been negotiated in texts conventionally grouped as *fin-de-siècle* Gothic literature. Canonical texts such as Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) or Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897) have been read for their fictionalization of contemporary anxieties re-

[1] See for example Davidoff and Hall 1987; Harris 1993.

garding economic precarity, gender dynamics, as well as fantasies of non-normative sexuality and degeneration (Hurley 1996: 42, 147). Regularly, these anxieties are negotiated via proxy figures: supernatural, monstrous, excessive antagonists whose otherness variously allows for a restoration of order, resolution of conflict, or, less reassuringly, points out instabilities, fissures, and dualities in Victorian ideas on morality.

A less-considered site of crisis for late-Victorian notions of home has been homelessness. Notoriously difficult to define, yet ubiquitous in increasingly urban environments, this paper advances the claim that homelessness can be read for its potential to point out and generate anxieties about the porosity and instability of home as a core ideological concept of the late-Victorian period. As large-scale urbanisation profoundly (re-)shaped the diverse populace of London, contemporary notions of degeneration became a discursive locale for conceptualising reasons and effects of metropolitan homelessness. A pseudoscientific term coined by psychologist Max Nordau, degeneration became the basis for a host of discriminatory medical and social practices: "[T]he propertied classes generally harboured anxieties about poverty and crime, about public health and national and imperial fitness […] Degeneration was […] an enabling strategy by which the conventional and respectable classes could justify and articulate their hostility to the deviant, the diseased and the subversive." (Greenslade 1994: 1-2). If we understand degeneration "as morbid deviation from an original and thus normative type" (Arata 2010: 15), the connection to conceptions of homelessness becomes immediately obvious: Specifically in contrast to middle-class identities which rested in no small part on the home as constitutive space, those who suffer from the debilitating effects of being homeless become marked as "deviant, criminal, psychotic, defective, simple, hysterical, diseased, primitive, regressive, or just dangerous" (Arata 2010: 16-17). The following sections aim to reassess the crisis of the domestic articulated in texts of the *fin-de-siècle* Gothic by centring the marginalized issue of homelessness through such ideas of degeneration as deviance. Principally, the present paper argues that homelessness is represented as an invasive phenomenon, blurring seemingly safe ideological demarcations between the public and the private. By extension, homeless characters in late-Victorian literary fiction are regularly presented as inhabiting liminal spaces and disturbing domestic scenes in ways similar to the excessively supernatural villains of the *fin-de-siècle* Gothic. Two texts from the period will serve as case in point for this claim: Richard Marsh's novel *The Beetle* (1897) and Charlotte Riddell's short story "The Old House in Vauxhall Walk" (1882). Both texts feature notable representations of homelessness and unhoused people whose position in society initially appears marginal, but who offer themselves to be read for their commentaries on the volatile nature of majoritarian imaginaries of home in late-Victorian fiction.

Home(lessness) and the *Fin-de-Siècle* Gothic

The *fin de siècle* has frequently been understood as a transitory period between the Victorian age and the immanent advent of modernity. Associated with a sense of "cultural decline," Margree and Randall ascertain, "[p]rocesses of modernisation had eroded many of the certainties of an earlier period, particularly mid-century confidence in the prospect of ongoing progress" (2012: 217). The ambivalence between narratives of progress and the fear of societal decline is reflected in the Gothic fiction of this period, which "provided a vehicle for exploring social transformations and the ambivalence they evoked […] includ[ing] the growth of the city and the rise of an urban poor, challenges to older Victorian ideologies of gender and sexuality, doubts about the validity and stability of Empire and fears about immigration" (ibid.: 218). Narratives representing and negotiating these uncertain positions mirror both society's conservative and subversive attitudes: "Gothic at the fin de siècle is able to combine two divergent impulses: one for the sublimity of the imagined destruction of all social normality; the other for the reassurance of its restoration." (ibid.: 219). This becomes evident in canonical texts such as Arthur Machen's *The Great God Pan* (1894) or Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), which revel in the corporeal excess of their monstrous antagonists who wreak havoc among their adversaries, at once upturning and confirming the status quo.

