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VICTORIANS LIVE

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INTRODUCTION

By Herbert Sussman

WITH THESE ESSAYS, *Victorian Literature and Culture* begins a regular feature, "Victorians Live," whose subject is how the Victorians still "live," how they remain "live," lively, alive. The focus is the intersection of the world of Victorian scholarship that the readers of VLC inhabit, with the larger world of representation. For, quite remarkably, in our globalized time, the Victorians remain "in" – from museum blockbusters to specialized exhibitions, from home decoration to popular fiction and graphic novels, from Masterpiece Theatre to Hollywood retellings of canonical novels. Rather than assuming an abyss between serious academic pursuits and the unserious non-academic world, Victorians Live seeks to chart the complex and ongoing dynamic wherein academic reinterpretations of the past, albeit in unexpected ways and with considerable time lags, shape the popular vision of the nineteenth century, and conversely, how contemporary social concerns as well as market demands on publishers and museums shape scholarship.

The essays in this issue focus on several aspects of this animated Victorian afterlife. Barbara Gates considers several exhibitions of Victorian natural history to see their relation to current issues in the history of technology and to our own sense of a vanishing nature. James Paradis sees modern or even post-modern taste in Tate Britain's show of the hitherto unexamined photographs of Samuel Butler. My essay on *Exposed: The Victorian Nude*, a massive exhibition initiated by Tate Britain in 2002, and *The Crimson Petal and the White*, the best-selling novel by Michael Faber, examines how the discourse of sexuality shaped in the academy has transformed the Victorians in the popular mind from repressed puritans into sexy beasts, albeit of rather particular sexual tastes.

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NATURAL HISTORY ILLUSTRATION

By Barbara Gates

INTEREST IN VICTORIAN natural history illustration has burgeoned in recent years. Along with handsome, informative shows at the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York ("Picturing Natural History"), at the American Philosophical Society ("Natural History in North America, 1730–1860"), and at the Royal Botanical Gardens in Melbourne ("Nature's Art Revealed"), the year 2003 saw an entire conference devoted to the subject in Florence, Italy. In 2004, the eastern United States was treated to two more fauna- and flora-inspired shows, both dealing specifically with nineteenth-century British science and illustration.

In the first of these, John Gould's (1804–88) ornithological work was beautifully displayed at the Australian Embassy in Washington, D. C. Gould, the English "bird man" of the nineteenth century, produced over forty imperial folio volumes with over three thousand hand-colored prints depicting the birds of every continent save Africa. His illustrators included some of the best practitioners of the art of natural history: his wife, Elizabeth Coxen Gould; Edward Lear; Henry Constantine Richter; William Hart; and Joseph Wolf. Gould's volumes were among the very first large-format, colored books on ornithology. Gould himself oversaw the whole enterprise and in addition worked on many of the illustrations and did much of the lithography. An entrepreneur as well as artist and scientist, he sometimes had three or four projects going simultaneously.

Gould began his scientific endeavors humbly enough – as taxidermist for the London Zoological Society. There he first got to know the many types of birds and animals that were shipped to London for further study. And there, too, in the 1830s, he initiated production of the large-format books. He and Elizabeth worked together on a book featuring one hundred newly discovered birds from Asia, *A Century of Birds Hitherto Unfigured from the Himalaya Mountains* (1830–33). This volume's success led to others, including the *Birds of Australia*, a seven-volume set published between 1840 and 1848, the rare and handsome volumes featured in the Washington exhibition. This monumental opus took both of the Goulds to Australia, where Gould came into contact with a post-Darwinian *H. M. S. Beagle* voyage and bought ornithological specimens from the *Beagle*'s officers. Previously Gould had helped Charles Darwin with his cataloguing of birds of the Galapagos.

The show at the Australian Embassy exhibited illustrations from Gould's book as well as his collection of Australian birds. Two magnificent folios greeted the entering viewer. The first was open to the "Red-tailed Black Cockatoo" (*Calypyotrhynchus banksii*), a huge black cockatoo with red outer tail-feathers and streaked yellow inner ones. This illustration was rendered by H. C. Richter and the plate was displayed alongside skins of the bird. The second folio featured the only two-page illustration in the Australian set and showed the "Satin Bowerbird" (*Ptilonorhynchus violaceus*) with a male in courtship with a female, a juvenile, and a second female that has just entered his flame-shaped bower of straw. This illustration, by Elizabeth Gould, was also complemented by bird skins – ornithological specimens prepared carefully so as to remove the interior parts of birds while keeping feathers as much intact as possible. Because Gould was so skilled at various types of preservation, his specimens show vividly. Organizers of the exhibition wished to suggest that Gould's work was about accuracy in ornithological discovery. Their decision to exhibit both aesthetically

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pleasing illustrations and the actual specimens collected by Gould was motivated by this desire.

The skins themselves may in fact provide the most remarkable Victorian story of the show. In 1841, Gould brought 322 South Australian specimens back from Australia to England and offered them to the British Museum of Natural History. Subsequently, in 1847, he offered the same museum his entire collection of over 1800 bird skins. When the BMNH refused, he made a similar offer to The Academy of Natural Sciences in Philadelphia, which bought the birds. The American purchase is what enabled the recent show, curated by Philadelphians. Amazingly, the well-preserved birds on display in Washington will make yet another voyage – back to Australia where they will next be shown in Tasmania.

