

# A Sewer is a Mistake



From *Les Misérables*, by Victor Hugo, 1867

Paris throws five million a year into the sea. And this not metaphorically. How, and what way? Day and night. With what purpose? None. With what thought? Without thinking about it. For what use? For nothing. By means of what organ? By means of its intestine. What is its intestine? Its Sewer...

After long experimentation, science now knows that the most fertilizing and the most effective of manures is that of man. The Chinese, we must say to our shame, knew it before us. No Chinese peasant, Eckerberg tells us, goes to the city without carrying back, at the two ends of his bamboo pole, two buckets full of what we call filth. Thanks to human fertilizer, the earth in China is still as young as in the days of Abraham. Chinese wheat yields a hundred and twenty-fold.

There is no guano comparable in fertility to the detritus of a capital. A great city is the most powerful of dung producers. To employ the city to enrich the plain would be a sure success. If our gold is manure, on the other, our manure is gold. What is done with this gold, manure? It is swept into the abyss.

At great expense, we send out convoys of ships, to gather up at the South Pole the droppings of petrels and penguins, and the incalculable element of wealth that we have at hand we send to the sea. All the human and animal manure that the world loses, if restored to the land instead of being thrown into the water, would suffice to nourish the world...

This garbage heaped up beside the stone blocks, the tumbrels of mire jolting through the streets at night, the awful scavengers' carts, the fetid streams of subterranean slime that the pavement hides from you, do you know what all this is? It is the flowering meadow, it is the green grass, it is marjoram and thyme and sage, it is game, it is cattle, it is the satisfied lowing of huge oxen in the evening, it is perfumed hay, it is golden wheat, it is bread on your table, it is joy, it is life. So wills that mysterious creation, transformation on earth and transfiguration in heaven.

Put that into the great crucible; your abundance will spring from it. The nutrition of the plains make the nourishment of men. You have the power to throw away this wealth, and to think me ridiculous into the bargain. That will be the crowning glory of your ignorance...

The present system does harm in attempting to do good. The intention is good, the result is sad. Men think they are purging the city; they are emaciating the population...

A sewer is a mistake.