A prevalent site of such fin-de-siècle uncertainties was the home as an ideologically charged concept whose significance for much of the Victorian period can hardly be overstated. That the notion of strictly divided public and private spheres was already fraught with doubt in the mid-nineteenth century becomes obvious in John Ruskin's influential *Sesame and Lilies*, published in 1865: His ideal vision of home as "the place of Peace; the shelter, not only from all injury, but from all terror, doubt and division" is immediately followed by the anxious concession that the physical space can cease being a home as soon as "the anxieties of the outer life penetrate into it, and the inconsistently-minded, unknown, unloved, or hostile society of the outer world is allowed by either husband or wife to cross the threshold" (1998 [1865]: 77). Put differently: As categories of gender, profession, class, and religion became increasingly volatile, so did the space that fundamentally constituted them. Kathleen Arnold claims on the matter that "home is much more than simply a structure and thus is marked by heterogeneity rather than sameness. The stability that is projected onto the home is therefore more a dream than a reality; it is characterized by flux and uncertainty." (2004: 60). With the changing roles of both men and women, a transformed professional arena for the middle classes, and shifting attitudes toward religion and family, the home became evermore intertwined with the "society of the outer world" that Ruskin had cautioned against and that acted as microcosm for larger societal concerns (1998 [1865]: 77).

No small portion of *fin-de-siècle* Gothic writing translated these concerns about shifting ideals of home into stories that feature an invasion of the domestic sphere by hostile outside forces. From Count Dracula's zoomorphic invasion into Lucy Westenra's bedroom to the ghost stories of writers such as Elizabeth Gaskell and Margaret Oliphant, the representation of domestic spaces in the *fin de siècle* is far from reassuring: The by now conventional, if not exhausted, trope of the haunted or invaded house proliferated during a period which relished dramatizations of porous, unstable, and compromised boundaries. Jack Morgan describes haunted houses as the "sinister loci" (2002: 180) of much historical and contemporary popular Gothic fiction. Taking recourse to the Freudian distinction between the *heimlich* and the *unheimlich*, Morgan maintains how "[o]ur house defines our safe, familiar space" (ibid.: 182) and inversely discerns: "If the boundaries of the house, the sleeping place, can be transgressed, it is near to the fundamental defense line, the skin, being crossed. The tropics of threatened household are one more expression of the gothic mode's essential preoccupation with decline, wasting, abject exposure, and disintegration." (ibid.: 183-84). Ghostly apparitions and invasions thus point out the volatility of the domestic space as integral constituent to individual, familial, and societal identities. As such, the topos of the haunted house is one example of the troubled topographies that the Gothic conventionally figures as spatial representations of a sustained epistemological instability and lack of fixity.[2]

With the home as central locus for the negotiation of many crises of the *fin de siècle*, it seems surprising how little critical attention has been awarded to its inverse, homelessness.[3] To use the term 'homelessness' to speak about the very poor and destitute unhoused people of nineteenth-century London is somewhat of an anachronism — as the OED's frequency band for the word suggests, its usage was uncommon throughout the nineteenth and indeed much of the twentieth century, with a stark rise only in the 1970s ("Homelessness"). In the present paper, 'homelessness' is being used both for purposes of readability and, following Anthony Steinbock's deliberations, because of its conceptually relevant intertwinement with 'home' as an ideologically charged concept. Steinbock presupposes a "structural dyad" (1999: 1) between home and homelessness, suggesting that "[t]he people who are now called the

[2] This understanding is also part of Jack Morgan's larger argument that "[i]mages expressive of the dissolution of architecture, infrastructure, and spatial ordering, resonate in our psycho-physical imaginations, eliciting a sense of a generally dissolving integrity, an objectified schizophrenia" (2002: 84). For other studies that have considered the complex intertwinement between architecture, the articulation of identity in relation to space, and the uncanny, the reader may be directed toward Vidler 1994 and Wigley 1993. Seminally for Victorian Studies and in line with the present paper's approach, Robert Mighall notes how anxieties of the Victorian period are mapped onto and negotiated within urban spaces (2003: 77).

