The Neo-Victorian Sexsation:
Literary Excursions into the Nineteenth Century Erotic

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Abstract

This paper explores contemporary writers' compulsive fascination with the nineteenth century erotic, the multivalent forms of literary re-imaginings of sexual history, and the infusion of present-day socio-political concerns into the literary striptease. Covering a range of neo-Victorian novels, including texts by Margaret Atwood, A. S. Byatt, Michel Faber, J. G. Farrell, John Fowles, Brian Moore, and Sarah Waters, this essay traces the myriad motives for excursions into the Victorian sexscape and their implications for contemporary culture and postmodern identities. Whether exposing the Victorian sexual double standard, recuperating repressed and forgotten histories, constructing genealogies of sexuality, or ironically enacting twentieth/twenty-first century voyeurism, the neo-Victorian novel can be relied upon to deliver a sexsational read.

Key words: neo-Victorian novel, Orientalism, sexuality, Margaret Atwood, A. S. Byatt, Michel Faber, J. G. Farrell, John Fowles, Sarah Waters.

1. Introduction: Invitations to Seduction

In Brian Moore's 1975 novel *The Great Victorian Collection*, the staid and respectable academic Anthony Maloney dreams into life an exhibition of Victorian artefacts in historical room settings, which include "the parlor of a famous Victorian brothel" alongside *objets d'art* and displays from the Great Exhibition of 1851.[1] Maloney's collection can be read as an emblem of neo-Victorian novelists' obsession with "exhibiting" the underside of nineteenth century propriety and morality, a sensationalised world of desire and novelty, where any sexual fantasy might be gratified. When a representative of *The New York Times* announces the completion of the collection's documentation on film, Maloney cautions him:

> There are a number of concealed drawers, cupboards, and compartments which have things hidden in them. The Victorians had many secrets. For one thing, there is the Carrington Collection of Flagellatory Instruments and Literature, which is concealed behind a false wall in the Zollverein Indian Room. There is the Dodson-Hutter Collection of Pedophilic Photographs, concealed behind false panels in a sideboard carved in oak in the Renaissance style by Graham and Sidgwood of

> London.…There is an artificial phallus concealed in a false compartment in the statue *The Turkish Slave* by Henry Powers. There are a number of wonderful things like this, which you've missed.[2]

Maloney proceeds to reveal what is hidden, to expose what is deliberately obscured from view. His collection constitutes a veritable orgiastic fantasy of erotic excess, demanding a correction of prevalent modern-day notions of our forerunners' sexual repression. Yet it could also be viewed as a Bluebeard's chamber - our own age's heart of the darkness, representing the omnipotent fantasy of penetrating and mastering the sexual unknown.

The opening of Michel Faber's 2002 bestselling *The Crimson Petal and the White* renders this desire explicit, enticing the reader to lose him/herself in the night time underworld of Victorian London in a metaphorical encounter of time-travelling punter and streetwalker:

> you are an alien from another time and place altogether.…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.[3]

Not surprisingly, Faber opts for a prostitute protagonist, Sugar, who quite literally deals in the fulfilment of every possible (and perverse) sexual fantasy, since being forced as a child into the sex-trade by her own mother. Indeed, our fascination with the Victorian erotic unknown seems to derive largely from depictions of such anomalous practices as child prostitution and sexual slavery or of the paradox of wilfully maintained sexual ignorance and unchecked libertinism. In one sense, we extract politically incorrect pleasure from what has become inadmissible or ethically *unimaginable* as a focus of desire in our own time. We thus enjoy neo-Victorian fiction at least in part to feel debased or outraged, to revel in degradation, *reading for defilement*. By projecting illicit and unmentionable desires onto the past, we conveniently reassert our own supposedly enlightened stance towards sexuality and social progress.

In another sense, however, the twenty/twenty-first century proliferation of sex clubs and prostitution, increases in global sex tourism, sex trade, and sexual slavery, the exponential rise in sexually transmitted diseases, violent internet and child porn, and paedophilia more generally could be read as an uncanny doubling and intensification of prevalent Victorian social problems, indicating a return of the repressed rather than "progress." Neo-Victorian fiction's project of the retrospective sexual

liberation of the nineteenth century becomes disturbingly infused with preferred ignorance - or deliberate denial - of our own culture's complicity in free market systems that enable continuing sexual exploitation and oppression. Organised stag nights to Prague or world-cup match celebrations, for instance, could be viewed as modern-day versions of Victorian gentlemen's nights on the town, encouraging an orchestrated influx and ready supply of prostitutes, not all of whom will be voluntary career professionals. Coming to "know" the secret sex-lives of the Victorians may thus become a means of "un-knowing" our own.

