

**Neo-Victorianism's Inhospitable Hospitality:  
A Case Study of Michel Faber's *The Crimson Petal and the White* (2002)**

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Abstract:

The Long Nineteenth Century has proven exceedingly hospitable to creative artists' historical re-imaginings. Yet the tendency of neo-Victorian works to focus on the nineteenth century's darker traumatic aspects troubles conceptualisations of ideal hospitality's crucial link with ethics. This article explores what I term neo-Victorianism's curious 'inhospitable hospitality', using Michel Faber's *The Crimson Petal and the White* (2002) as a case study to expose troubling gender biases and hierarchies of Otherness at the heart of hospitality. Hospitality, I contend, is *predicated* on inhospitality, accounting for neo-Victorian violations of Otherness and questioning our own subjectivity as liberal subjects.

Keywords: *The Crimson Petal and the White*, Jacques Derrida, Michel Faber, inhospitable hospitality, Emmanuel Levinas, Otherness

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As evidenced by the impressive number of literary and cinematic prize winners and contenders set in the Long Nineteenth Century, this particular historical period has proven exceptionally hospitable to the creative imaginations of artists around the globe and, in turn, has received a warm welcome from appreciative international audiences and critics. From the various 2013 BAFTA, Academy Awards, and Golden Globes garnered by Steve McQueen's *12 Years a Slave* (2013) and two years later by Alejandro G. Iñárritu's *The Revenant* (2015), Eleanor Catton's 2013 Man Booker Prize win for *The Luminaries* (2013), the consecutive awards of the 2016 and 2017 Costa Book of the Year to Francis Hardinge's Young Adult fiction *The Lie Tree* (2015) and Sebastian Barry's *The End of Days* (2016) respectively, to Colson Whitehead's 2017 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction for *The Underground Railroad* (2016), the revisited nineteenth century has firmly established itself within present-day cultural consciousness.[1] We have become accustomed to the omnipresence of neo-Victorianism on our bookshelves, theatre stages, television, cinema, and computer screens – with 'neo-Victorianism' here employed in the broadest globalised sense of the term, unrestricted to texts' specifically British provenance, histories, settings, or protagonists. We have made ourselves vicariously 'at home' in the nineteenth century, just as the period has become a permanent guest within postmodernity. Indeed neo-Victorianism, I propose, repeatedly blurs the roles of host and *arrivant* in this hospitable encounter.

Linked as it is to sales figures and profit margins, however, the appeal of neo-Victorian works confounds the disinterested selflessness of ideal hospitality as elaborated by Emmanuel Levinas and especially Jacques Derrida, centred on a protective concern for the guest's or visitant's wellbeing. Moreover, upon closer analysis, neo-Victorian fictions' particular brand of hospitality assumes a rather disturbing cast, preparing not so much a welcome as an *unwelcome* for us. Few such fictions promote the comfortable nostalgic immersion in period sights and sounds via a 'hosting' of boundless conviviality and humanism as found, for instance, at the close of Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* (1843). Nor do most of these narratives unreservedly celebrate the indomitable optimism of the age, with its voyages of exploration and discovery, world-changing scientific and technological advances, and innovative social and legal reforms. More often, neo-Victorian texts hone in on nineteenth-century injustices, abuses, and traumas, ranging from violent crime, misogyny, child abuse, sexual exploitation, and class iniquities to racism, oppressive colonialism, inter-cultural conflict, and even genocide. Indeed, without a good dose of these period 'horrors', neo-Victorian works are likely to disappoint audience expectations. As Christian Gutleben

remarked in his ground-breaking *Nostalgic Postmodernism: The Victorian Tradition and the Contemporary British Novel* (2001), neo-Victorianism's engagement with "the unsavoury" in all its manifestations often goes beyond "serv[ing] a didactic function" to become "part of a generic convention" or even an outright "anti-Victorian stance", so as to precipitate audiences' already primed responses of moral outrage and disgust (129, 131). Drawing on Julia Kristeva's concept of abjection, Gutleben further links neo-Victorian reader response to "a new *Zeitgeist*" or "postmodern cult of [...] the monstrous", which vitiates the very possibility of "moral edification" by disintegrating "the stable, reassuring world of Christian values" so closely linked with nineteenth-century fiction (133-134) – and, one might add, with Biblical hospitality narratives also, although the latter derive from the Old rather than New Testament. Paradoxically, then, we seem to be most attracted by the *inhospitality* of the Long Nineteenth Century to modern-day liberal consciousness.

This article explores what I term neo-Victorianism's curious 'inhospitable hospitality' by using Michel Faber's iconic neo-sensation fiction *The Crimson Petal and the White* (2002) as a case study to deconstruct the unacknowledged assumptions underpinning Levinas's and Derrida's notions of hospitality. In particular, I confront hospitality's inherent gender bias and unpick its problematic implications for neo-Victorianism's preferred tropes clustering around trauma and abjection (primarily female abjection). Thereafter, I consider how re-imagined nineteenth-century encounters with Otherness in various neo-Victorian works manipulate audience affect and mirror our own negotiations with the Victorians as our perceived temporal and ideological 'Others'. Yet if refusing to afford comforting escapism, what exactly do neo-Victorian texts promise time-travelling audiences by way of welcome and temporary sojourn in the past? With what kind of fare are we feasted as honoured guests? What kind of sacrificial gifts are offered up on our behalf? Reading Faber's novel through the lens of inhospitable hospitality enables a clearer understanding of the often conflicted gender and identity politics involved in neo-Victorian works' production and consumption. Not least, such readings complicate our assumed modern-day superior liberalism and tolerance, or even celebration, of Otherness.

## 1. Questionable Hospitality and Hierarchies of Otherness

The oft-cited introduction to Faber's *The Crimson Petal and the White* plunges its readers directly into an extended playful variation on the trope of hospitality. The scene evokes the *arrivant's* intrusiveness as outsider and Other, the *hôte's* invitation and protective concern for his guest, and a disturbing potential for hostility arising from the encounter – all elements of the Biblical 'mirror' scenes from Genesis and Judges, in which Derrida implicitly anchors his concept of hospitality. Derrida briefly mentions these stories from the Old Testament at the end of his Fifth Seminar from 17 January 1996, entitled 'Step of Hospitality/No Hospitality', in *Of Hospitality* (2000). The first tale from Genesis 19(1-30) centres on Lot, his wife and daughters, and Lot's angelic guests, who preserve the family from Sodom and Gomorrah's subsequent destruction, although Lot's wife, of course, is turned into a pillar of salt for casting a forbidden backward glance at her lost home. Late into Faber's novel, the story of "Lots' daughters" is briefly mentioned by the philanthropist Emmeline Fox as inappropriate reading for children (Faber 2003, 708). The other story from Judges 19(1-30) involves a man from Gibeah giving a night's lodging to the Levite from Ephraim, a travelling stranger accompanied by his concubine. In both scenarios, hospitality transcends self-interest, even superseding the host's familial obligations when the strangers, whom he has welcomed into his home, are threatened by members of his adopted community and he proposes to sacrifice his female offspring in their stead. Indeed, Faber quite deliberately constructs his narrator's

warning 'welcome' to the reader as a comparable scene of arrival and imperilment in potentially hostile, foreign territory:

Watch your step. Keep your wits about you; you will need them. This city I am bringing you to is vast and intricate, and you have not been here before. You may imagine, from other stories you've read, that you know it well, but those stories flattered you, welcoming you as a friend, treating you as if you belonged. The truth is that you are an alien from another time and place altogether. [2]

When I first caught your eye and you decided to come with me, you were probably thinking you would simply arrive and make yourself at home. Now that you're actually here, the air is bitterly cold, and you find yourself being led along in complete darkness, stumbling on uneven ground, recognising nothing. Looking right and left, blinking against the icy wind, you realise you have entered an unknown street of unlit houses full of unknown people. (Faber 2003, 3-4).