[3] For the context of the nineteenth century, some recent additions to the corpus of secondary research have been the following two illuminating studies which investigate specific subtypes of unhoused people: Davies 2021 and Robinson 2022. The present paper's use of 'the homeless' is most closely related to Robinson's category of the "casual paupers" as vagrant people in the city (2022: 91) and to Davies's understanding of the tramp as a "conception of homelessness that was responsive to the evolution of capitalism" (2021: 3).

homeless are no longer depicted with a positive identity; we do not use the language of rogue, vagabonds, beggar, bums, drifters [...]. Instead, groups of people are defined in terms of a lack — they are the home-less — and they are implicitly circumscribed by a solution to this lack of a home." (ibid.: 1-2). The increasing number of very poor and destitute people in London had been cause for worry long before the final decades of the century, as Alistair Robinson summarizes: "Victorian attitudes were […] characterized by a materialist approach to poverty and were concerned with diagnosing, defining and controlling the vagrant body." (2022: 3). This is reflected in legislative efforts of the period. Legislations such as the 1824 Vagrancy Act, the 1839 Metropolitan Police Act, or the 1864 Contagious Diseases Act all worked in different ways toward the aim of controlling and relieving the effects of extreme poverty and houselessness both for the people it affected and the public which felt disturbed by them (ibid.: 12-19). Despite these measures, homelessness remained a part of public life that inspired varied critical examination throughout the nineteenth century.

Seminal explorations of the life and circumstances of the poor and homeless had been made by Henry Mayhew and Charles Booth in the 1850s and 60s. Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor* is a four-volume-spanning collection of newspaper articles, initially published in the *Morning Chronicle*. Meticulously compiled, substantiated with figures, illustrations, and verbatim excerpts from conversations, the reports aim to depict the life of London "street folk" (Mayhew 2020 [1851]: 1). He initially acknowledges the difficulty of unambiguously categorizing those people who "obtain their living in the streets of the metropolis" (ibid.: 3) but soon falls back on the rhetoric of scientific racism typical of the period. Surmising that "in each of the classes […] there is a greater development of the animal than of the intellectual or moral nature of man" (ibid.: 3), Mayhew concludes:

> […] they are all more or less distinguished for their high cheek-bones and protruding jaws — for their use of a slang language — for their lax ideas of property — for their general improvidence — their repugnance to continuous labour — their disregard of female honour — their love of cruelty — their pugnacity — and their utter want of religion. (ibid.: 3-4)

Mayhew's adamant attempts to bring order into "the industry, the want, and the vice of the great Metropolis" (ibid.: iii) mirror prominent suspicions about those whose lives largely, if not entirely, took place in the streets, namely that they would lack habits and characteristics associated with a functioning domestic setting, such as diligence, restraint, and piety. The ideological nexus between the home and respectability is thus fortified, while inversely reinforcing prejudices against the homeless. Anticipating many of the aforementioned concerns of the *fin de siècle*, the rhetoric permeating Mayhew's writing makes clear how homelessness and the people it affected evoked a number of anxieties regarding degeneration, economic precarity, urbanization, the volatility of

class identity, and the virility of the British Empire. Concurrently, *London Labour and the London* Poor, in its appeal to assume responsibility anticipating Kipling's "The White Man's Burden" (1899), implores the wealthier classes of the city to improve the "condition of a class of people whose misery, ignorance, and vice" exists right next to and "amidst all the immense wealth and great knowledge of 'the first city in the world'" (Mayhew 2020 [1851]: iv). Descriptions that abound with racialized, animalized, derogatory, and paternalistic vocabulary are used and many of the discursive practices used to conceptualize imperial invasive forces are mapped onto the domain of homelessness.