Readers of *Victorian Literature and Culture* who now find that the deadline for seeing this remarkable show has passed need not entirely despair. The Academy of Natural Sciences in Philadelphia has a web-site, http://www.acnatsci.org, which features many of the images on view in Washington.

"Ocean Flowers: Impressions from Nature," a show that originated at the Drawing Center in New York City, had a dual purpose. It provided an extensive display of botanical illustrations (over 300 of them). It also focused on different types of early and pre-photographic illustration, including photographs produced without a camera, and highlighted advances in graphic media in the nineteenth century. Visitors to this show were greeted with an anteroom full of artifacts and illustrations to introduce them to early nineteenth-century graphic technologies. Prominent among these were the works of Alois Auer, an Austrian who pioneered in producing "nature prints" – impressions in soft lead made directly from rocks and animals and transferred to paper – and of William Henry Fox Talbot, a Scottish natural historian. In the late 1830s Talbot experimented with what he termed "photogenic drawing" – the use of light and light-sensitive solutions spread on paper, again to produce images from real objects, a technique that led to further developments in photogenesis.

The most spectacular photogenic images arrested the viewer stepping into the larger of the two rooms of the exhibition, where the back wall was covered with blue photograms by Anna Atkins. These photograms, or cyanotypes, were made by placing specimens on chemically treated paper and exposing them to the sun, a process refined by Sir John Herschel, the noted astronomer and friend of Atkins, and still used today in the production of blueprints. The wall of Atkins's cyanotypes affected this viewer like a plunge into a royal blue sea, floating with seaweed transformed into "ocean flowers" (Figure 25). It held fourteen rows of pictures, neatly hung with five vertical prints per row. Non-diving Victorianists might imagine it as a wall replete with pictures, rather like a nineteenth-century Royal Academy show. Atkins produced three volumes of such images in the first natural history books to be illustrated by this early form of photography, *Photographs of British Algae* (1843–53). All three of the rare volumes were on display in "Ocean Flowers." The many kinds of photo-reproduction in this show remind us that in early Victorian times, there was a desire to let nature describe itself that flourished through new photographical technologies alongside the desire to draw nature in more traditional ways.

The rest of the larger room in the Drawing Center was artfully arranged, the two lateral walls showing colorful prints of botanical specimens from the British Empire. Most interesting to this student of Victorian culture were the drawings by Indian artists (mainly anonymous) hung in juxtaposition to some of those by British artists. The former took their taste for miniatures, with their bright colors and stylized representations, into their renderings

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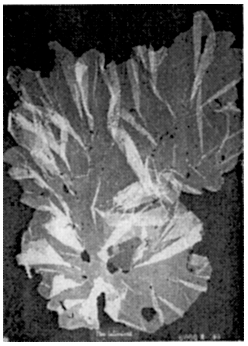


Figure 25. Anna Atkins, *Ulva latissima*, from *Photographs of British Algae*, c. 1850. Cyanotype, 26 × 21 cm. Glasgow Museums: Art Gallery and Museum, Kelvingrove.

of larger, botanical drawings. The result was intricate and artfully posed objects that contrast with European styles. On the right wall were two large, colorful, 1851 British pictures that drew viewers like magnets. Both were depictions of the *Victoria regia*, the famous water platter (a water lily with enormous spiny pads) named for the Queen, and both were rendered by Walter Fitch, a leading artist for Joseph Hooker at the Royal Botanical Gardens at Kew. At one and the same time intricate, artful, and accurate, they spoke authority. All of the parts of the *regia* are rendered with utmost care in the one picture, while a spectacular open lily is represented in the other.

The whole of the exhibition was, of course, a tribute to what has been called "the heyday of natural history," that time from the 1830s to the 1860s when people were engaged in natural history crazes like "pteridomania" (a madness for ferns). To demonstrate this trend, the show featured remarkable vitrines full of the kinds of illustrated natural history books used by enthusiasts hungry to learn more about nature. Most of these date from mid-century, a time when brightly colored pictures were in vogue. Among those featured were Philip Henry Gosse's *Naturalist's Rambles of the Devonshire Coast* (1853), open to an exquisite chromolithograph, a type of illustration produced with from three to fifteen colors, each having its own lithographic stone. Collectors of such popular books – and I confess an interest here – could see works by Agnes Catlow, the Reverend J. G. Wood, Isabella Gifford, Mary Howard, and other well-known writers of popular natural history. Later natural history books, dating from the last quarter of the century, were illustrated differently, once machinery was available to render multiple black-and-white illustrations at lesser cost. Viewing the books in the show, one might rue the loss of color in favor of a greater profusion of plates. In the case of natural history, aesthetics seem to have fallen victim to mass production and more widespread attempts at scientific education.

Vivid and alluring, "Ocean Flowers" certainly boasted something for nearly every Victorianist – those with special interests in natural history, those who collect Victorian prints, those interested in Victorian book illustration, those with an interest in early forms of photography, and those who simply like to see nineteenth-century objects beautifully rendered and displayed. Works of the famous, like Julia Margaret Cameron's albumen photogram from *My Printing of Ferns* (c. 1862), were represented, but the overall effect of the show was to demonstrate both how, and how artfully, nature was redrawn at a

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time when natural history and an enthusiasm for new visual technologies were of utmost importance. Accompanying "Ocean Flowers" is a large and comely catalogue, with essays by the organizers of the show and several other expert contributors. It has been finely reproduced by the Drawing Center and Princeton University Press with a format that echoes the display of the objects at the Center.