The reader, addressed as an "alien", is constructed as a vulnerable visitor without bearings in strange surroundings, which require care to navigate lest they prove his downfall. Note that I deliberately employ the male pronoun here, as Faber's text implicitly assumes/constructs a male reader-*flâneur* intent on seeking out erotic scenes, pleasures, and titillations in Victorian London's streets, brothels and bedrooms. In this sense, female readers, from the outset, are doubly Othered as virtual *arrivants*, since excluded from the proffered male-male hospitality, much as are Lot's daughters, Lot's wife, and the Levite's concubine, as I argue below. Although uncannily familiar, the place of sojourn, seemingly "welcoming you as a friend", proves deceptive: the guest always remains out-of-place, occupying a liminal position on sufferance only as temporarily tolerated outsider, always at risk on account of his difference for all that it might *seem* "as if you belonged". Even upon eventual arrival in his host's abode, preparing to "make yourself at home", the visitor will remain Other in the midst of "unknown people", to whom he in turn remains unknown and thus readily dispensable.

Perhaps not coincidentally, the stranger's "stumbling" progress in the extract above recalls Lot's and his family's desperate flight from Sodom into a terrifying strange new world, where everything they have known is destroyed, leaving the one-time host an estranged wanderer without bearings, awaiting his own arrival somewhere else among strangers. Crucially, as Judith Still notes, in both the Biblical narratives of Lot and of the man from Gibeah, "the host is himself a guest in the community rather than a native" (2010, 67), comparable to the status of Faber's narrator. Hence a sort of doubled hospitality applies: the resident *arrivant* acts as host to another, more recently arrived stranger merely passing through. Analogously, Faber projects himself back in time to take up his imaginative temporal abode in nineteenth-century London, from where, in his guise as 'resident alien' and narrator-host, he welcomes the novel's readers.

Significantly, Derrida makes reference to the Biblical stories in order to distinguish conditional hospitality (which does not welcome the Other unreservedly) and unconditional, infinite, or absolute hospitality (which does). He posits a crucial difference between the socially regulated laws of hospitality, which accord the Other guest right but always remain circumscribed by specific expectations, rules, and customs that determine the respective roles of *hôte* and *arrivant* and govern their interaction, and *the* law of radical hospitality exempt from any anticipation, regulation, and imposed or reciprocal obligation. Note that complying with the laws of socially regulated hospitality is still a hospitality *of sorts*, albeit a qualified, limited, and imperfect hospitality. Elsewhere, Derrida also refers to hospitality in this everyday rule-bound sense as "No Hospitality"/"*Pas d'hospitalité*" (2000b, 75), because "'pure' hospitality" (Derrida 1998, 70), in his terms, involves an element of unknowingness, surprise, and disinterestedness. The host must not anticipate the guest, know of his coming, make preparations for his arrival, or calculate on any future benefit or recompense for himself

from the encounter (e.g. praise or honour for the host's virtuous extension of hospitality, the eventual enjoyment of reciprocated hospitality in his guest's own home when the roles of host and guest will be reversed, or rescue from impending danger as bestowed on Lot). Hence the *hôte* and *arrivant* cannot assume – in both senses of the word, as *presuming* and *accepting responsibility for* – the culturally constructed, predetermined roles of the (conditional) host and guest. Derrida thus emphasises the necessity of “absolute surprise”, describing pure hospitality's unconditional encounter with the Other as a “visitation” (with all its religious connotations) as opposed to a visit resulting from an issued “invitation” (2002b, 70). Yet surely even at the unlooked-for first encounter, when the host extends a wholly spontaneous, unplanned welcome to a complete stranger, expectations *cannot but arise*. In effect, to express a welcome like ‘please treat my home as though it were your own’ encompasses a range of implicit promises and enticements: of refuge, a bed, food, company and temporary community. Simultaneously, it precludes other possibilities: the *arrivant* does not expect to be refused a place to rest, be forced to go thirsty or hungry, to be ignored, treated as a threat, injured or killed as an unwanted intruder.[3] Likewise, no audience comes innocently to the neo-Victorian past without preconceptions and anticipations of what the encounter will entail.

In this sense, absolute hospitality is always deferred, “an impossible ideal” (O’Gorman 2006, 52) rather than an attainable state, a receding horizon rather than a specific point of arrival, a boundless promise rather than a particular fulfilment, “an unlivable contradiction” (Derrida 2002a, 360) rather than an actual experience. Derrida terms this hospitality's “self-deconstruction”, that is, “an experience” that “can only [...] produce itself as impossible, only be possible on the condition of its impossibility”, by “remain[ing] forever on the threshold of itself” (2000c, 5, 14). The continuation of *The Crimson Petal and the White*'s opening passage suggests as much, highlighting this essential dilemma of inevitable deferment and the unavoidable ‘arousal’ of expectations, which preclude absolute hospitality.

Yet you did not choose me blindly. Certain expectations were aroused. Let's not be coy: you were hoping I would satisfy all the desires you're too shy to name, or at least show you a good time. [...] Now you hesitate [...]. But you've allowed yourself to be led astray, and it's too late to turn back now. [...]

The main characters in this story, with whom you want to become intimate, are nowhere near here. They aren't expecting you; you mean nothing to them. If you think they're going to get out of their warm beds and travel miles to meet you, you are mistaken.

You may wonder, then, why did I bring you here? Why this delay in meeting the people you thought you were going to meet? The answer is simple: their servants wouldn't have let you through the door.

What you lack is the right connections, and that is what I brought you here to make: connections. A person who is worth nothing must introduce you to a person worth next-to-nothing, and that person to another, and so on and so forth until finally you can step across the threshold, almost one of the family. (Faber 2003: 3-4).

Faber's narrator intimates a hierarchy of subjects of differential worthiness to qualify as guests of hospitality and be allowed “across the threshold”, implicitly a gendered hierarchy. For as numerous critics have remarked, the narrator assumes the role of a pimp to the reader-punter in Faber's narrative of sexual exploitation and degradation [4], centred on the prostitute Sugar Castaway, her feminine body welcoming all (at least, all who can pay) in that most hospitable of houses, the brothel, simultaneously the most perverted site of ideal hospitality reduced to pure monetary calculation, exchange, and commoditisation.

Faber's narrator aptly posits the guest's ‘welcome’ as the start of a series of *transactional* rather than unqualified engagements between Victorian Londoners and time-travelling reader-Other, whereby the latter's encounter with various potential hosts will eventually enable him to infiltrate the middle-class home under the guise of seeming belonging, “almost one of the family”. Hospitality here becomes something to be manoeuvred

with forethought – Derrida’s earlier cited “[p]as d’hospitalité”. Moreover, the novel’s conditional hospitality is preceded by failure and rejection, with the *arrivant* “mean[ing] nothing” to the host community and the Victorians claiming to be ‘not at home’ to the stranger, refusing him admittance without the prior strategic cultivation of connections. Additionally, the passage seems ghosted by vampiric echoes: the *arrivant* can only enter the host’s home if invited “across the threshold”, and inviting the guest poses an implicit risk to the security of the home and family. The guest as *hostis* or ‘stranger’ may at any moment transform into the guest as *hostilis* or ‘enemy’ intent on harm, underlining the radical indeterminacy and unknowingness of the hospitable encounter. For who knows what “desires you’re too shy to name” the guest might inspire or seek to gratify, once having taken up temporary residence within the host’s abode? [5] Not least, these include the previously mentioned neo-Victorian desires for horrid scenarios of sexual exploitation, suffering, and abjection.