2. Into the Great Unknown (or, Being Had)

In figuring the great unknown predominantly through the sexscape of the female body, the Neo-Victorian novel replicates the methods of Victorians themselves. In 1845, for instance, the American gynaecologist Marion Sims described himself as "a colonizing and conquering hero" for advancing boldly into unexplored territory: "I saw everything as no man had seen it before."[4] Not all Victorians, however, shared his excitement of discovery. Some clearly preferred ignorance. An apocryphal account of the life of the Victorian author and art critic John Ruskin recounts the disaster of his wedding night with Effie Gray. So unlike was his wife's materiality from Ruskin's idealized notions of angelic femininity and from the smooth female forms familiar to him from Greek statuary and paintings that he "suffered a traumatic shock … when he discovered that Effie had pubic hair."[5] His disgust rendered him incapable of consummating their union; nor did he do so in the remaining six years of their marriage prior to its annulment.

In the 1973 *The Siege of Krishnapur*, J. G. Farrell stages what I take to be a comical re-enactment of this scene. In a fictional British outpost during the Indian Mutiny, the besieged imperialists seek to uphold standards through rituals such as the tea party held by the (already) fallen Lucy Hughes for two of her favourite admirers and heroic defenders of the Residency, George Fleury and Harry Dunstaple. Before the ritual can properly commence, a swarm of resonantly named cockchafers engulfs the participants. Feeling the flying black beetles "pullulating beneath her chemise," Lucy hysterically tears off her clothes: "Her muslin dress, her petticoats, chemise and underlinen were all discarded in a trice and there she stood, stark naked but as black and glistening as an African slave-girl."[6] Paradoxically, it is only once Lucy has stripped naked that the narrative striptease properly begins. The insects fasten onto Lucy's white flesh but repeatedly fall off due to their own weight, leaving the female form simultaneously veiled and exposed in a sort of "flickering," erotic

black-and-white silent film that inspires George with the idea of "a series of daguerreotypes which would give the impression of movement."[7]

As Lucy swoons, the men dither whether or not it is "permissible" to assist the naked woman, but finally, "clearing their minds from any impure notions", they proceed to remove the insects, using the torn-off boards of a conveniently handy Bible to "shave" Lucy.[8] This is the point at which Farrell invokes the Ruskin episode:

> Her body, both young men were interested to discover, was remarkably like the statues of young women they had seen…like, for instance, the Collector's plaster cast of *Andromeda Exposed to the Monster*, though, of course, without any chains. Indeed, Fleury felt quite like a sculptor as he worked away and he thought that it must feel something like this to carve an object of beauty out of the primeval rock. He became quite carried away as with dextrous strokes he carved a particularly exquisite right breast and set to work on the delicate fluting of the ribs. The only significant difference between Lucy and a statue was that Lucy had pubic hair; this caused them a bit of a surprise at first. It was not something that had ever occurred to them as possible, likely, or even, desirable.
>
> 'D'you think this is *supposed* to be here?' asked Harry, who had spent a moment or two scraping at it ineffectually with his board. Because the hair, too, was black it was hard to be sure that it was not simply matted and dried insects.
>
> 'That's odd,' said Fleury, peering at it with interest; he had never seen anything like it on a statue. 'Better leave it, anyway, for the time being. We can always come back to it later when we've done the rest.'[9]

The scene of Lucy as slave girl in moving daguerreotype is clearly voyeuristic and plays to modern readers' titillation, mediated by her mesmerised Victorian male observers. The passage invites desire, even as it delays erotic gratification - quite literally sublimating Fleury's sexual energy into art - and then short-circuits desire altogether by the shift to comic parody in the Ruskinesque episode. Having enticed his modern-day audience into the sexual tableau of the prone and naked female body, helplessly available to the manipulations of male desire, Farrell checks our delectation by inscribing an insurmountable difference in sexual

knowledge and competence between the Victorian participants - "them" - and us. Lucy's pubic hair ejects us from the fictional illusion of the nineteenth century into our own supposedly more sexually aware historical context.