Why, one might wonder, all this interest in Victorian natural history over the past several years? Why so many shows appearing at nearly the same time? Aesthetically, their objects are justly beautiful, worthy of multiple viewings. And books like David Allen's, Ann B. Shteir's, Jim Secord's, and my own have, for several decades, pointed to the importance of Victorian natural history, attempting to whet Victorianists' appetites for further study in this area. But I believe there is more to all this than a revival of scholarly interest. The natural world that was new to the Victorians was fuller of species and the Victorian sensibility more robust in its love for nature than is ours. Innumerable bird skins, pressed plants, and rocks gathered by Victorian hands reveal a world of plenty. Scientists like Charles Lyell, Alfred Russel Wallace, Charles Darwin, and Joseph Hooker drew ordinary Victorians' attention to the world's diversity and relied on keen and careful amateurs to help fill in data for their theories and catalogues. Natural history clubs sprang up all over the United Kingdom as people combed field and stream for specimens.

As species disappear daily, as many of us become more aware that we may never have the privilege of witnessing what the Victorians saw, our nostalgia for lost worlds seems to increase. Moreover, this is nostalgia not just for lost species, but for another time and place, and for the exuberance with which the Victorians embraced the living world. Today we can reproduce the natural world with seeming ease, but images of once-living specimens in hand-rendered and field-drawn reproductions have an allure that reveals hands-on searching, cataloging, and an adventurer's kind of Victorian excitement. Despite the recent revival of interest in bird watching in America, few of us are afflicted with pteridomania these days. Nevertheless, those who love the natural world can return to a vibrant view of it through these two remarkable displays of Victorian natural history.

University of Delaware

EXHIBITIONS AND WORKS CONSIDERED

"John Gould's *Birds of Australia*," at the Australian Embassy in Washington, D.C. March 4-April 14, 2004. Curated by Leo Joseph and Robert McCracken Peck of The Academy of Natural Sciences, Philadelphia.

"Ocean Flowers: Impressions from Nature," at The Drawing Center, New York City. March 25–May 22, 2004; Yale Center for British Art, June 2–August 8, 2004. Curated by Carol Armstrong, Princeton University, and Catherine de Zegher, Director of the Drawing Center.

Allen, David Elliston. *The Naturalist in Britain: A Social History.* London: Allen Lane, 1976.

Armstrong, Carol and de Zegher, Catherine. *Ocean Flowers: Impressions from Nature.*
Princeton: Princeton UP, 2004.

Gates, Barbara. *Kindred Nature: Victorian and Edwardian Women Embrace the Living World.* Chicago: Chicago UP, 1998.

Merrill, Lynn L. *The Romance of Victorian Natural History*. New York: Oxford UP, 1989.

Secord, James, ed. with N. Jardine and E. Spary. *Cultures of Natural History*. New York: Cambridge UP, 1996.

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Shteir, Ann B. *Cultivating Women, Cultivating Science: Flora's Daughters and Botany in England, 1760 to 1860*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1996.

PHOTOGRAPHY AND IRONY: THE SAMUEL BUTLER PHOTOGRAPHY EXHIBITION AT THE TATE BRITAIN

By James G. Paradis

AN EXHIBITION of Samuel Butler's photography in Gallery Sixteen, an elegant rotunda room just off the entrance to the Tate Britain, offered a rare opportunity to see some of the photography of the author of *Erewhon* and to contemplate how Victorian photographic realism fares in the setting of a modern museum. The exhibition, celebrating the centenary of Butler's death, ran from November 2002 to May 2003 and was made up of thirty-five framed photographs, some of them digitally touched up by Dudley Simons, and an assortment of photobooks and editions of Butler's self-illustrated volumes. It was developed by Tate curator Richard Humphreys and Butler scholar Elinor Shaffer, with the support of librarian Mark Nicholls from St. John's College at Cambridge, which houses most of Butler's extensive photographic work in its special collections. Titled "Samuel Butler and the Ignorant Eye," after Shaffer's notion in her *Erewhons of the Eye: Samuel Butler as Painter, Photographer, and Art Critic* (1988) that Butler's photography renders "the eye of the viewer . . . ignorant and open" (229), the black-and-white secularism of Butler's work offered a startling change in imagery from the intense colorism of "Rossetti and Medievalism," the exhibit that preceded it in Gallery sixteen.

From the lush folds enveloping Rossetti's mannered and mystic women, one arrived at Butler's idea of "medievalism" in a photo titled "'The Wife of Bath' on Board the 'Lord of the Isles' Going to Clacton" (1891) (Figure 26). A hearty middle-aged woman in an ample black traveling dress and an odd miter-like hat sits on a bench inside the cabin of a steamer savoring her meal in abstracted contentment. The food and drink are spread out in a clutter of bowls, jugs, plates, and open baskets beside her. A woman with strong hands and frank appetites, she is an obvious satire on photographic literariness and efforts to ennoble photography through manipulation for painterly effect. Butler's methodology, which was one of the themes of the Tate commentary, is to apply the blunt imagery of contemporary material to displace styles conferring more privileged artistic status. The irony can be startling. Further down the gallery wall in a graphic male nude titled "'Rose' the model" (1865), Butler offered a close-up frontal of the male model's thighs, pubic area, and rippling torso. With biological literalism, the photograph conveys the material truth behind the alabaster male torso of classical sculpture that it self-consciously displaces. In this exhibition of strong photographic presences, what was absent was as important as what was shown.