Yet we are “led astray” by hospitality itself in this regard, which invites us to indulge in just such questionable desires. Bear in mind that in the hospitality scenes from both Genesis and Judges, the host’s home is threatened by members of the community, who demand he surrender his guest to be sexually violated or else face dire consequences himself. Lot instead offers to sacrifice his two virgin daughters to appease his neighbours’ lusts (a proposition rejected by the Sodomites), and his home is only saved through the supernatural intervention of his angelic visitors, who strike the assailants with blindness. In the analogous scenario involving the man from Gibeah, the host again offers his virgin daughter in lieu of his guest, along with the Levite’s concubine; although the first woman is spared, the latter is mercilessly thrust outdoors by her master to slake the mob’s fury. The next morning finds the woman’s battered, apparently lifeless body on the steps of the hospitable sanctuary that excluded her. Evidently, ideal hospitality differentiates between forms of accommodated Otherness (here, on the basis of gender), between those more and less worthy of its protections. Both Biblical scenarios, then, enact a monstrous compromise: the willingness to sacrifice a disposable abjected Other – in both cases, women – to perversely secure and sanctify the masculine host-guest relationship of ‘sacred’ hospitality. Inhospitability thus resides at the very heart of the Biblical *pater familias*’s exemplary hospitality. Indeed, I argue that absolute hospitality is not just defined by its inverse relationship with conditional hospitality, but by its *intrinsic* relationship with inhospitability.

While the sacrifice initially proffered by Lot or the man from Gibeah might be read as an absolute self-sacrifice (with the female offspring functioning as a symbolic extension of the father), the host who seemingly withholds nothing nonetheless withholds his own (male) body, which is never offered up for violation in lieu of that of his guest. Negating any rights of the daughters or the concubine to autonomous subjecthood, the host and his guest define women as disposable possessions or adjuncts to male subjectivity. Discussing political asylum, Sara McKinnon pertinently remarks that access to hospitality “hinges upon one’s recognized subjectivity”; therefore insofar as subjectivity is coded differentially, may be withheld or denied, not all individuals are deemed “full subjects worthy of hospitality” (2010, 139, 146), irrespective of their precarity or need for protection. Inherently undemocratic and unequal, hospitality constructs a *hierarchy of Otherness*.

Consequently, there is never *enough* hospitality to go round and encompass all those dwelling in a place. Garasimos Kakoliris thus asserts that Derridean hospitality imposes upon its aspirants a “permanent” condition of “‘bad conscience,’” of guilty insufficiency, since it “precludes [us] from ever being hospitable enough” (2015, 151). As if to emphasise just this point, Faber’s narrator pillories the very notion of absolute hospitality as early as the novel’s second chapter, by having his narrator comment on the likely doom awaiting an abandoned starving street child huddled on the steps of the maternally coded “Church of Our Lady of the

Assumption”: “God gets his amusement from doling out enough food, warmth and love to nourish a hundred human beings, into the midst of a jostling, slithering multitude of millions. One loaf and one fish to be shared among five thousand wretches – that’s His jolliest jape” (2003, 41). In comparable vein, Faber deploys inhospitable hospitality for his readers’ “amusement”, as we derive pleasurable entertainment from the wretchedness of Victorian London’s poor and the author’s stage-managed spectacles of (female) abjection, offered up for our delectation and consumption. These sensational narrative politics sit uneasily with Faber’s claim that he began writing the novel as “a radical feminist” motivated by a sense of “solidarity with disenfranchised misfits on the fringes of society” (2002, n.p.). Indeed, almost invariably, neo-Victorianism’s perverse hospitality leaves us hungry for more of the same, with decadent self-indulgence ghosting purported ethical motives, such as the recovery of silenced viewpoints and histories, including those of sex workers and other urban poor. Neo-Victorianism’s inhospitable hospitality too leaves those who partake of it suffering from “bad conscience”.

## 2. Hospitable (Self-)Sacrifice and Exclusion

The perversion of hospitality runs through the life of *The Crimson Petal and the White*’s main protagonist, Sugar Castaway, whose surname aptly recalls the position of wandering strangers in unfamiliar communities as found in tales of hospitality.[6] Prostitute and later mistress and muse to the reluctant industrialist William Rackham, Sugar eventually penetrates to the heart of the Rackham family home by assuming the role of governess and carer to William’s neglected daughter Sophie, whose mother Agnes, incapacitated by mental illness, is significantly unable to act as ‘hostess’ in any sense of the term. With his wife proving a permanent disappointment to her husband’s familial and social ambitions, William frequents brothels as a ‘homely’ place of solace, at one of which, i.e. Mrs Castaway’s establishment, he first encounters Sugar. The brothel dramatizes the *pretence* of absolute hospitality, exposing the inherently transactional and sacrificial nature of hospitality per se, which elevates the ‘guest’ above all other moral obligations, accommodating him at the expense of others’ (and even one’s own) abjection. Hence Sugar is described as withholding nothing: her “naked eyes” unreservedly “promise everything” (Faber 2003, 26), there is no sexual service, however depraved, she refuses to perform for her mother’s punter-guests, and her welcoming expression proves “irresistible” due to “an apparent ecstasy of gratitude to have lived to experience such an encounter” (27) – namely to have been granted the opportunity to accommodate the *arrivant*’s every need and desire. The brothel, then, resembles nothing so much as the heterotopia of illusion represented by that “universally hospitable place” of “a hotel, or [...] a department store” (Faber 2003, 33): in all these spaces, the exchange of currency for services and goods renders the utopian ideal of hospitality impossible, exposing the harsh economic reality it only seems to suspend. For in the hotel and department store, as in the brothel, the very possibility of hospitality is predicated on the guest-as-consumer’s ability and willingness to pay. In its gratification of readers’ desires, *The Crimson Petal and the White* could be said to assume aspects of all these interchangeable, accommodating, and inviting sites, soliciting its visitors to ‘spend’.

It seems no coincidence that in *Totality and Infinity* (1969), in the subsection of the chapter ‘The Dwelling’ entitled ‘Habitation and the Feminine’, Emmanuel Levinas genders home and “its essential interiority” as inherently female, referring “to the inhabitant that inhabits it before every inhabitant, the welcoming one par excellence, welcome in itself – the feminine being” (157). In these terms, “the feminine being”, like Sugar or her prostitute friend Caroline to whom Faber’s reader is first introduced, lays herself open in boundless welcome to the guest’s penetration in an act of (seemingly voluntary, but actually coerced) self-

sacrifice. Levinas's notion of home further evokes humankind's first hospitable dwelling place, the mother's womb, as also suggested by his earlier claim that "[w]ith the dwelling the latent birth of the world is produced" (157). Indeed, our first sight of Caroline parodically evokes Levinas's figuration of the home's sacrosanct and female-gendered "essential interiority": in her room in the St Giles rookery, we witness Caroline "squatting over a large ceramic bowl filled with a tepid mixture of water, alum and sulphate of zinc", while "[u]sing a plunger improvised from a wooden spoon and old bandage" to try and "poison, suck out or otherwise destroy what was put inside her only minutes before by a man you've just missed meeting" (Faber 2003, 6). The scene, then, is one of violation of the presumed 'sanctity' of the female body-as-home and its boundless (maternal) welcome, here cut short – quite literally expunged – by the depiction of the woman's attempts at crude contraception.