In contrast to Henry Mayhew's decidedly moralistic approach to categorizing the impoverished and homeless, Charles Booth's seminal investigation into the *Life and Labour of the People in London* obtains a more descriptive sociological standpoint. Published and revised over the span of seventeen years (1886-1903), Booth and his team presented a scrupulous quantitative and qualitative investigation of the occupations, housing conditions, and leisure activities of the working-class citizens of London. The survey's meticulous detail-work finally resulted in the *Descriptive Map of London Poverty*, a cartographic depiction of the City of London according to the relative wealth of each street's inhabitants. Apart from the fact that Booth's accompanying explanatory notes in text form did much to publicly "evoke the somber landscapes of the East End" (Seabrook 2013: 130), his maps also showed how closely affluent middle-class, comparatively well-off working class, and destitute paupers and houseless people actually lived together. In the East End more than elsewhere, the map's colour scale indicating household income shows overlaps between the streets, blocks, and houses occupied by the "[f]airly comfortable" with "[g]ood ordinary earnings," the [v]ery poor, casual" people suffering from "[c]hronic want," and those who even Booth, elsewhere striving for objective categorizations, labels the "[l]owest class" who putatively are "vicious, semi-criminal" (Booth 2025 [1886-1903]: n.pag.). Both Mayhew and Booth, then, somewhat anxiously noted the geographical proximity between the homes of the respectable and the destitute, a proximity which, in the face of the porous boundaries dramatized by the *fin-de-siècle* Gothic, fuelled anxieties about the home as penetrable fortress. As an omnipresent phenomenon on the streets of London many wished to do away with entirely in favour of policing public life, homelessness challenged bourgeois notions of public order, respectable work, dress, and manners.

Reading Homelessness

Echoing several of these bourgeois trepidations, Richard Marsh's *The Beetle* and Charlotte Riddell's "The Old House in Vauxhall Walk" are examples of late-nineteenth century literature which may be read for their Gothic portrayals of homeless people as disturbances to the domestic space. In *The Beetle*, the homeless clerk Holt becomes at

once victim of and adjunct to the eponymous Beetle creature that seeks to wreak havoc in bourgeois London society. In "The Old House in Vauxhall Walk," the enigmatic protagonist Graham is introduced as a homeless man but ends up as the well-situated owner of the eponymous haunted house.

Despite having enjoyed relative popularity during their lifetimes, both authors have received comparatively little contemporary critical attention. Marsh's writing has been analysed for its contributions to *fin de siècle* discourses on gender (Margree et al. 2018) as well as degeneration and its implications of the imperial other (Karschay 2015). Riddell's fiction has been read for its intertwining of the supernatural and industrial capitalism (Colella 2016) as well as its representations of female professionalisation (Smith 2010). Adding to these investigations, the present article suggests reading the texts for the profound questions they raise about the stability and (im-)permeability of the home when confronted with the homeless. In a number of ways, they highlight the porosity of social identities and the material home; they pose spectral yet corporeal threats to the division between public and private. The following reading investigates the porous politics of home and homelessness in these texts under the following aspects: narrative structure and agency, liminal geographies, and the nexus between homelessness and the supernatural, all of which are tied to the constitution of social identity and discursive efficacy.

Narrative Structure and Agency

The Beetle was published in the same year as *Dracula* and purportedly arose out of a bet between Richard Marsh and Bram Stoker on who could write the more shocking Gothic thriller. Indeed, Marsh's novel shares with the by now vastly more popular vampire tale a number of stylistic similarities: "[T]he narrative is related by differing voices of characters involved in the drama, and the final sections involve a race against time to save the heroine and destroy the monster." (Davies 2007: i). The ultimate section of the text is narrated by private investigator Augustus Champnell. In his "conclusion of the matter" (Marsh 2018 [1897]: 359), the detective takes on a metanarrative role in explaining the origins of the multivocal reports that make up *The Beetle*. The involvement of the Holmesian Champnell, Davies claims, can be understood as an appreciative "nod to the crime fiction stories of the day" (2007: x). However, significantly, Champnell's account does not contribute to a rational or scientific explanation of *The Beetle*'s mysterious events, but rather leaves both readers and characters in indefinite suspension and confirms many of the "uncertainties and imponderables" (ibid.: xi) of the late Victorian period when concluding: "[E]xperience has taught me that there are indeed more things in heaven and earth that are dreamed of in our philosophy […]" (Marsh 2018 [1897]: 362). I suggest that this perhaps most poignant articulation of the novel's epistemological uncertainty is what renders it truly