Like many Victorian photographers, Butler had come to the camera after extensive sketching and work in watercolors and oils. At Heatherly's School of Fine Art in London in the 1860s and 1870s, he had struggled unsuccessfully for years to emulate the colorful naturalism of Giovanni Bellini, although he had managed on several occasions to get his work hung at the Royal Academy. In the midst of his regimen as a student at Heatherly's, he had been introduced to photography and, from the start, as the Rose study shows, he had appreciated the potential of the lens to dismantle the academicism under which he was laboring. Although the photographs of this exhibition reveal a painterly sensitivity

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Figure 26. Samuel Butler, "'The Wife of Bath' on Board the 'Lord of the Isles' Going to Clacton," 1891. Photograph courtesy of the Master and Fellows of St. John's College, Cambridge.

for the effects of light and shadow and the power of the frame, they rarely subordinate the photographic image to the canvas; indeed, some of them convey a certain irreverence that may have been Butler's reaction to his artistic failures. Butler used the photographic surface very successfully to explore visual ambiguity, in a manner that drew on the camera's empiricism to yank incongruous elements together in a way that suggested a more complicated reality. We can see this process at work, for example, in another of the exhibition photographs, his 1889 shot of a Fleet Street scene looking east toward St. Paul's (Figure 27). The paradox of photographic time is brilliantly captured in the hurried activity of hatted figures casting slanting shadows in the afternoon, a falling sun beyond the frame and a clock frozen at two thirty-five. In the background, the advertisement for "Rubber Stamps," the source of the photograph's title, suggests iteration amid multiple forms of motion and time.

Enabled by a legacy left by his wealthy father to purchase his own cameras in 1887, Butler and his factotum Alfred Cathie produced a steady output of photographic plates through 1900. Some of his earliest photography was produced to illustrate *Ex Voto* (1888), his study of life-sized terra-cotta dioramas of the sixteenth-century Sacro Monte or New Jerusalem of Varallo in Northern Italy. The photographs of this ruminating, Tussaud-like exploration of the religious grotesque include graphic scenes of flagellation, the gory massacre of the innocents, a grinning terra-cotta Herod complete with a dust-ridden mane of human hair, and a vast Crucifixion scene. These photographs of terra-cotta Biblical figures, many of them in poor repair, convey a feeling not so much of a New Jerusalem of divinity and

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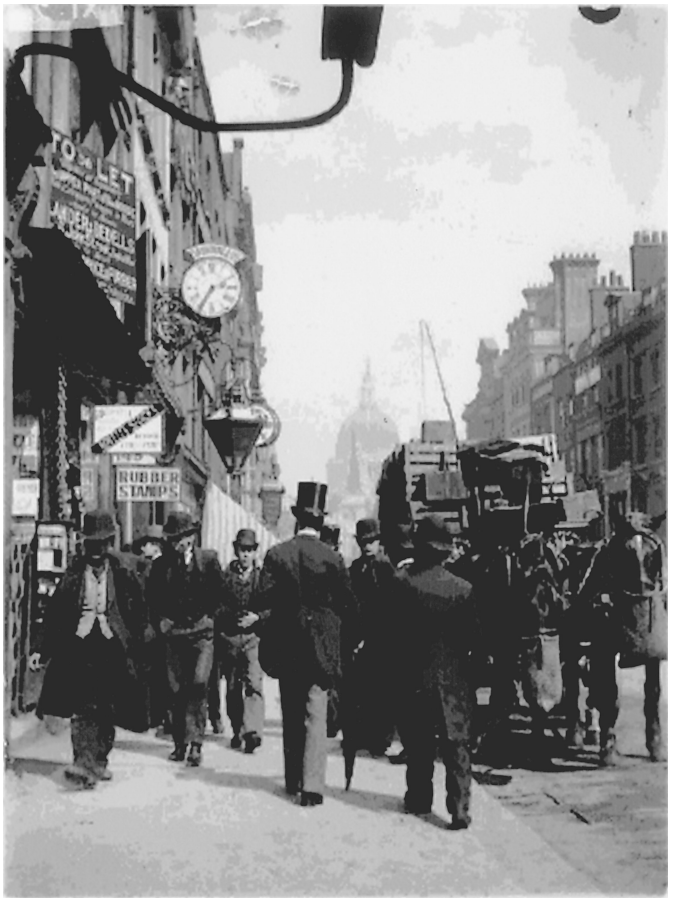


Figure 27. Samuel Butler, "'Rubber Stamps', Fleet Street, Showing St. Paul's," 1889. Photograph courtesy of the Master and Fellows of St. John's College, Cambridge.

evil as of a Counter-Jerusalem of ghoulish deformation and decay. As Shaffer has argued perceptively in her pioneering study, Butler's photography frequently takes us into "a world of naturalism exploiting the photograph's innate tendency towards the grotesque and its historical tendency towards deflation and comedy" (228). Some of his later photography was employed in developing visual evidence for his *The Authoress of the Odyssey* (1897), an archaeologically-inspired localization of the story of Ulysses in the western Sicilian locale of Trapani. Here, we find more examples of Butler's ironic juxtaposition, as he is photographed beside his Sicilian scholarly companion Signor Sugameli peering out from the cave of Polyphemus, a large hillside grotto outside Trapani. This secularization of the Homeric tradition, grounded in Butler's photographic literalism, was one of the inspirations, Hugh Kenner held, of James Joyce's *Ulysses*.