Implicitly, like Derrida's conceptualisation of hospitality, that of Levinas too is founded on the negation of feminine subjectivity and the disregard of female suffering.[7] In Tracy McNulty's words, "[a]lthough the feminine traditionally occupies an essential position within the hospitality relation, it is generally not as a subject" (2005, 74). As Levinas goes on to argue, "every home *in fact* presupposes a woman", so that even her "empirical absence" from a dwelling place "nowise affects the dimension of femininity which remains open there, as the very welcome of the dwelling" (1969, 157-158, original emphasis). At the same time as positing woman as foundational to hospitality, Levinas conveniently 'absents' the female subject from the hospitable encounter itself. Pertinently, Still notes that the unbounded "spirit of generosity" of absolute hospitality only "has a fantasmatic relationship to femininity" (2010, 57). In similar vein, Rosalyn Diprose alleges that Levinas's conceptualisation of femininity merely serves to enable men to "have time" and means to engage in "consciousness, labor, and hospitality" (2009, 148). Femininity *as* home renders women themselves homeless, excluded from the home's welcoming shelter. Woman is relegated to the status of ideal *conduit* of boundless hospitality (the Latin *hostia* or sacrificial offering, or, in the context of the Christian Eucharist, the consecrated consumed host) rather than a genuine relational 'hôte' in the full (male) dual sense of the word. [8] For as Gil Anidjar explains, the French term can mean both host and guest: "the hôte is both the one who gives, *donne*, and the one who receives, *reçoit*, hospitality" (2002, 356). In Derrida's and Levinas's terms, however, as in Faber's novel, women are neither givers nor recipients of true hospitality; they only give *themselves* or, more accurately, *are given* so as to enact hospitality as a patriarchal pact between men.[9]

For Sugar, the brothel is both home and workplace, where her mother prostituted her while still a child, to offer 'unconditional' satisfaction to the punters – except that the money that changes hands for services rendered at once obviates any notion of unconditionality. Yet in effect, Mrs Castaway's eager sacrifice of her daughter does not differ in kind or even intent from the actions of Lot or the man from Gibeah, who both express their willingness to surrender their own daughters to the lusts of the mob without any apparent moral conflict over the abandonment of their parental obligations. In both Biblical scenarios, the claim to hospitality 'justifies' women's reduction to the status of commodities within a transaction: the guests' (and the hosts' own) safety is to be bought in exchange for women's bodies and lives. Speaking of his daughters, Lot says to the Sodomites "Do to them as you please" (Genesis 19:8), words echoed by the man of Gibeah to those assailing his home. [10] In comparable fashion, Faber constructs his female characters so as to invite his readers to imaginatively 'do to them as we please'. Ironically, inhospitable hospitality thus renders Faber and his neo-Victorian audience complicit in the very forms of (gendered and sexual) exploitation which the novel sets out to condemn. Yet this complicity in symbolic re-victimisation is not merely due to the postmodern quandary of any effective critique first having to re-present the

invidious conditions it seeks to contest; rather, said complicity is produced and sustained by the trope of hospitality itself.

Accordingly, absolute hospitality to the Other is never absolute, since founded on inhospitality to *other* Others or other forms of Otherness. [11] The conceptualisations of hospitality by Levinas and Derrida *are themselves predicated on inhospitality*, which is not so much the inverse of hospitality as one of the latter's fundamental constituents and enablers. My concept of 'inhospitable hospitality' thus differs from Derrida's conceptualisation in crucial aspects. In Derrida's view, the Latin-derived term 'hospitality' "carries its own contradiction incorporated into it", thus "allow[ing] itself to be parasitized by its opposite, 'hostility,'" – hence his neologism "hostipitality" (2000c, 3). Discussing Derrida's ideas in relation to the antagonistic welcome often accorded modern-day immigrants as "parasitic guest[s]", Ana María Manzanás Calvo similarly alludes to "the concept of hospitality, which frequently lives side by side with its own negation. This is, in fact, the double movement inherent to hospitality itself" (2013, 110). Hospitality and hostility are thus deemed opposites, parasitically conjoined in inescapable tension. In contrast, I propose that hospitality and inhospitality are not parasitic but *symbiotic*. [12] The promise of absolute hospitality to Others can only be conceived and enacted through inhospitality to other Others. [13]

In Faber's novel, men like William Rackham may piss and soil themselves while drunk, to be cleaned up by the solicitous Sugar as part of the brothel's seemingly limitless, hospitable dispensing of succour, but it is first and foremost women's bodies which are used, abused, fucked, medically violated, degraded as unclean, or subjected to abortion. (Dying in a house fire, William Rackham's elder brother Henry, 'feminised' by his extreme repression and obsessive sexual guilt although apparently still a virgin, constitutes an exception in this regard, which merely proves the rule.) Women become Faber's neo-Victorian 'sacrifice' to indulge his readers' expectations of – and desires for – period set pieces of patriarchal and misogynist abuse. Faber's narrator 'does to them as he pleases' in order to appease his readers' appetite for the fascinating frissons of Victorian iniquity. Hence female 'sacrificiality' is signalled even before Sugar's first appearance in the text, when an early morning accident results in the death of an anonymous woman run over by a cab on Church Street – the victim, whether resident or guest to the neighbourhood, has presumably not 'watched her step'. (Indeed, it matters not which she is, since in neo-Victorian worlds, as within the terms of hospitality, woman is always outsider and Other.) As Caroline, woken up by the commotion outside her window, later reports, "I fink a woman died. The police carried a body away, wiv skirts on" (Faber 2003, 40). The unknown woman's death serves no essential purpose in terms of the plot, [14] so that it must be read as underlining the novel's economy of inhospitable hospitality predicated on the exploitation and abjection of sacrificial women.

### 3. Neo-Victorian Audiences' Othering and the Hospitable Pay-Off

Gender-based 'sacrificiality', as well as 'sacrificiality' of other forms of Otherness in terms of race, age, sexual orientation or non-normative bodies, pervades neo-Victorian texts in various media. One might think of *Ripper Street* (2012-2016), for instance, and the sequence of Ripperesque murders of women in the inaugural episode 'I Need Light' (2012), culminating in the rape and near strangulation of the prostitute Rose Erskine (Charlene McKenna) by an aristocratic slummer as part of the production of a prototypical snuff movie; or of the fate of John Merrick (Joseph Drake), 'the Elephant Man' in Series Two, who witnesses a murder which precipitates his own by suffocation, when the pillows that prop him up are forcibly removed by his killer to silence him in 'Am I Not Monstrous?' (2013). Or consider the bookending 'sacrifices' in John Logan's *Penny Dreadful* (2014-2016). The opening night-



time scene of a mother and young daughter torn to pieces in the water closet of a lodging house by an unseen monster – later revealed as the werewolf Ethan Chandler (Josh Hartnett) – is mirrored by the death of the African Sembene (Danny Sapani), the only non-white protagonist of the first series, by his friend and ally Chandler in the concluding episode of the season. Another such bookend occurs at the series' finale, as the female lead Vanessa Ives (Eva Green) succumbs to the seductive promise of Dracula (Christian Camargo) to create a world of eternal night for her, in which – as demonically possessed madwoman, witch, and fallen woman – she will finally belong, becoming the norm rather than relegated to the status of abject Other. Yet in the end, it is Ives rather than Dracula who is sacrificed for the sake of the inhospitable world of men, begging Chandler to slay her and dying in his embrace. *Penny Dreadful* also recoups Faber's trope of child prostitution (discussed below) in the fate of the brutalised Justine (Jessica Barden) who, under the tutelage of the resurrected Irish prostitute Brona Croft/Lily Frankenstein (Billie Piper), turns monstrous avenger on male oppressors – akin to the narrator-victim-turned-slayer of Sugar's half-written novel and Gothic revenge fantasy in *The Crimson Petal and the White*. Justine too is eventually dispatched by her lover Dorian Gray (Reeve Carney), just as he earlier eliminated his transgender lover Angelique (Jonny Beauchamp) to safeguard his portrait's secret and hence his self-mastery. In both these cases, the 'host' callously eliminates the women invited into his opulent home as guests, who are made to pay the ultimate price for his hospitality and our twenty-first-century viewing pleasures. In both TV offerings, then, gothicised Victorian London's (in)hospitable allure becomes indissociable from the exhibition of violated women's (as well as non-normative, non-white, and transgender) bodies on screen.