This movement from seduction to erotic disappointment and/or self-conscious farce constitutes a recurrent motif in the neo-Victorian novel. It satirises readers' over-investment in sex as the hallowed gateway to true, because uncensored, knowledge of our Victorian predecessors and comments on our own cultural obsession with sex. As Miriam Elizabeth Brustein argues, too many authors reductively associate "representations of sex - speaking and performance thereof - with the 'truth' about the Victorians" *per se*, producing a supposedly "heightened realism" by "uncover[ing] the bodies hidden under corsets and frock coats" that ends up revealing rather less about our forebears and more about twentieth/twenty-first century sexual fantasies.[10]

This raises questions as to whom the laughter often produced by neo-Victorian sexual fumblings should be properly directed at, as in Faber's comparable Ruskinesque scene in *The Crimson Petal and the White*. Henry Rackham, the priesthood contemplating brother of Sugar's lover, reflects on the mysteries of the female body via "the Magdalens and the classical heroines and the martyred saints" with "their flesh…on show" at the Royal Academy exhibitions,[11] all the while tortured by the shadowy areas the painters withhold from view and by his secret lust for his widowed reformist friend Emmeline Fox. To test his faith and commitment to social reform, Henry engages prostitutes in paid conversation with the aim of converting them from their fallen ways. His unsuccessful first encounter ends with an unplanned question and its disastrous consequences:

> "Are you…are you hairy?'
>
> She squints in puzzlement. 'Hairy, sir?'
>
> "On your body.' He waves his hand vaguely at her bodice and skirts. 'Do you have hair?'
>
> 'Hair, sir?' she grins mischievously. 'Why, of *course*, sir: same as you!' And at once she grabs hold of her skirts and gathers them up under her bosom, holding the rucked material with one hand while, with the other, she pulls down the front of her pantalettes, exposing the dark pubic triangle.
>
> Loud laughter sounds from elsewhere in the street as Henry stares for a long instant, shuts his eyes, and turns his back on her. […] Head aflame, he stumbles stiffly

> down the street, as if her sex is buried deep in his flesh like a sword.
>
> 'I only wanted an answer!' he yells hoarsely over his shoulder, as more and more of Church Lane's elusive and subterranean voiced join in the laughter without even understanding its cause.
>
> 'Jesus, sir!' she calls after him. 'You ought to get *summat* for your extra shillin'!'[12]

As much as siding with the laughing audience, the amused reader is implicated in Henry's position of being laughed *at*, for Henry very much assumes the reader's initial position as the alien exploring the Victorian sexscape. Likewise, Henry's prurient, compulsive, and horrified fascination mirrors our own, for all that we come from what Sugar imagines as "the more sophisticated and permissive future that's just around the corner."[13]

Indeed, for products of a "permissive" society, neo-Victorian fantasies repeatedly take on curiously antiquated overtones of imperialist adventures by would-be conquerors of exotic female "others." In this sense, Henry's encounter with the heathen of the streets echoes the reader's first glimpse of Sugar in terms of Oriental imagery and sensual promise: "Her eyes alone, even if she were wrapped up like an Arabian odalisque, with nothing else showing, would be enough to declare her sex."[14] Similarly, Moore refers to Henry Power's statue *The Turkish Slave*, Farrell has Lucy pose as an African slave-girl, and in John Fowles' 1969 *The French Lieutenant's Woman* the protagonist Charles Smithson perceives the enigmatic Sarah Woodruff as "proud and submissive, bound and unbound, his slave and his equal"[15] shortly before he finally takes physical possession of her. Put differently, the neo-Victorian novel exoticises, eroticises, and seeks to penetrate the tantalising hidden recesses of the nineteenth century by staging a retrospective imperialism.

Eighteenth and nineteenth century fantasies of the Orient as free zone of libidinal energies are now understood as products of the Western imperialist imagination rather than attempts at literary realism or empirical knowledge. The same applies to the neo-Victorian sexsation, which artificially inflates desire only to reveal the impossibility of its sustainability and satisfaction in reality. In Fowles' novel, the gentleman Charles' growing obsession with the fallen woman Sarah propels the plot of bourgeois respectability tempted by erotic transgression to its natural climax, namely the sexual union of the protagonists. Yet the consummation proves perversely anti-climactic, so that Fowles' erotic build-up appears no more than a means of game playing with the reader.