fin-de-siècle, an uncertainty that can be connected to the presentation of homelessness in the text.

The portion of the narrative ascribed to the homeless clerk Robert Holt is presented as vivid first-person narrative. Holt, recently having become homeless after losing his employment and being "the victim of bad luck" (ibid.: 20), roams the deserted nocturnal streets of London in search for shelter. He ends up breaking into the house that the eponymous Egyptian Beetle creature inhabits while plotting its revenge on eminent politician Paul Lessingham. Holt is mesmerized by the Beetle and thus coerced to be its aid, before eventually dying of emaciation. At no point in the sixty pages of his account can the reader suspect Detective Champnell's concluding revelation that "that portion of this strange history which purports to be 'The Surprising Narration of Robert Holt,' was compiled from the statements which Holt made to Atherton, and to Miss Lindon — as she then was — when, a mud-stained, shattered derelict, he lay at the lady's father's house." (ibid.: 361-62). Although an in-depth discussion of Marjorie Lindon's character goes beyond the scope of the present paper,[4] there are several points worth noting here. By engaging in politics and setting out on her own to destroy the Beetle, Marjorie trespasses the gendered division of the spheres both figuratively and literally speaking. As a consequence, she is abducted by the creature, "stripped to the skin" from her "feminine glories" (ibid.: 288) and instead dressed in the homeless Holt's "old togs" (ibid.: 317). So disposed of any visual marker of her identity, "Miss Marjorie Lindon, the lovely daughter of a famous house; the wife-elect of a coming statesman" is being mistaken for a male "tramp, all rags and tatters" (ibid.: 320). Although she is rescued in the end, she remains "for something like three years under medical supervision as a lunatic" (ibid.: 359). Not only do Holt and Lindon seem "particularly vulnerable to the Beetle's degenerative influence, as they both inhabit an ideologically problematic position with regard to the novel's heroic men" (Karschay 2015: 149). What is more, in Marjorie's fate, the text conflates anxieties about the purported masculinity of emancipated women and the urban homeless, as both figures transgress societal boundaries and thus call into question the integrity of the domestic sphere.

The narration, far from being the first-person account it presents itself as, is thus thrice removed: told by Holt in fatally ill health to two other characters of the novel and then passed on to the detective. It remains unclear who would have transcribed the statements made by Holt into the narrative, but the obfuscated origin fits with the fragmented nature of the story at large: The fainting spells and loss of memory and bodily autonomy Holt experiences are exacerbated by the Beetle's mesmeric influence on him. Significantly, though, Holt's deteriorating physical and mental state are not primarily caused by the Beetle: As the former roams through the streets without sense

[4] For this, the interested reader may be directed toward Julian Wolfreys's discussion of the New Woman's fate (2004: 27-30).

of orientation or purpose, he already experiences a fit of "overpowering giddiness" which "appeared to last for hours" and renders him feeling "backboneless" (Marsh 2018 [1897]: 8). It is this state which is later echoed in his "helplessness" (ibid.: 15) and effeminate "passive obedience" (ibid.: 19) under the Beetle's influence. Put differently, what the narrative presents as the emasculating and ruinous effect of the Beetle's invasion is acutely inherent in Holt's preceding state of homelessness. As conventionally, "[m]en experienced a loss of masculine self-respect through unemployment [and] a lack of housing, […] [t]he novel emphasises that Holt's decreased status is as distressing as is his hunger and desolation" (Rebry 2016: 7). The gendered descriptions of Holt's deterioration fortify the ideological connections between home and gender mentioned above: Weakened to the extreme, his attempts to "play the man" (Marsh 2018 [1897]: 13) fail and he must surrender to being "no longer a man [as his] manhood was merged in [the Beetle's]" (ibid.: 19). The lack of home, the novel suggests, puts a previously respectable clerk in a state of abject misery, unable to take agency over both his life and narrative. It is not only the Beetle's influence, but significantly his homeless state which compromises a stable performance of (heterosexual) masculinity.