Insofar as writers and filmmakers seek to evoke some degree of historical verisimilitude, they will, of course, reproduce invidious period conditions, such as extremes of sexploitation found in *Ripper Street*, *Penny Dreadful*, and *The Crimson Petal and the White*. Accordingly, the neoliberal postmodern subject, possessing what we like to think of as due respect for gender, racial, sexual, disabled, and other minority rights, is itself estranged and Othered by the encounter with the represented 'alien' past, where women lacked property and voting rights, homosexuals were persecuted as deviants, disability was exhibited as a spectacle, and non-white races were enslaved or forcibly subjugated in the name of God-appointed white superiority and the spread of 'civilisation'. On one hand, to make ourselves negotiate this now grossly, politically incorrect world, we have to accept its Otherness at face value and avoid attempts to diffuse that Otherness by translating it into present-day value systems. On the other hand, to feel too much 'at home' would mean compromising or even suspending our more progressive, ethical standpoint on human rights, civil liberties, and identity politics. Put differently, the disconcertion produced by neo-Victorianism's inhospitable hospitality thrives on the perceived radical *disjuncture* between re-imagined past and existent present worlds. Simultaneously, however, Janus-faced neo-Victorianism wants to construct analogies, radical critiques and re-visions, forcing Victorian Otherness *to account for itself* in terms of our own values, exhorting the 'gift' of symbolic redress for the period's transgressions and, indeed, those of our own time mirrored therein (such as prevalent child sex abuse). Here the roles of neo-Victorian *hôte* and *arrivant* begin to blur, as they do in hospitality per se, between the giver and recipient of the gift of welcome.

Quentin Tarrantino's *Django Unchained* (2013) proves a resonant case in point. The audience thrills to see the brutalised African-American Django (Jamie Foxx) break his chains to become first a gun-slinger and then the vicious slaveholders' equally brutal executioner. Fittingly, Django achieves the latter by insinuating himself as a pretend guest, a hostile posing as *hostis* (i.e., a Trojan horse), into the plantation home of Calvin Candie (Leonardo DiCaprio). Fittingly, Derrida compares hospitality's simultaneous "promise" and "threat" to "a Trojan horse" (2002a, 359), as the host lays himself open to potential violence by the

unknown stranger. Django is accompanied by his 'good' white mentor and co-conspirator, Dr King Schultz (Christoph Waltz), the German bounty hunter who earlier freed him. Schultz's self-sacrifice towards the end of the film, aiding Django's attempts to free his slave-wife Broomhilda (Kerry Washington) from the sadistic Candie, can be read as a sort of 'gift' to white audience members, attenuating by atoning for white historical guilt in the dehumanization of African-Americans. Indeed, the institution of slavery might itself be read as a perversion of hospitality, as suggested by Candie's relationship with his black butler Stephen (Samuel L. Jackson), a privileged black Other in the household, who rewards his host and master with unquestioning loyalty, colluding in Candie's excessive violence against other slaves, including Django's wife. As in the Biblical texts from Genesis and Judges, the woman's violated body becomes the conduit that mediates the men's hospitable relations, but it also precipitates the film's extreme punishment of the perpetrators in the finale of apocalyptic carnage – a scene which viewers, vicariously turned blood-thirsty nineteenth-century avengers, have so insistently desired to witness that it seems almost as though we conjure it into being. The film's excess of inhospitality is thus transformed into the hospitable pay-off for the audience.

The hospitality trope serves a similar function at the end of Richard Flanagan's biofiction *Wanting* (2008), a text that repeatedly blurs the positions of diegetic hosts and guests in scenes of dubious hospitality between Tasmanian indigenes and colonisers. The white imperialists are strangers in another people's country, unwanted 'guests' who, from a postcolonial perspective, have usurped their Aboriginal hosts' home. It is thus deeply ironic that Mathinna, the orphaned Aboriginal girl, should become a 'resident alien' and privileged guest at the residence of the Governor and his wife, Sir John and Lady Jane Franklin. Temporarily adopted by the couple as a human experiment in 'civilising' the savage, Mathinna is showered with 'gifts' of dresses, shoes, education, Christian religion, and new foods. Symbolically, all of these constitute the 'unleavened bread' that the Franklins as hosts bestow upon the girl, who never asked for their hospitality. Yet Mathinna's people have already been categorised as lesser beings, and hence 'improper' or undeserving subjects of/for hospitality, doubly so in Mathinna's case on account of her female sex. At the start of *Wanting*, akin to Lot and his family's exile, the indigenes have been forcibly expelled from their homeland to "a distant island that lay in the hundreds of miles of sea that separated Van Diemen's land from the Australian mainland", where their incremental 'civilising' is overseen by a so-called "Protector" (Flanagan 2010, 2), a kind of appointed host paid by the British government for his 'hospitality' to and care of the unfortunate evictees. Yet in spite of the Protector's best efforts, his charges keep dying, their deaths functioning as an indictment of this officialised 'hospitality' which is everything but, with the Protector himself equivocating, "And were they not worthy?" (2).

Within the logic of hospitality, which I have argued always equates to a logic of *inhospitable* hospitality, most especially to females, Mathinna's fate is thus pre-programmed. Like Lot's daughters *in potentia* and the Levite's concubine in actuality, Mathinna is sacrificed to the desires of Franklin, host, guest-usurper and master of the home in one. Paradoxically, in opening himself and his residence up to Otherness, Franklin reasserts his patriarchal and racial mastery in the very moment of its dissolution in the encounter with the Aboriginal visitant. Mathinna's self-styled adoptive *pater familias* commits paedophilic rape upon her person, before she is abandoned in an orphanage when the Franklins return to England. Flanagan's choice to insert this invented episode into a biofiction – that is, a narrative about actual, historical individuals – may strike us as decidedly inhospitable to Franklin's memory, impugning the character of a man who can no longer defend himself. Yet from another perspective, it makes perfect sense, literalising the gendered sacrificial violence of female Others by the host. What the earlier discussed Biblical texts – and Levinas and

Derrida – crucially elide is exactly what Flanagan’s novel dramatizes overtly: that the victimised women are *first* violated by the host/guest, rather than any third parties outside the home.

Later, while still in her teenage years, Mathinna is strangled and drowned face down in a puddle by a fellow Anglicised Aborigine, when she demands payment for sexual favours during a drunken argument. In an horrifically inhospitable world to the non-white islanders, the girl’s abject death nonetheless becomes the opportunity for an act of textual hospitality to the audience. [15] The moment of unforeseen grace comes via the figure of the white Garney Walsh, who first encountered Mathinna as a vibrant seven-year-old, charged with conveying her to the Governor’s mansion, and who now discovers her animal and insect ravaged corpse by the roadside like an unexpected visitation. Initially disgusted by her abject state, which renders her almost unrecognizable as a human being, Garney turns her body over and, upon seeing her face (in a quasi Levinasian encounter with the Other), recalls his last sight of the girl “a few weeks before” caught up in a typically inhospitable neo-Victorian spectacle:

he had seen her break into a drunken dance in the middle of a Hobart street before it was even noon—part native jig and something of a toff’s dance, half-hyena and fully a princess, queer, lost, belonging and not belonging. A few jeered. Some threw scraps of food at her, urchins chased her as though she were a bird with broken wings. (Flanagan 2010, 250-251)

Like Lot’s daughters and the Levite’s concubine, “belonging and not belonging”, Mathinna has no place at the host’s table, merely being thrown “scraps” and leavings by the colonial ‘guests’ who have taken over her home as their own. As if to make belated amends for her radical displacement and exile, Garney “pick[s] her damp body up with hands that were at once very large and very gentle” and places it carefully onto his sled, before asking his ox “to help him carry the poor child home” for burial (250-251). Without any expectation of recompense, Garney offers the unexpected and exposed Other a “home” and a dignified place of rest. Quite literally, Garney shoulders the burden of white historical guilt and inhospitality to Mathinna and her people, and simultaneously liberates readers from the same. McNulty argues that, in the case of absolute hospitality,

the host’s identity is paradoxically established through the dispossession and surrendering of his substance, [...] even to the point of giving away that which defines him as master and host. This tension identifies an aporetic limit where identity is established at the very moment of its dissolution. (2005, 72)

Like Garney, we as neo-Victorian readers must surrender our assumed ethical superiority (to the colonisers) by acknowledging the West’s historical accountability and our implication in Mathinna’s trauma as consumers of her literary re-victimisation, establishing our “identity” as more liberal, tolerant, and enlightened subjects “at the very moment” of its dissolution. Standing in for us, the Western guest/hostile in Tasmania turns host to the Aboriginal host, as Garney performs a twenty-first-century mourning on our behalf, forcing us to recognise that our vicarious temporary ‘dwelling’ in nineteenth-century Tasmania comes at the cost of sacrificing Mathinna over again. Garney thus becomes both host to the reader *and* to the dead girl, offering us a qualified absolution and Mathinna a final welcome denied her in life.