But the bulk of the Butler photographic archive is the result of years of patient and quirky observation. A compulsive wanderer in England and abroad, especially in Italy,

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Butler lugged camera equipment with him constantly, and his output, as this Tate exhibition selection decisively showed, was considerable and omnivorous: country landscapes, urban scenes, family portraits, children, laborers, priests, tramps, counts, freaks, and barnyard animals. More than 3,500 plates and photographs survive in collections at St. John's College at Cambridge University and at the Chapin Library at Williams College, Massachusetts. A massive CD-ROM of some two thousand of his snapshots prepared by the St. John's College special collections staff offers the visitor to that archive a curiously riveting viewing experience, an opportunity to become immersed in a vanished Victorian landscape. And for all of Butler's pervasive photographic intellectualism, his restless and sometimes aimless ironic play with visual representation, there is much in this extraordinary body of work that reveals a profound warmth and deep sympathy for his subjects. The loveliest and most arresting, and, indeed, most painterly, piece of the exhibition was that of an old priest who appears to be saying his Rosary in the dark shadows of a Sicilian church, with a blinding stream of light flooding through a great open door and illuminating the floor in front of him (Figure 28). This piece shows Butler at this best in working with the effects of light and the simple image, and it represents a photographic style that is found throughout the larger collection. Butler had an archival instinct matched by few Victorians and left behind an immense body of unpublished work, including a series of thoughtfully edited notes and aphorisms, a manuscript work of fiction (*The Way of All Flesh*) that he considered his *magnum*



Figure 28. Samuel Butler, "Old Priest in the Church of the Addolorata, Monte Erice," 1894. Photograph courtesy of the Master and Fellows of St. John's College, Cambridge.

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opus, and a meticulously prepared correspondence. His photography is by no means the least of his remains.

Massachusetts Institute of Technology

WORK CONSIDERED

Shaffer, Elinor. *Erewhons of the Eye: Samuel Butler as Painter, Photographer, and Art Critic*. London: Reaktion Books, 1988.

HOW THE VICTORIANS BECAME SEXY: THE FLESHLY SCHOOL OF PAINTING

By Herbert Sussman

EXPOSED: THE VICTORIAN NUDE, an extensive exhibition initiated by and first shown at Tate Britain in 2002, and *The Crimson Petal and the White* by Michael Faber, a best-selling novel set in Victorian times and published in the same year, illustrate the interchange of the scholarly and the popular, more particularly how the recent rich work in Victorian sexuality, familiar to readers of this journal, informs and is transformed within blockbuster museum shows and popular fiction. Both exhibition and novel shed some light on the question of how the Victorians have become so sexy.

Exposed, curated by Alison Smith, a distinguished British art historian, traveled from Tate Britain to Munich, the Brooklyn Museum of Art (where I saw the show), and finally to Kobe, Japan. As a scholarly intervention in Victorian art history, in its visual richness, and through the critical essays in the fine catalog, the project demonstrates a number of important points, many of which were earlier articulated in Smith's excellent monograph, *The Victorian Nude: Sexuality, Morality and Art*. The plenitude – the acres of flesh, primarily female, but also male – convincingly refutes the common wisdom that Victorians did not do nudes. Instead, *Exposed* shows that through the nineteenth century British artists employed the tradition of the nude for a complex array of purposes. Furthermore, through a combined thematic and chronological organization the exhibition breaks down the monolithic category of "Victorian Art." The representation of the nude is seen as unfolding and shifting from the 1830s through the 1890s in the various sections of the show – The English Nude (1840s); The Classical Nude (1860s); The Private Nude; The Artist's Studio; Sensation! The Nude in High Art (1870s–1890s); The Modern Nude (1880s–1890s).

In its intellectual organization, however, *Exposed* exhibits some of the contradictions within recent Victorian art history. Following the work of feminists scholars such as Griselda Pollock, who enabled us to see such representations of women as the Rossettian stunner not as emblems of female loveliness, but of male erotic fantasies and patriarchal power, *Exposed* seeks to show the importance of the Victorian nude as an ideological figure to be read as registering complex social meanings that shift over the century, to see these unclothed bodies in terms of signification rather than erotics. In her introductory catalog essay on "The Nude in Nineteenth-Century Britain," Smith speaks of the English nude as "functioning to contain a complex set of cultural and historical associations" (11). Thus, the characteristic Victorian integration of the nude figure within a mythic or historical narrative is revalued as

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ideological work with political and cultural importance. For example, the outpouring of Lady Godiva paintings in the 1840s following Tennyson's poem of 1842, epitomized by Edwin Landseer's *Lady Godiva's Prayer* (1865), a work admired by Queen Victoria, demonstrates a politicizing of nudity that could transform Lady Godiva into "a Saxon heroine who acted in defence of English Liberty" (*Exposed* 67).

But as Kenneth Clark famously noted in his study of the nude, an observation quoted by Smith in her monograph, "No nude, however abstract, should fail to arouse in the spectator some vestige of erotic feeling" (7). Indeed, the laudable effort by the exhibit to rescue the Victorian nude for signification runs against the inherent erotic charge of the unclothed body, an erotics shaped in this particular case by the scholarly reimagining of Victorian sexuality and a museum marketing that represents Victorian sexuality within the category of the perverse, a category itself constructed in the nineteenth century.