In contrast to *The Beetle*'s multivocal narration, Charlotte Riddell's short story "The Old House in Vauxhall Walk" maintains its singular narrative voice throughout: A third-person heterodiegetic narrator focalizes through the protagonist Graham Coulton. Despite the plot's ostensible focus on the supernatural haunting of the eponymous house, the tale's actual mystery appears to be its protagonist. The first paragraph opens with Coulton's exclamation: "Houseless — homeless — hopeless" (Riddell 2020 [1882]: 265) and initially implies that the "young man who hurried along Vauxhall Walk one rainy winter's night, with no overcoat on his shoulders and no hat on his head" must be one of "the weary, the desolate, the hungry, the forsaken, the waifs and strays of struggling humanity that are always coming and going, cold, starving and miserable, over the pavements of Lambeth Parish" (ibid.). As the second paragraph interjects, however, the exclamation opening the story is uttered by "a person who looked like and who was a gentleman" (ibid.) and, in rhetoric reminiscent of Mayhew's pseudoscientific racism, specifies: "His boots were not worn down at the heels or broken at the toes […]. His clothes were good and fashionably cut […]. His face was not pinched with famine or lined with wicked wrinkles, or brutalised by drink and debauchery" (ibid.: 266). The mystery of the protagonist's origin and aim is then complicated once more by the text's insistence that the evening is "not an evening to be abroad without a home to go to, or a sixpence in one's pocket, yet this was the position of the young gentleman" who finds himself "tired and cold and hungry, and he saw no prospect save of pacing the streets all night" (ibid.). As it turns out, Coulton is the son of a wealthy businessman who had a dispute with his father. His principal reason for roaming the streets is his reluctance to reconcile with his father, not true economic precarity as in Robert Holt's case. Yet, his (temporary) homelessness provides the same momentum for the plot of the short story

as does Robert Holt's homelessness in *The Beetle.* Both texts open *in medias res* and the desperately aimless vagabonding of the two characters leads them both to enter ostensibly sheltering houses, setting the plots' events in motion. Homelessness, the texts thus suggest, harbours narrative potential due to its central ambiguity lying in its transgressiveness: It is the last station of misery for the ailing characters, yet the starting point of narrative.

Liminal Geographies

Despite their differences in socioeconomic standing and situation — Holt as unemployed clerk, truly homeless, Coulton as temporarily displaced, yet financially secured gentleman — the two characters are united in their nocturnal search for shelter. After having been rejected from several overcrowded workhouses and casual wards, Robert Holt's narration begins with his plight to find *any* shelter which allows him "to keep body and soul together" (Marsh 2018 [1897]: 7). Graham Coulton "would have given much to have had a room, or even part of one" (Riddell 2020 [1882]: 266) — in short, both men express the urgency to escape their states of houselessness and deprivation. However, both houses they find shelter in quickly turn out to be less than ideal lodgings: The "inviting window" (Marsh 2018 [1897]: 11) Robert Holt uses to slip into the detached villa he stumbles upon leads him into the Beetle's dwelling and results in him "shriveling into nothingness" (ibid.: 19) under the creature's mesmeric influence. Graham Coulton, initially "thankful" (Riddell 2020 [1882]: 271) and "satisfied" (ibid.: 272) to have found shelter in the house in Vauxhall Walk, soon feels overwhelmed "with a fear and an agony upon him such as he had never before felt in all his existence" (ibid.: 275) when he experiences the first episode of spectral haunting. In both texts, the scarcely furnished houses, abandoned by their previous residents, derelict, and closely associated with malevolent forces, attract the despairing homeless who have no other place to turn to, but whose situation is only exacerbated by houses that harbour the supernatural.