#### **4. Women, the Unhomely Home, and Impossible Hospitality**

Unsurprisingly, in *The Crimson Petal and the White* as in *Wanting*, the paradigmatic site of hospitality – the dwelling place, the home – becomes singularly *unhomely* and precarious for women, who in Levinas’s earlier cited terms are identified with “the very welcome of the dwelling” even as they are excluded from hospitality’s magic circle of sanctuary and

protection. As much is evident not only in Sugar's prostitution at the tender age of thirteen by her own mother, who acts as patriarchy's agent of sacrifice – it is the madam, after all, who 'welcomes' the punters to her establishment and caters to their needs via dispensing/dispensing with 'her' girls – but also in the invidious situation of the reclusive Agnes Rackham. Doctor Curlew is regularly "*invited* as an eminent scholar of mental frailty" to visit the Rackham home (Faber 2003, 259, added emphasis), where he conducts invasive genital examinations of Agnes, intimated to involve sexual stimulation to effect a discharge of her 'hysteria' so as to prevent her descent into full-blown madness (as if Lot or the man of Gibeah had invited the rapists inside to despoil the women within the home). Repeatedly, these 'medical' procedures take on connotations of rape, with the doctor 'making himself at home' with – and in – Agnes' body, as he searches for her wandering womb (see 165 and 169-170), that centre point of home's "essential interiority" as described by Levinas, the feminine *as* habitation, *as* dwelling place, as "welcome in itself". At one point, implicitly viewing Curlew as guest-turned-hostile usurping the place of the master of the home, Agnes asks herself, "Is she mad to imagine that Doctor Curlew is [...] taking liberties no physician should?" (Faber 2003, 161). Yet the doctor is more 'at home' with her body than his repressed self-dispossessed patient can ever be – for Agnes, everything linked to corporeality is shameful and everything to do with sexuality proves a source of terror. Hence, eventually, "as always, she acquiesces" (161), laid open/laying herself open to his gynaecological violation once more.

If the Biblical stories enact hospitality without women's participation as *agents* and *subjects* of said hospitality, the same applies to a dominant strand of neo-Victorian narrative, exemplified by Faber's novel. In both kinds of texts, the cultural reproduction of hospitality becomes an act of "homosociality", with women relegated to "the figure of exchange"; regarded not as "foreigners" or Others "who should be endowed with hospitality" in their own right, they instead become mere "hostages" of exchange between men" (McKinnon 2010, 150, fn. 17). Accordingly, in due course, the figures of Faber's patriarchal host and the invited doctor-guest aptly collapse into one, when William commits marital rape on his heavily sedated, semi-conscious wife (see Faber 2003, 614-615), with Curlew's drugs rendering Agnes unable to ward off her husband's sexual advances. Hence Agnes's doubled violations both facilitate and enact the hospitality between the two men, which renders Agnes a quasi displaced person in her own home. Revealingly, following Williams' efforts to soothe her after his assault, the drugged Agnes moans, "How am I to get home?" (Faber 2003, 615). Women's essential homelessness within the context of hospitality is also suggested earlier, during the Rackhams' excursion to Sandown Park, following the theft of the contents of Agnes's purse and William's suggestion that they return home: "'Home?' she echoes, as if she can't imagine what fantastical place he might mean" (373).

Meanwhile Agnes's 'consent' in the doctor's 'medical' procedures is wholly irrelevant. As much is indicated by her mental rehearsals of prior attempted refusals of the examinations:

*You examine me every week; what harm can it do to leave it undone just once? 'You can't mean that; only a madwoman would willingly let her health decline.' I am not a madwoman! 'Of course not. That's why I'm asking your permission, rather than ignoring your wishes as I would ignore the wishes of an asylum inmate.'* (161)

Akin to Lot's daughters or the Levite's concubine, Agnes is positioned as abject non-subject and Other, whose fate is decreed by and for the benefit of men. It thus proves apt for Faber to interject the disturbing vignettes of Agnes's medical abuse into the complex negotiations between Mrs Castaway and William Rackham to secure Sugar's sexual 'hospitality' for his own exclusive use. Likewise, it is no coincidence that, on her first night as governess in the

Rackham family home, Sugar should be disturbed by dreams of her first violation as a thirteen-year-old in her mother's house (see 523): brothel and family home collapse into the same heterotopic site of inhospitable non-belonging for women. Yet even when denied access to absolute hospitality (except as its conduit, its reagent, its translation), women are nonetheless *constituted* by that same hospitality (i.e., as non-subjects or subjects *unworthy* of hospitality).

Sugar's and Agnes's 'sacrificiality' are merely two sides of the same coin, as underlined by Curlew's subsequent role in having both women expelled from the Rackham home. Curlew convinces William to have Agnes removed to an asylum, and he informs the master of the house of the governess's pregnancy, having examined Sugar following her deliberate fall down the stairs in an attempt to induce the abortion of William's child that occurs a few days later. William issues Sugar with a written notice of summary dismissal, suggesting that he has come to view her more akin to an inconvenient and 'polluting' migrant worker, who now threatens the host with dispossession in his own home: Sugar poses a risk to the maintenance of William's respectability in the community as a soap manufacturer dedicated to society's literal and metaphorical (i.e. moral) 'cleanliness', and hence a threat to his public identity. Yet what William's actions also make clear is that Sugar was never a true 'guest' to begin with, but merely another quasi-possession for William to 'do with as he pleases' and dispose of at will. His hospitality was always only conditional and commercialised, as underlined by the way in which, once ensconced as governess within his home, Sugar's sexual services are increasingly replaced with her (unpaid) secretarial services and advice on his business dealings. When Sugar tries to seek William out in his study to make him change his mind about her imminent expulsion from the Rackham home, readers are presented with another parodic scene of failed hospitality:

She knocks.

'Who is it?' His voice.

'Sugar,' she says, trying to suffuse that one word with all the affection, all the familiarity, all the companionship, all the promises of erotic fulfilment, that a single whispered sound can possibly embody: a thousand and one nights of carnal bliss that will see him through until he's an old, old man.

There is no reply. Silence. She stands shivering[.] (Faber 2003, 800)

Sugar's appeal is met with no response, as she is left standing on the threshold refused entry, even though already 'inside' the home. [16] Hospitality, in Derrida's earlier cited terms, "remains forever on the threshold of itself". And, of course, in any case Sugar does not *qualify* as a guest, because she is not a stranger, but named and known, and here attempts to barter the promise of recompense – "of erotic fulfilment", of "a thousand and one nights of carnal bliss" – for her continued sojourn in the Rackham household. The encounter thus turns into another transaction, like all previous encounters between William and her perceived seductive Otherness. Pure hospitality remains out of reach; so too for Faber's reader, positioned as generously accommodated peeping tom, unexpectedly refused the promised satisfactions of a further titillating "thousand and one nights" played out between Sugar and her sugar-daddy.

In Faber's novel, absolute hospitality remains always out of reach, a receding horizon rather than a specific point of arrival, perhaps best illustrated in the unknown fate of Agnes Rackham. Throughout her homelessness in her marital home, Agnes not only craves acceptance from society but, above all, dreams of finding an unconditional welcome and asylum at the fantasised, all-female 'Convent of Health', of which she takes Sugar to be a divine emissary and "guardian angel" (Faber 2003, 331), who repeatedly saves her: when Agnes becomes lost, is robbed and knocked down in London's night-time streets after an

insulting outburst to an acquaintance at the opera, [17] and again when she goes missing on Christmas Eve and Sugar eventually discovers her in the family brougham, as if about to set out on a journey. Significantly, Derrida's discussion of the Latin 'acceptation' (from 'acceptio') as "the action of receiving, the welcome given, the way one receives" leads on to his consideration of 'reception' and 'welcome' as terms "also often see[n] at the entrances to hotels and hospitals, what were once known as hospices, places of public hospitality" (2000c, 7). Convents, of course, traditionally served this same function, as places invested in an ethics of care, with nuns often tending to the ill and outcast. The yearning for sanctuary, home, and belonging experienced by Agnes and Sugar, both travellers in search of absolute hospitality, remains unfulfilled. Or does it?