The title of the exhibition, *Exposed: The Victorian Nude*, in its multiple suggestions and suggestiveness neatly encapsulates the dynamic between the realm of scholarly publication and the world of major museums dependent for their income on attracting large crowds. At the Brooklyn Museum of Art, *Exposed* followed *Sensation*, a 1999 show of young British artists that incurred the wrath of Mayor Giuliani, who threatened to withdraw municipal funds because of the sacrilege of *The Holy Virgin Mary* by Chris Ofili showing a Virgin Mary in part constructed of elephant dung. *Exposed* itself quite nicely offers a bit of titillation as voyeurism, lifting the clothing, the covering of the flesh. But in contrast to *Sensation*, a show of contemporary art, the erotic frisson is purified by historical distance, a distinct advantage for museums supported by public funds here and abroad. After all, a postmodern painting of naked women tied to posts in the football stadium to be ravaged by the Detroit Lions would be a bit more touchy for taxpayers than naked bound female Christian martyrs about to be devoured by real lions in a painting by the aptly named Herbert Schmalz, *Faithful unto Death: 'Christianes and Leones!'* of 1888. Ironically, then, the exhibition replicates in the twenty-first century, the hypocritical prurience that, in part, it claims to find in the Victorians. If the narrative art of the Victorian nude provided an excuse to see naked ladies, *Exposed* is presented as an opportunity to see naked Victorian ladies, as well as men and boys, while feeling superior to the benighted inhabitants of nineteenth-century Britain. The critic of the *Village Voice* simply accepts that the purpose and the intent of the art is sexual titillation, "These nudes are calculated to produce a buzz" (Saltz 53).

There is another implication in the title – that these are not timeless nudes, but Victorian nudes, Victorian bodies rendered by Victorian artists. Indeed, *Exposed* marks the triumph of Foucauldianism in the popular imagination. Michael Kimmelman, reviewing *Exposed* for the *New York Times*, says, "You don't need to be Michel Foucault and write a book about the history of sexuality to recognize" that the Victorians were absorbed by sex. The exhibition assumes the Foucauldian idea of the historicity of Eros, that each era constructs its own specific sexuality. Furthermore, the title assumes that the word "exposed" has a specific relevance to Victorian sex. One cannot, for example, imagine a show called "Exposed: The Renaissance Nude." For it is exposure, unveiling that defines the particular frisson of Victorian sexuality today. It is seeing the nineteenth-century sexual body uncovered, seeing the piano legs without the flounces, the flesh beneath the crinoline that provides a sexual kick equal to if not greater than, say, viewing the body in the work of Degas, imitated by such late-Victorians as Walter Sickert, and certainly viewing the naked contemporary body.

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In its erotic intensity and in its particular and even peculiar form, the sexual afterlife of the Victorians becomes attractive not for its purity, but for its perversion. The *Village Voice* critic suggests that the show should have been called "Kinky." To the contemporary viewer, the nineteenth-century sexological definitions still apply; the Victorian nudes appear as a gallery of perversion, a visual Krafft-Ebing. In Lawrence Alma-Tadema's *Tepidarium* (1882), the reclining woman masturbates with a feather fan while contemplating an "overtly phallic strigil" (*Exposed* 148) held in the other hand. Like Schmalz's *Faithful unto Death*, the well-known *Knight Errant* (1870) by John Everett Millais and *The Greek Slave* of Hiram Powers, seen here in a replica made for the Great Exhibition of 1851, show the voyeuristic charge of female bondage. Henry Scott Tuke's *August Blue* (1894), a non-narrative painting of adolescents bathing in Falmouth Harbor, registers the new acceptability of representing a pedophilic homoeroticism centered on the young boy. The late Victorian male fantasy of the fatal woman appears in many works, including John Collier's painting of *Lilith* (1887) wrapped round by a giant snake and Herbert Draper's *Ulysses and the Sirens* (1909) showing the bound Ulysses threatened by a boarding party of predatory naked women.

In its expanse of fleshly intensity and non-normative sexual scenes, the art in *Exposed* shows erotics trumping signification. As if confirming the Foucauldian notions of the truth of sex within our discourse of sexuality, what the exhibition seems to expose is the authentic motivation of the Victorians as neither religion nor economics nor social class, but Eros, albeit an Eros deformed.

Like *Exposed*, Michael Faber's enormously skilful novel *The Crimson Petal and the White* exemplifies the ways in which the scholarly revaluing of Victorian sexuality enters the public realm. This is no steamy Victorian bodice ripper, but rather a canny and informed imagining of the nineteenth century. An impressive knowledge of quotidian Victorian life combines with post-modernist reflexiveness, as in this self-conscious use of the panoramic mode and the narrator speaking directly to the Reader:

> That is why I've brought you here to Church Lane, St. Giles: I've found just the right person for you.
> I must warn you, though, that I'm introducing you at the very bottom: the lowest of the low. The opulence of Bedford Square and the British Museum may be only a few hundred yards away, but New Oxford Street runs between there and here like a river too wide to swim, and you are on the wrong side. The Prince of Wales has never, I assure you, shaken the hand of any of the residents of this street, or even nodded in passing at anyone here, nor even, under cover of night, sampled the prostitutes. (4)