The ambiguous character of the houses as shelters and, concurrently, spaces of dreadful supernatural hauntings is further emphasized by their location. As *The Beetle*'s Robert Holt is being rejected from overcrowded shelters and workhouses, his roaming leads him to Hammersmith, one of the many suburbs of Victorian London:

> [T]he locality which I was entering appeared unfinished. I seemed to be leaving civilization behind me. The path was unpaved; the road rough and uneven, as if it had never been properly made. Houses were few and far between. Those which I did encounter seemed […] amid the general desolation, to be cottages which were crumbling to decay […]. It was as if I was in a land of desolation […], [a] strange and inhospitable place. (Marsh 2018 [1897]: 7-8)

This sceptical appraisal of the suburb falls in line with Sarah Bilston's assessment of the suburb in the Victorian imagination at large. "On the margins between country and city," (2019: 3) she maintains, the suburb "occupied hitherto unimaginable amounts of geographical space" (ibid.: 5). This peculiarly modern marginality and ambiguity was not lost on the Victorians, who "were intensely conscious of the gap between what the new suburbs were designed to offer — consistency, legibility — and what they were" (ibid.: 8). This gap translated into the fictional representation of the homes erected in suburbs which "tend to be either dull, ridiculous, monstrous, or all three" (ibid.: 7). The latter is certainly true for *The Beetle*'s suburb, a space which, although newly developed, is already replete with decaying matter. No utopian space for Londoners to enjoy an urban lifestyle without the incessant bustle of the inner city, the "suburb is a dangerous landscape the visitor must escape, a place of labyrinths, a terrifying, threatening terrain" (ibid.: 13). "Holt is literally leaving civilised London for a more primitive mode of existence," Minna Vuohlainen remarks (2006: 121), and Stephan Karschay notes how the suburb becomes "decrepit hinterland […] marked by an evolutionary regressiveness" (2015: 137). Robert Holt's loneliness and desolation are thus at once mirrored and fortified by the text's gloomy portrayal of a suburban landscape which offers no secure housing opportunities but instead embodies *fin-de-siècle* fantasies of a modernity which, despite its sustained association with progress, is already decaying.

Despite its relative proximity to the City of Westminster, consulting Charles Booth's aforementioned poverty map discloses that the eponymous Vauxhall Walk of Riddell's story is located in Lambeth parish, a formerly poor, yet old area of London. The house in which Graham Coulton seeks shelter mirrors this: "the houses, so large and good, [were] once inhabited by well-to-do citizens, now let out for the most part in floors to weekly tenants" (Riddell 2020 [1882]: 266), and the "old, old house with a long wide hall […], oak floorings, and mahogany doors […] still spoke mutely of the wealth and stability of the original owner" (ibid.: 268). Coulton then by chance discovers that, because of a persistent haunting, the opulent house had been let to his family's former manservant for a low price. This detail, I argue, offers itself to be read for its comment on the volatile nature of the Victorian home. Originally the residence of a well-to-do family, the house is now haunted by its current owner, a penny-pinching spinster, and as such has become uninhabitable for anyone but lower-working-class servants and homeless people whose economic precarity forces them to settle for inadequate housing. The house hence ceases to be a safe and respectable home and instead becomes a palimpsest of generational avarice, misery for the poor, the disenfranchised, and even the supernatural.