The still shirt-clad Charles climbs on top of the "half-swooned," "passive yet acquiescent" Sarah, and with a single thrust "beg[ins] to ejaculate at once" - in "precisely ninety seconds" the non-event is over.[16] Similarly in A. S. Byatt's 1990 Booker Prize winning *Possession* the unions of the two sets of nineteenth and twentieth century lovers, whose romances develop in parallel, take up a minuscule amount of text compared to the long drawn out build-up of attraction and seduction. When the Victorian poets Randolph Henry Ash and Christabel LaMotte finally consummate their secret affair, their orgasms disappear into a line break in the text; the reader's curiosity remains unsatisfied. As Jennifer M. Jeffers argues, the reader desires to possess and "come to 'know' the text" - and thence the Victorian age stripped naked - "much as a lover comes to 'know' her beloved."[17] Yet the next paragraph only teases us further with a retrospective glimpse from Randolph's summary perspective. "That was the first of those long strange nights" which the reader never becomes privy to beyond the abstract "passion" and "pleasure."[18]

At this point, roughly half-way through the novel, Byatt's readers may displace their sexual anticipations onto the twentieth century academics Roland Michell and Maud Bailey, who through biographical and textual detection seek to discover the truth about the Victorian poets' relationship. Not surprisingly, their quest for knowledge ends in sex. Yet the libidinal energy that literally drives Byatt's plot fizzles out in a single sentence bedroom scene:

> And very slowly and with infinite gentle delays and delicate diversions and variations of indirect assault Roland finally, to use an outdated phrase, entered and took possession of all her white coolness that grew warm against him, so that there seemed to be no boundaries, and he heard, towards dawn, from a long way off, her clear voice crying out, uninhibited, unashamed, in pleasure and triumph.[19]

As in the case of the poets' union, the discretely couched, self-consciously "outdated" language, highly romanticised and oblique, withholds more than it discloses. The reader is not allowed to participate even vicariously, but is held "a long way off," as if viewing a painting from a distance rather than feeling visceral involvement with sweat-moistened flesh and groping hands. Not a breast, buttock, clitoris, vagina, or penis in sight.

Much as does Fowles' novel, *Possession* makes clear that our arrogant attempt to *repossess* the Victorian age through sex is analogous

to Ash's reflections on Christabel: "For months he had been possessed by the imagination of her. She had been distant and closed away, a princess in a tower [….] Her presence had been unimaginable, or more strictly, *only* to be imagined."[20] So too, Victorian sexuality continues to appear to the modern-day reader/critic as a princess in a tower awaiting retrospective rescue by our more liberated age. Yet nineteenth century sexuality too is "*only* to be imagined" but never *known* as anything other than a simulacrum in the image of our own desires. The neo-Victorian novel reader, then, has been had, in part by what s/he *wants* to believe, much like William Rackham in Faber's novel, his sense of sexual omnipotence affirmed by Sugar's praise of his male organ: "The taste of it alone is enough, she assures him, to bring her to the brink of ecstasy."[21] Or like Charles in *The French Lieutenant's Woma*n. Discovering virgin blood on his shirttails that reveals the fallen woman's paradoxical innocence, he accuses her, "I was no more than the dupe of your imaginings"[22] - and, more importantly, his own.

3. Politicising Victorian Sex

The role of sexual fantasy in asserting power over the subjected, exploited female, colonising her so to speak, while simultaneously enacting the deconstruction of any such desire, balances reactionary and liberationist impulses. In Sarah Waters' 1999 *Affinity* and 2002 *Fingersmith*, the implication of lesbian desire in fraud and criminality inevitably reinforces outdated stereotypes of lesbianism as linked to deviance. Yet Waters also employs the neo-Victorian sex trope for a subversive textual/sexual politics of turning the tables on heteronormativity. In *Fingersmith*, she ironically appropriates the male dominated realm of pornography, represented by the lesbian protagonist Maud Lilly's abusive and tyrannical collector "uncle." After his death, Maud assures her economic independence by writing Victorian pornography, a lesbian profiteering from male desires by simulating fantastic sex on paper, and probably mainly heterosexual sex at that. Analogously in *Affinity*, Waters stakes a political claim to spiritualism, already recognised by feminist theorists as a means of female empowerment and Victorian women's advance into the public sphere, as a manifest space of lesbian intervention.