In this novel, the quotidian truth of Victorian life is rendered brilliantly, but the deeper truth of the Victorians is seen to be neither the desire for monetary gain nor moral sanctity, but, as in *Exposed*, the truth of sex. The plot is energized by the notion that the Victorians, or rather Victorian men, were motivated at the foundation of their being by sexual desire. Sugar, the proto-feminist prostitute as heroine lies there thinking not of England, but of her cash accounts and Mary Wollstonecraft. The male protagonist, William Rackham, a Victorian businessman, is obsessed with Sugar because he finds no satisfaction in his dutiful, sexless relationship with his hysterical wife. Yet his erotic drives are registered under the label of perversion; he needs a woman to satisfy his outré sexual desires. Even the economic self-interest that was once seen as powering industrial England is here registered as secondary. William energetically fattens the profits of Rackham Perfumeries through innovations, but

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only so that he can fund his passion for Sugar. Even William's brother, ostensibly a man of God, thinks only of the body of a woman. In our current sexualized view of the Victorians, religion functions as a hypocritical cover for prurience.

Here, sex is the essential motivating force of nineteenth-century Britain; the plot is driven by desire, or more specifically by male desire, but the texture of nineteenth-century realism employed with irony and intelligence provides a welcome counterpoint to the Victorian male fantasies registered in *Exposed*. Even though the dust jacket shows a detail of D. G. Rossetti's *Lilith*, female flesh is hardly idealized; Sugar suffers from severe eczema. She must cope with a cold room and a full bladder, with douches and stained bed sheets while employing her sexual knowledge to enthrall a bourgeois man. In this extended rewriting of Rossetti's "Jenny," the enigmatic prostitute, the Victorian nude as object of the male gaze, speaks. And her speech displays, in a mildly anachronistic fashion, a modern feminist consciousness; her female secret life lies in her angry journals kept in her closet.

Both novel and exhibition, then, imply not only that the Victorians were sexy, but that, *mirabile dictu*, they were more intensely sexual than we. Although the old idea of Victorian sexual repression continues to control contemporary views, the scholarly rethinking of repression, exemplified in the influential work of John Kucich and John Maynard, has percolated into present awareness so that inhibition now appears as intensifying rather than enervating the erotic. In *The Crimson Petal* William's desire becomes a fierce passion precisely because he must overcome his inhibition about his sexual needs as well as his sense of duty to his childlike wife. The world of the Victorian nudes becomes a lost sexual paradise, of a particular kind, of Eros in restraint, both literally in bondage paintings such as *Bondage* (1895) by Ernest Norman, showing a Semitic slave dealer offering a Nubian slave to the Pharaoh, and in the general artistic effort to contain flesh within classical or mythic narratives.

The power of repression in generating the sexual frisson of the show appears in contrast to the quite fascinating section of pornographic photographs and early moving images, curtained off by the Brooklyn organizers in another contemporary replication of Victorian prudery. A fine catalog essay, "Prudery, Pornography and the Victorian Nude (Or, what do we think the butler saw?)" by Martin Myrone, sees the new technologies of image reproduction as enabling the democratization of pornography, moving porn downscale from the elite to the larger male public. The insouciance of the comic turns in these early films, where moral machinery has been jettisoned for the exposure of female and male flesh without the excuse of classical myth, provides some relief after the Arnoldian high seriousness of Victorian artistic machines, but, paradoxically, these films are the least erotic, and the most risible, work of all the nudes of *Exposed*. To the modern viewer in New York City, who can see more salacious examples on the side of passing buses, women stepping out of their bloomers unconstrained by moral narrative lacks the prurience, the kick of the perverse in the paintings and sculptures of chained ladies.

The inclusion of pornography near the end of this vast array of nineteenth-century works points toward the art historical narrative that informs *Exposed*, the conflation of art history with what Foucault famously calls the Liberation Hypothesis – as moderns became liberated from sexual inhibition, so British art over the course of the nineteenth century liberated itself from moral and religious narrative so as to expose the nude in itself, see the nude plain, with a visual and sexual pleasure outside discourse. While laudably amassing examples to deconstruct the deadening generalization of a unitary Victorian art, in showing the complexity and the variation of the genre over time, the chronological organization still