The Nexus between Homelessness and the Supernatural

The most significant connection between Victorian politics of home and the presence of homeless characters in the texts by Riddell and Marsh becomes apparent in this nexus suggested between homelessness and the supernatural. In *The Beetle,* Robert Holt is the first character who is in direct contact and communication with the insectile invader. Being particularly vulnerable due to his homelessness, he becomes its most troubled and seriously affected victim, losing first his mental and physical integrity and later his life. Concurrently, under the Beetle's hypnotic influence, Holt is the one executing the burglary into Paul Lessingham's house to steal some private letters and to send Lessingham into hysterics after revealing that the Beetle will haunt him (Marsh 2018 [1897]: 48-50). Dressed in one of the Beetle's cloaks, magically equipped with some of its supernatural powers, the identity of the homeless man is thus fused with that of the monstrous invader. While conscious of himself being the "hapless slave of another's will," Holt must concede that committing the burglary happens "so naturally, that a judge and jury would have been with difficulty persuaded that they were not the product of my own volition" (ibid.: 42-43). The text thus remains inconclusive about the extent of Holt's agency; the invasion of the homeless man, however, undoubtedly perpetuates that of the foreign gothic monster. "[T]he threat to civilization," Margree observes, "comes not solely from the archaic and the foreign but already exists in the center of modernity itself." (2007: 65). The supernatural's ruinous effects are multiplied through its intimate alliance with the homeless and contribute to the sustained physical and ideological disruption of the home as safe refuge.

In Riddell's text, the homeless Graham Coulton is similarly aligned with the ghost that haunts the house in Vauxhall Walk. Even though, intermittently, the protagonist feels "[s]ick almost with terror" (Riddell 2020 [1882]: 282) when observing the spectral events, it is remarkable how the mental and physical exhaustion he initially suffers from are not exacerbated but indeed improved upon by the appearance of the ghost. Looking "more bright and gay than usual" (ibid.: 281) the morning after having encountered the apparition, he sets out to uncover who murdered the old woman who haunts the house. The burglars responsible for her death return to the house, stab Coulton in the same manner they assaulted her, but fail to flee the scene and are detained eventually. The arrest of her murderers prompts the old woman's ghost to reveal to Coulton the hiding place of her fortunes and to retire, leaving Coulton the financially secure new owner of the house. The text thus complicates one of the central premises of the late-Victorian ghost story, namely that its spectral hauntings represent "an anxiety about the 'wealth' invested in the home and middle-class concerns about who really 'owns' such places" (Smith 2007: 89). While this can be convincingly applied to a reading of the old woman's ghost as tenacious occupant of the house, it can also be extended to the presence of the homeless man, who, through complicity with the supernatural, gains wealth and

property. The association of homelessness with the spectral not only places the former in conceptual proximity of the latter, but it also articulates "class anxieties which obliquely touch upon the perils of home ownership" (ibid.: 94). The house becomes a site for the negotiation of class conflicts preventing any sustainable demarcation between the real and the fantastic, wealth and poverty, public and private.

Conclusion

The portrayals of the homeless characters' plights in both Riddell's and Marsh's texts offer themselves to be read for society's inability to not only metaphorically but quite literally accommodate marginal figures. In these late-Victorian texts, homelessness becomes a slippery, inconclusive issue; it obfuscates any unambiguous concept of individual identity and is thus positioned fundamentally *other* to normative politics of home and identity. It would be an overstatement to say that *fin-de-siècle* Gothic *equates* the homeless with the monstrous or ghostly. However, the texts discussed in the present article do point out uneasy overlaps between the two: In the middle-class imagination, homeless people are associated with moral degeneration and a loss of agency. This conceptually approximates them to the transgressive monstrosity of Gothic monsters that represent the abject other. At the same time, the presence of the homeless in domestic spaces discloses that these spaces are already upset, ghostly, or damaged. Home, the presence of the houseless characters iterates, is always already in the process of decay. The flexibility of social identities — the working-class clerk becoming destitute, the homeless man turning out to be of good social standing and coming into great wealth — further emphasizes the genre's preoccupation with the dramatization of "social tensions which characterised London at the time" (ibid.: 101). In both *The Beetle* and "The Old House in Vauxhall Walk," home as the hearth of late-Victorian domestic ideology reveals these relations: It is at once central to the self-fashioning of the middle classes *and* a locus of insecurity, ambiguity, and fluctuating societal norms.

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