Waters' first novel, the 1998 *Tipping the Velvet*, demonstrates this historicisation of lesbianism still more explicitly, tracing the Whitstable fishmonger Nancy Astley's picaresque journey of sexual awakening via a series of lovers ranging from the repressed music hall male impersonator Kittie Butler, through the rich exploitative Sapphist Diana Lethaby and her working class maid, to the socialist philanthropist

Flora Banner. Nan's progression to an open and equal lesbian relationship figures personal liberation and social progress through sexual liberation. While questions surround the extent of Nan's budding political consciousness, Waters' sexsationalist politics are unambiguous. Not only does Nan's androgynous facility to shift between female and male roles in her stage career and her stint as a rent boy enact feminist theories of gender as historically contingent performativity. More significantly, Waters recuperates a lesbian history left out of the Victorian public record apart from negative mentions in medical discourses on sexual perversion and degeneracy. By showing lesbianism to be pervasive from the lower to the upper classes, Waters creates a quasi-genealogy of lesbian desire and puts the weight of history and historical precedent behind lesbian existence. Waters breathes life into Terry Castle's notion of the "*Apparitional Lesbian*,"[23] giving her flesh, blood, sex, and cunt, as in Nan's first union with Diana and her massive leather dildo:

> I fingered her the harder she kissed me, and the hotter I grew between my legs, behind my sheath of leather.… she gently lowered herself upon me; then proceeded to rise and sink, rise and sink, with an ever speedier motion. At first I held her hips, to guide them; then I returned a hand to her drawers, and let the fingers of the other creep round her thigh to her buttocks. My mouth I fastened now on one nipple, now on the other, sometimes finding the salt of her flesh, sometimes the dampening cotton of her chemise.[24]

There is nothing remotely spectral or unreal about lesbian sex here, which is wholly of the flesh. This literal *materialisation* arguably accounts for Waters' explicit and extended sexual representations, in contrast to Fowles and Byatt. Paradoxically, however, the reader's belief in Waters' lesbian history is finally achieved not by facts but by the sheer force of desire that carries its own conviction within it.

Even overtly political uses of the sex trope in neo-Victorian fiction thus remain flawed as avenues to genuine knowledge of the past, as Margaret Atwood's exposure of the Victorian sexual double standard in the 1996 *Alias Grace* also makes clear. Dr. Simon Jordan, a burgeoning American psychologist, is employed to assess the mental state of the infamous real-life murderess Grace Marks, convicted for her involvement in the murders of her employer Thomas Kinnear and his housekeeper-cum-mistress Nancy Montgomery, but spared execution on account of her young age. Thirty years after the murders, Simon plans "to open her up

like an oyster" and break through her supposed amnesia, so as to establish the true extent of Grace's culpability with a view to obtaining a possible pardon.[25] The choice of an aphrodisiac for Simon's simile proves apt, for the doctor's "chief concern," like that of the Victorian newspaper readers, who avidly followed Grace's case, the prison and asylum visitors who come to gaze upon her with prurient curiosity, and arguably that of the neo-Victorian novel readers also, is whether or not Grace really was the guilty and murder inciting "paramour" of her fellow servant James McDermott, executed for the crime.[26] Simon stands in for the modern-day reader, seeking to penetrate and possess Grace as an object of erotic knowledge.

All the male characters of the novel to some extent engage in what I earlier called *reading for defilement*, from the reverend, who urges Grace to confess her sins, to the man she marries upon her release, who employs her stories of degradation as sexual foreplay. "[H]is favourite part of the story," Grace notes, is "when poor James McDermott was hauling me all around the house…looking for a bed fit for his wicked purposes."[27] Similarly, Grace recalls her murdered master's evident pleasure at "watching my bare ankles and legs, dirty as they were, and…my backside moving back and forth with the [floor] scrubbing, like a dog waggling its rump."[28] In the Victorian imagination, the figure of the maid, her morals already inevitably suspect on account of her lowly origins, is constructed as sexually available to the men of the house, comparable to chattels or prostitutes. So too in Simon's mind, where Grace's servant status in the prison governor's household evokes memories from his childhood, of creeping into the maids' attic bedrooms to finger their still warm, discarded petticoats and stockings. In a clearly sexual Bluebeard-like dream of a passageway of locked doors, Simon believes he senses the hidden maids, "[s]itting on the edges of their narrow beds, in their white cotton shifts, their hair unbound and rippling down over their shoulders, their lips parted, their eyes gleaming. Waiting for him."[29]