## 5. Coda: Intimations of 'Pure' Hospitality

At first glance, the ending of *The Crimson Petal and the White* reiterates neo-Victorianism's inhospitable hospitality. If William implicitly regards his one-time mistress as *hostis* turned *hostilis*, Sugar literally adopts the role assigned her by depriving the host of the property – his other female 'possessions' – that defines and legitimates his identity as 'master' of the home. First, akin to the angels in Lot's story, she assists Agnes in escaping, scuppering Doctor Curlew's and William's plan, which Sugar discovers by chance, to have Agnes removed to the asylum. Thereafter, Sugar absconds with William's daughter Sophie to an unknown destination. On her way to King's Cross Station with the girl, Sugar again doubles Agnes, whom readers last see in a train carriage departing for Cornwall and an unknown fate. The possibility remains that Sugar's first act of usurping the host's mastery is not entirely selfless: since Agnes's departure precedes her dismissal notice, it may be in Sugar's best interests to permanently remove her rival for Williams' affections. Indeed, Sugar's imagining of various possible "gruesome fates" for Agnes, a veritable litany of martyrs' sufferings – from falling down a Cornish mineshaft or off a cliff, drowning, burning to death, being involved in a railway accident, caught up in a threshing machine, or run over by a carriage, to being robbed and raped upon arrival at some "rural railway station" (Faber 2003, 680) – suggests a guilty conscience at her 'hospitable' intervention, which may destroy rather than preserve Agnes, more like Lot's wife than daughters. [18] The text thus suggests that, regardless of intent, enacted hospitality remains far from ideal, indelibly entwined with inhospitable potentialities.

William's desperate search for his lost 'property' completes the circle, leading him back to Church Lane where the story opened, with William now relegated to the same position of alien in St Giles that the reader occupied at the start of the narrative. After interrogating Caroline, William falls down rotten stairs and receives the gift of unconditional hospitality from the "person [...] worth nothing" (4), who served as the audience's first 'stepping stone' to eventually securing entrance into the Rackham family abode. Without any demand or expectation of (re)payment from her unexpected 'guest', Caroline charitably supports the stumbling William as she leads him back to New Oxford Street to find a cab to take him home – although here, too, the text undercuts ideal hospitality, by having Caroline accept the "handful of coins" William "press[es] [...] upon her" (832). The closing lines of the narrator's final direct address to the reader playfully invoke hospitality once more:

How very long we've been together, and how very much we've lived through, and still I don't even know your name!

But now it's time to let me go. (835)

(Note the curious use of 'me' rather than 'you' in the final line, here, which once again blurs the roles of host and guest.) Derrida, of course, emphasises that true hosts, extending absolute hospitality, must be prepared to welcome their guests without knowing *anything* about them,

not even their names, since naming itself constitutes an attempt at knowledge and mastery of the Other.

This casts the novel's open ending in a rather new and different light. As Mark Llewellyn remarks, *The Crimson Petal and the White* has "no real conclusion, abruptly stopping" in the middle of Sugar's great escape (2009, 31), hence violating readers' expectations for a neat resolution typical of the Victorian novels emulated by Faber's text, which often sketch out the main protagonists' futures. Llewellyn goes on to discuss readers' outrage and sense of betrayal, addressed in Faber's Foreword to his later short story collection *The Apple: New Crimson Petal Stories* (2006) that reprises some of the novel's characters. Llewellyn cites one angry reader's accusation – "How dare your book end with us not knowing what happened to Agnes! And where did Sugar take Sophie off to anyhow?" – as well as Faber's response: "Sugar has been denied privacy all her life, I would say, and by the end of the novel she has earned the right to make her own way in the world, unscrutinised by us" (Faber 2006, xii, xvi, as quoted in Llewellyn 2009, 32). Llewellyn views Faber's response as somewhat disingenuous, but if read through the lens of hospitality, Faber's justification takes on a different cast. The *inhospitality* of the novel's ending to its readers, refusing to meet their expectations, stands in stark contrast to the conditional hospitable pay-off so often provided by texts that meet out symbolic punishment and justice (although, of course, *The Crimson Petal and the White* also gestures at this pay-off in William's public embarrassment, his loss of wife and daughter, and his fruitless recovery mission). Faber's assertion of Sugar's right to privacy and anonymity, allowing her to escape his own and his reader's knowledge, as does Agnes, returns both women to the status of unknown Others, visitants who depart back into obscurity. Ideal hospitality, Derrida pertinently reminds us, is "an intentional experience which proceeds *beyond knowledge* toward the other as absolute stranger, as unknown, where *I know that I know nothing of him*" (2000c: 8, added emphasis). Much as the host of an unconditional hospitable encounter would not know the fate of his guest once the stranger departs, Faber's narrator disavows knowledge both of his reader's identity and of his female protagonists' fates, mimicking the unknowingness of ideal hospitality.

If as Kevin O'Gorman suggests, Derrida's "conditional hospitality takes place only in the shadow of the impossibility of the ideal version" (2006, 53), then, equally, in *The Crimson Petal and the White*, ideal hospitality takes place only in the shadow of debased conditional hospitality and exploited Otherness – that is, beyond the text itself, in the reader's unknowingness and imagination. The novel's final act of inhospitality towards its readers accords, or at least gestures towards, a quasi ideal hospitality extended to the text's sacrificial women. Again, inhospitality becomes the *necessary enabling condition* for the very possibility of absolute hospitality – which can, however, never quite compensate for the novel's prior sensationalist commodification of Sugar's and Agnes's sexploitation and suffering. In Derrida's words, "[h]ospitality can only take place beyond hospitality" (Derrida 2000c, 14) – in this case, beyond the novel's close.

At the end of *Of Hospitality*, Derrida asks, rather cryptically: "Are we heirs to this tradition of hospitality?" (2000b, 155). The prominent cultural phenomenon of neo-Victorianism, with its Gothic penchant for Otherness in all its celebrated, persecuted, and abused forms, suggests an affirmative answer. Although in Derrida's terms, we do not freely "choose" this heritage – "it is what violently elects us" – we do, at least in part, choose the tropes through which we remember it and "keep it alive" (Derrida as quoted in Naas 2005, 13). [19] Paradoxically, the very elements of the nineteenth century abhorred by neo-liberal society – prejudice, extreme forms of discrimination and exploitation, deliberately inflicted violence and disregarded suffering – are exactly what seems to 'invite' today's writers, filmmakers, and audiences most insistently to revisit the period. Modern-day artists and

audiences actively seek out the violation of Otherness (including their own) as virtual *arrivants*, taking up temporary imaginative residence within the historical past. Enacting neo-Victorianism's inhospitable hospitality, texts like *The Crimson Petal and the White* leave us questioning whether we are the nineteenth-century's guest and 'hostage' or vice versa.