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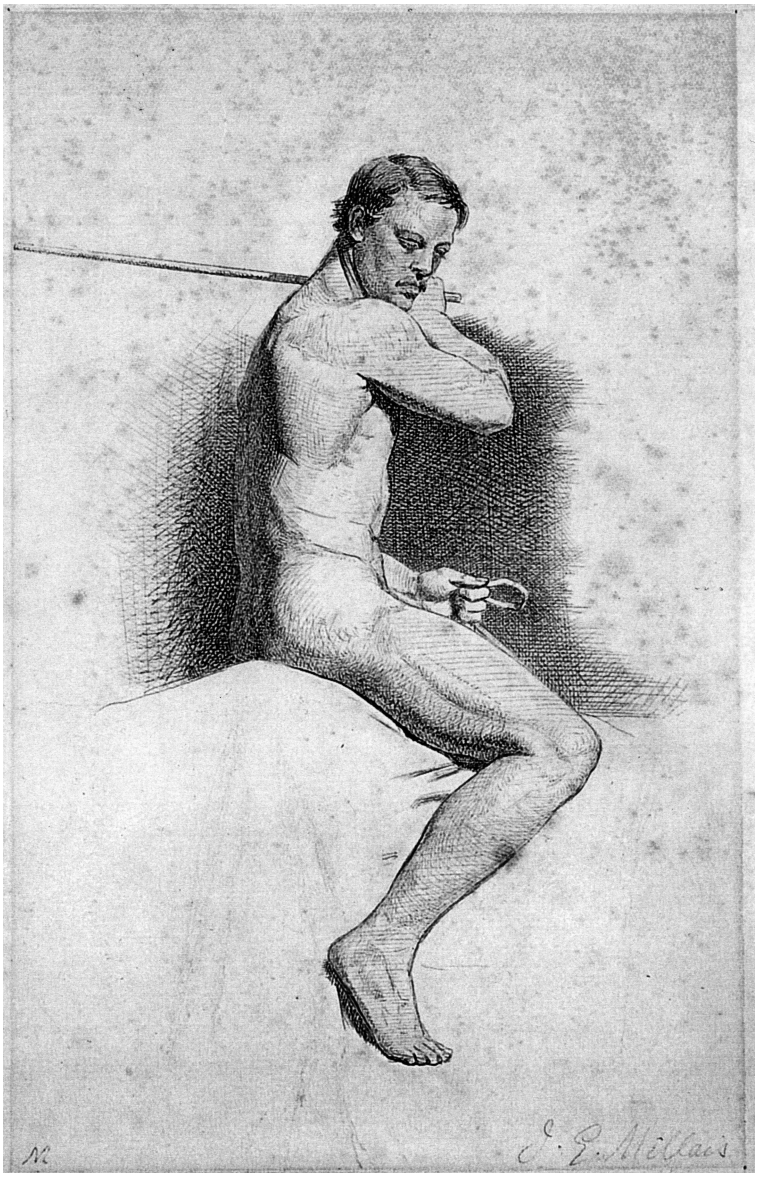


Figure 29. John Everett Millais, "Study of a male nude seated as if on horseback." c. 1843–53. Pencil and pen and ink on white paper. Courtesy of the Victoria and Albert Museum.

imposes the deadening teleology, the notion that Victorian art worked almost providentially toward the French model of modernism, a model that contemporary Victorian art history is moving to counteract. For all its art historical acumen, *Exposed* sings the old song, that the Victorians were benighted artistically and sexually, until the French freed up English painting and the England libido. A work such as Sickert's *Woman Washing her Hair* (1906) showing only the torso of a woman bending over the sink in a shabby bed-sitter, or Philip

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Wilson Steer's *Seated Nude: The Black Hat* depicting a nude wearing only a black hat with flowers, painted in 1900 but never exhibited because of its clear eroticism, show the desire of English artists to emulate Degas and Manet. In spite of its respectful concern for signification in early and mid-Victorian work, the catalog still invokes the avant-garde model to praise what is termed "The Modern Nude," as the work of cutting-edge British painters, inspired by developments in French art" (250). The "avant-garde" works take on value because they were "greeted with revulsion by conservative critics" (250).

If, then, applying the model of French modernism to the Victorian nude only distorts our reading, if the nineteenth-century British treatment of this traditional genre remains outside our usual art historical categories, the question remains: What are we to do with the Victorian nude? Certainly, for all the contradictions and ambivalence in the realizing of this exhibition, the general approach – close, historically specific contextualizing – provides one productive method. For moving beyond the avant-garde paradigm and considering Victorian painting within its own national context, we can turn to the methodology employed in Elizabeth Prettejohn's reading of Alma-Tadema's paintings of Rome, "Lawrence Alma-Tadema and the Modern City of Ancient Rome," where she argues that we can read these paintings as a modernist response to the multitudinousness of the nineteenth-century city analogous to that of Parisian painters, yet rendered in an historicist manner specific to Victorian England.

I would end with a few personal responses. *Exposed* definitively proves the basic fact, the existence of the Victorian nude, but the multitude of works, the acres of flesh, primarily female, but also male, wearies even the most devoted Victorianist. The exhibition provided less a visual treat, than visual exhaustion. The paintings and sculpture demonstrate the conviction of the organizers that the nude provided the Victorians a vehicle for complex and changing ethical, political, and gendered signification, but there is no doubt either that there is an excess in the occupation with the nude body beyond the need of moral and religious meaning. Draper's *Ulysses and the Sirens* surely figures manly sexual restraint, but the erotic attraction of three naked sirens climbing over the gunwales, two of whom are women rather than sea-monsters, their flesh highlighted in the foreground while the men remain shadowed in the background, overwhelms the ethical import.

And yet the show contains a few surprises of stunning visual quality. For this viewer, the gems were art without narrative done in the 1840s and 1850s, well before the pallid imitations of the French and the homoerotic paintings, by such artists as Tuke, William Stott, and Frederick Walker at century's end. Because they were done as life studies, drawings such William Mulready's *Male Academic Study* (1845), Ford Madox Brown's *Academic Study of a Man* (late 1840s), and especially John Everett Millais's *Study of a male nude seated as if on horseback* (1843–53) (Figure 29) stand as an art focused without excuse on the beauty of the body, on the power of flesh and muscle before its being covered by the costumes of finished painting. These sketches reveal, or I should say expose, an artistic energy and skill, an artistic power cloaked by the narrative machinery of the Victorian nude.

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