Atwood resonantly critiques unstable gender and class hierarchies, which become "eroticized topograph[ies] for transgressive desire,"[30] acting upon which proves punishable, even fatal, for women, while men do so with impunity. Thus Grace's friend Mary Whitney, seduced by her employer's son, is forced to safeguard her domestic position by resorting to abortion, which kills her. In contrast, Simon admits freely availing himself of the sexual opportunities afforded by his European travels and slips readily into an affair with his married landlady Rachel Humphreys, in no way feeling thereby disqualified to pursue the prison governor's virginal daughter Lydia as a possible marriage partner. Nevertheless, Simon conveniently justifies the "hypocrisy" of

dichotomising women into virginal and fallen, on the basis that "one must present what ought to be true as if it really is" so as to "safeguard the purity of those still pure."[31] Atwood's novel represents female sexuality as conveniently "read" or constructed by men so as to be most readily exploited. Accordingly she has her protagonist's "real" sexual nature and role in the murders evade both Simon and Grace's other would-be readers.

4. Conclusion: The New Orientalism

What does the neo-Victorian novel's sexsation finally amount to in its contradictory celebration of libidinous fantasy, its parody of erotic fulfilment, and its political impulse to sexually liberate the past? The answer lies in the seemingly innocuous query of one of Grace's murdered master's friends, who asks whether Thomas had locked his mistress "up in a cupboard somewhere with the rest of his Turkish harem."[32] The query is linked directly to Grace's shock at two pictures in Thomas' bedroom. One depicts the bathing scene from the apocryphal story of Susannah and the elders, set, of course, in the Middle East. The other shows "a woman without any clothes on, on a sofa, seen from the back and looking over her shoulder, with a sort of turban on her head and holding a peacock-feather fan,"[33] in all likelihood a print of Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres's 1814 painting *La Grande Odalisque*. In the course of the novel Simon too turns into a metaphorical pasha contemplating the sensual delights of an imaginary harem, already implicit in his earlier cited dream of the waiting half-dressed maids. He reflects on his mistress Rachel's sexual fantasies, one of which consists of being

> trapped, at the mercy of his will, as in the obscene novels obtainable at the seedier bookstalls of Paris, with their moustache-twirling Sultans and cowering slave-girls. Silvery draperies, chained ankles. Breasts like melons. Eyes of gazelles. That such configurations are banal does not rob them of their power.[34]

When quizzed about Grace's veracity by Simon, her defence lawyer MacKenzie invokes the *Thousand and One Nights*, comparing her to Scheherazade and suggesting she "has merely been telling [Simon] what she needs to tell" so as to "keep the Sultan amused."[35] Though singularly striking when taken together, the discrete dispersal of such Oriental allusions throughout the novel means they function as a textual unconscious, easily missed upon first reading and requiring decoding to become fully visible.

What I want to propose is that Neo-Victorianism as a literary genre and aesthetic technique has become the new Orientalism, a significant mode of imagining sexuality in our hedonistic, consumerist, sex-surfeited age. As the spread of more interdependent globalised economies, mass tourism, and new technologies continuously diminishes the availability of unexplored geographical "dark areas" for reconfiguration into mirrors of our own desires, a displacement occurs from the spatial to the temporal axis. As Sugars' mother remarks in *The Crimson Petal and the White*, "we are hawkers in the marketplace of passion, and we must find whatever niche is not already filled."[36] In an ironic inversion, the Victorian age that once imagined the Orient as seductive free zone of libidinous excess in its literature, architecture, and arts, itself becomes Western culture's mysterious eroticised and exotic other. Like Victorian Orientalist writers, who "revealed…the mysteries of the Orient to their middle-class English audiences, without the inconvenience of travel,"[37] the neo-Victorian writers invite us to travel back in time without ever having to leave our easy chairs. The Orient, described by Malek Alloula as "the sweet dream in which the West has been wallowing for more than four centuries," a dream that "set[s] the stage for the deployment of phantasms,"[38] is replaced in the modern-day imagination by the equally wet dream of the Victorian age.