## Notes

1. Even when neo-Victorianism does not win the day, as in the case of the 2016 Booker Prize, the shortlist will frequently include at least one neo-Victorian work. In the case of Graeme Macrae Burnet's *His Bloody Project: Documents relating to the case of Roderick Macrae* (2016), for instance, the neo-Victorian runner-up far outstripped sales figures achieved by short-listed works by more famous authors, such as J. M. Coetzee (see Brooks 2016, n.p.). Similarly, the shortlist for the Australian 2018 Miles Franklin Award included Eva Hornung's *The Last Garden* (2017) and Jane Rawson's *From the Wreck* (2017), both set in colonial Australia, as well as Catherine McKinnon's multi-timeframe *Storyland* (2017), which includes neo-Victorian sections. The 2020 Costa First Novel Award was likewise garnered by Sarah Collins's neo-Victorian *The Confessions of Frannie Langton* (2019).
2. The opening of the television series *Ripper Street* (2012-2016), created by Richard Warlow, seems to echo Faber's novel. The inaugural episode 'I Need Light' depicts a group of well-heeled visitors to the night-time East End about to set off on a tour of the district's abject sights. Before the guide invites his 'guests' (and, by extension, the twenty-first-century audience) to "Follow me for the haunts of Jack the Ripper" (Warlow and Shankland 2012: 0.31-0.33) and immerse themselves in an inhospitable stew of filth and corruption, he warns them to beware of where they place their feet, recounting a prior visit by William Gladstone, which resulted in the politician having to purchase a new pair of boots.
3. Derrida cites Immanuel Kant's *Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch* (1795) to this effect, referencing "the right of a stranger not to be treated with hostility when he arrives on someone else's territory" (Kant as quoted in Derrida 2000c, 5).
4. Mark Llewellyn notes *The Crimson Petal and the White*'s "implicit association of contemporary readers with the customers for Sugar's sexual favors in the novel", arguing that "Faber makes a direct link between Sugar's 'earning' of her keep through physical prostitution and a writer's earning of his/her keep through providing a kind of textual relief [hospitality?] through the neo-Victorian story" (Llewellyn 2009, 32; also see Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010, 13). This reading is supported by the verbatim repurposing of the novel's earlier cited second sentence, uttered by the narrator – "Keep your wits about you; you will need them." – as part of Sugar's murderous sensation fiction towards the end of Faber's novel, only repeated in italics with the added emphasis of an exclamation mark (see Faber 2003, 816). Similarly, Nadine Muller points out how the writer "renders himself the pimp and his readers the punters of his fictional commodity, his prostitute protagonist" from "the moment the reader considers purchasing his book and, with it, his fictional and sexual product, Sugar" (Muller 2012, 41, 54).
5. As Derrida notes, hospitality in the absolute sense would have to involve "an opening to the newcomer whoever that may be", a "newcomer" who, for all the host knows, may even "be the devil" (2002b, 70), someone "who could come with the best or worst intentions: a visitation could an invasion by the worst" (2000c, 17, fn. 17). Gerasimos Kakoliris thus describes absolute hospitality's "indiscriminate" welcome as posing the incalculable risk of "opening the door to its own undoing", since "we cannot determine who will be our guest or how he or she will behave as a guest" (2015, 147; also see 153). Faber's novel parodies this precarity in the scene in which William Rackham's wife, Agnes, vomits all over Lady Harington's ballroom floor, after verbally abusing her hostess by saying "outrageous things" and comparing her appearance to that of a duck: "'That's no excuse,' [William] chided his wife, 'for insulting one's host.'" (Faber 2003, 431)
6. Meanwhile 'Sugar' too is a play on words, evoking the consumable sweetener, while also functioning as a slang word for 'money' and hence financial transactions, such as those involving wealthy 'sugar daddies'.
7. Laura McMahon notes that "what makes the story of Abraham and Isaac truly 'monstrous', according to Derrida in *Donner la mort* (1999), is the exclusion of the feminine. [...] [T]he story of Abraham and Isaac pertains both to a sacrifice made by the woman (the loss of the son) and a sacrifice of the woman (her exclusion from the scene)" (2012: 518, original emphasis). Yet a comparable sense of the "truly 'monstrous'" with regards to hospitality's exclusionary gender politics is lacking. The closest Derrida comes to such an acknowledgement is his follow-up to the question "What is a foreigner?", close to the



end of his seminar 'Foreigner Question' in *Of Hospitality*, when he asks, "What would a foreign woman be?" (2000a, 73) – a question that significantly remains unanswered.

8. McNulty stresses that in both religious tradition and "archaic practice, the host is absolutely always male, and even the many terms designating the host have no female equivalent", going on to note that "[e]ven as archaic forms of hospitality and exchange are replaced by modern secular relations ('brotherly love,' equal rights, and legal citizenship), the feminine continues to occupy a marginal and uncertain position" within hospitality discourse (2005, 74).
9. When William purchases Sugar from Mrs Castaway, he initially sets her up in her own rented house, described as "his home away from home" (Faber 2003, 299). This ironically suggests that Sugar is his 'guest' rather than 'host' when henceforth he avails himself of her sexual favours, effecting a deliberate blurring between the roles of *hôte* and *arrivant*. Insofar as William remains master of the house, Sugar cannot grant him access or invite him into 'her' home but is more akin to a hostage of his benevolence. Such a reading conforms with Derrida's recognition that "[i]t's the familial despot, the father, the spouse, and the boss, the master of the house who lays down the laws of hospitality. He represents them and submits to them to submit the others to them" (2000b, 149).
10. Significantly, it is not the man from Gibeah but the Levite *arrivant* who thrusts his concubine outside, performing the host's sacrifice on the latter's behalf, having literally made himself 'at home' and acting like the master of the house. Here too, the roles of host and guest become interchangeable, in line with Anidjar's explanation.
11. In *The Gift of Death* (1993), Derrida implicitly acknowledges this contamination of ideal hospitality, when he admits that "I cannot respond to the call, the demand, the obligation, or even the love of another without sacrificing the other other, the others [*sic*] others" (as quoted in Kakoliris 2015, 154).
12. Derrida perhaps comes closest to the point I am trying to make, when he admits that "[t]he two regimes of law, of *the* law and the laws" – i.e. of unconditional and conditional hospitality respectively – "are both more or less hospitable, hospitable and inhospitable, hospitable *inasmuch as* inhospitable" (2000b: 81, original emphasis).
13. This can also be seen in Lot's lack of hospitality to the Sodomites, who are refused entry into his home (though they too, appear unexpectedly at his door) and whose desires Lot refuses to accommodate unreservedly (by withholding his guest's body).
14. Note, however, that the scene has a slyly metafictional function, apparently referring to Faber's initial planned ending for the protagonist: "I had brought Sugar to life only to crush her under the wheels of a cab (the original finale)"; however, eventually deciding that "[s]he deserved better", the writer altered the ending of the story (Faber 2002, n.p.).
15. An earlier gift or, more accurately, 'payback' to the audience comes in Flanagan's depiction of Franklin's lonely agonised death in the ice, far from home, as he thinks back longingly to his encounter with Mathinna before his 'fall'.
16. On the night following this scene, sleep again transports Sugar back to Mrs Castaway's unhomey establishment, further strengthening the symbolic equivalence between brothel and home.
17. Insofar as London's streets are Sugar's 'home' turf, the rescue after the opera constitutes another parodic scene of hospitality based on female sacrificiality. Since Agnes rushes into the night without her coat and is covered with filth after being knocked down, Sugar persuades a poor strawberry seller to part with her old-fashioned mantle for ten shillings, which Sugar 'gifts' to Agnes to cover herself with. Later, after having directed Agnes back to the Rackham carriage, Sugar witnesses a commotion on the same street, during which a shrouded body is carried off (echoing the cab accident in the opening chapter). Back home, Sugar realises that the victim was likely the strawberry seller, whose coatless bodice she noticed was "stained with breast-milk" (Faber 2003, 396), probably killed for the ten shillings, which evoke Judas's thirty pieces of silver. In effect, Sugar's attempt at 'hospitality' to Agnes sacrificed another poor woman and, possibly, also condemned the victim's now motherless infant to death.
18. This possibility is echoed in William's convenient 'identification' of a drowned woman's corpse (rendered unrecognizable by its time in the water) as that of his missing wife, so as to be able to have Agnes declared legally dead, enabling him to remarry.
19. Naas quotes from Jacques Derrida and Elisabeth Roudinesco's *For What Tomorrow... A Dialogue* (2004; French original 2001).

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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