Orientalism as a means of appropriation, of asserting discursive, symbolic, and political power over the Other, as first defined by Edward Said, has of course become politically incorrect and thence untenable, so that alternatives must be sought to fill its place. Even more so since "Oriental" religion and communities are now firmly embedded, if not wholly indigenised, into heterogeneous, "multi-cultural" Western societies. As Bryan S. Turner argues, nowadays:

> the sense of the strangeness of the outside world is difficult to sustain since the other has been, as it were, imported into all societies as a consequence of human mobility, migration and tourism. Otherness has been domesticated…Islam is increasingly…part of the 'inside' of the Western world.[39]

The Orient is already with us, no longer somewhere else or out there. As a result, writers turn inwards to their own culture to discover or, more accurately, *construct* a replacement Other. Through a process self-estrangement via nostalgic displacement and simulation, our Victorian 'Others' supplant the Orient to become what Said called "a sort of surrogate and even underground self."[40]

The substitute Orientalism of neo-Victorian fiction is signalled by a striking repression or relegation of Orientalist tropes to the textual unconscious of the genre, in particular what Alloula calls "the very embodiment of the obsession: the harem," which associates "a political notion (despotism) with a sensual vision (the possession of women)."[41] Exotic settings or individuals themselves hardly ever figure, though logically such a prominent aspect of the nineteenth century imaginary should feature conspicuously in literary revisions of the period. Instead, the neo-Victorian novel replaces the seraglio with nineteenth century brothels and bedrooms, as in William Rackham's first visit to a house of pleasure in *The Crimson Petal and the* White. Entertained by two girls at once, in a room where "[f]lattened velvet cushions are strewn on the threadbare Persian carpet," William's "lust becomes almost somnambulistic; he demands ever greater liberties…and the girls obey like figments of his own sluggish dream."[42] Similarly, his brother Henry imagines Emmeline Fox as an odalisque, "splayed supine in a pillowy bower, naked and abandoned, inviting him to fall upon her."[43] Meanwhile Sugar's daily routine emulates Victorian fantasies of harem life as an indolent existence of pure voluptuous indulgence, with Sugar reflecting that "[h]alf her life…seems spent in the bath, preparing herself in case William should visit."[44] In *Tipping the Velvet*, Diana Lethaby's friends attribute elongated clitorises to Oriental women in a debate that again invokes the harem trope:

> 'We are reading the story,' cried a woman… 'of a lady with a clitoris as big as a little boy's prick! She claims she caught the malady from an Indian maid. I said, if only Bo Holliday were here, she might confirm it for us, for she was thick with the Hindoos in her years in Hindoostan.'
>
> 'It is not true of Indian girls,' said another lady then. 'But it is of the Turks. They are bred like it, that they might pleasure themselves in the seraglio.'[45]

In *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, Charles complains of Mr. Freeman's harshness following the break-off of Charles' engagement with his daughter, only to be reminded by his solicitor that "if you play the Muslim in a world of Puritans, you can expect no other treatment."[46]

Even as it promises a retrospective self-conscious critique of gender, class, and/or race relations and their ideological legacy, the neo-Victorian novel's sexsation brings with it very real dangers of inadvertent recidivism and obfuscation, not least through re-romanticisation. The depiction of prostitution, for example, proves highly problematic. Though granting prostitutes an individuality beyond their typical embodiment of sin and social evil in Victorian fiction, *Tipping the Velvet* and *The Crimson Petal and the White* represent prostitution - no matter how degrading and exploitative - as a means of self-actualisation through performativity, a calculated circumvention of "hard work" and appropriated female labour, and a sensible means of achieving economic independence and the "good life." Such figuration articulates a questionable *laissez faire* policy and *twenty-first* century trope of self-liberation through sexual liberation, which threaten to re-encode femininity first and foremost in terms of sexuality, and thence in terms of the body and its sexual availability. Such terms are all too easily co-opted by conservative factions defining and codifying "social problems" (such as teenage pregnancy, single motherhood, sexually transmitted diseases, date rape, etc.) in ways that can be readily manipulated for sexual panic and political profit. This includes the notion, encoded in the picture of Susannah and the Elders in *Alias Grace*, that "women are always held responsible for male desire" and its consequences.[47] Quasi-Victorian sexual ignorance, rather than knowledge, paradoxically becomes the only guarantor of moral and/or legal innocence and safety of the female body/subject once more.

Similarly, the discourse of liberty from despotism, formerly articulated through Orientalism, at least promises the possibility of political engagement when transposed to neo-Victorian fiction. Yet it seems increasingly unsustainable for the West to position itself as democratically superior primarily on the basis of our supposedly more enlightened attitudes to sexuality as *the* basic human right per se. Perhaps liberationist engagement can only be sustained by *not* conflating liberty with sexual liberation, or knowledge with sexual knowledge, but keeping the two distinct. In Byatt's *Possession*, Roland complains about disparate elements being "all reduced like boiling jam to - human sexuality" and queries, "really, what is it, what is this arcane power we have, when we see that everything is human sexuality? It's really *powerlessness*."[48] Though most immediately relevant to contemporary gender relations, we should also be aware of the operation of such reductionism in international relations. One need think only of the way the figure of the Afghan woman, shrouded in her *burqa*, was appropriated to help justify the U.S. led

NATO intervention in Afghanistan against the Taleban, a move disturbingly reminiscent of British imperialists' treatment of the Indian practice of *suttee* or widow self-immolation, ironically described by Gayatri Spivak as "brown women saved by white men from brown men."[49] This configuration almost literally replicates the Orientalist position, for as Emily Haddad points out: "Much European condemnation of oriental tyranny arose (and still does) from moral indignation at the presumed oriental subordination of women."[50] We need to begin to ask not only what we know about sexuality, but *how* we know it. Or, put differently, what knowledge derives from eroticised fantasies of the Other (and ourselves as Other) and what from actual embodied practice - and to what extent both require further demythologisation.

In *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, John Fowles' narrator issues a resonant warning about the dangers of facilely projecting our fantasies of otherness upon the sexually repressed Victorians, when "our [own] world spends a vast amount of its time inviting us to copulate, while our reality is as busy in frustrating us."[51] Using the Victorians as an excuse to produce and disseminate sexual discourse, purportedly about "them" but really about ourselves and our own desires, may finally result in power*lessness* rather than sexual empowerment and liberation. In an ironic twist, neo-Victorian Orientalism rebounds upon ourselves, as we become what we imagine:

> In a way, by transferring to the public imagination what they left to the private, we are the more Victorian - in the derogatory sense of the word - century, since we have, in destroying so much of the mystery, the difficulty, the aura of the forbidden, destroyed also a great deal of the pleasure.[52]

Notes

[1] B Moore, *The Great Victorian Collection*, Paladin Grafton, London, 1988, p. 13.

[2] ibid., pp. 37-38.

[3] M Faber, *The Crimson Petal and the White*, Canongate, Edinburgh, 2002, p. 3.

[4] M Sims, cited in E Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle*, Bloomsbury, London, 1991, p. 129, cited in J King, *The Victorian Woman Question in Contemporary Feminist Fiction*, Palgrave Macmillan, Houndmills, Basingstoke, 2005, p. 67.

[5] M Lutyens, *Millais and the Ruskins*, John Murray, London, 1967, p. 156. Other critics suggest alternative reasons for his disgust, including body odour and menstrual blood; see *Wikipedia*, "John Ruskin", retrieved 7 November 2006, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Ruskin.
[6] J G Farrell, *The Siege of Krishnapur*, Orion, London, 1999, p. 230.
[7] ibid., pp. 230-231.
[8] ibid., p. 231.
[9] ibid, pp. 231-232, ellipses in the original.
[10] M E Brustein, "*Alias Grace*", 4 November 2004, retrieved 20 October 2006, http://littleprofessor.typepad.com/the_little_professor/2004/11/ialias_graci.htm.
[11] Faber, p. 315.
[12] ibid., p. 326, first ellipses in the original.
[13] ibid., p. 229.
[14] ibid., p. 26.
[15] J Fowles, *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, Triad/Granada, Bungay, Suffolk, 1977, p. 301.
[16] ibid., p. 304.
[17] J M Jeffers, "The White Bed of Desire in A. S. Byatt's *Possession*", *Critique*, vol. 43, no. 2, Winter 2002, pp. 135-147, p. 135.
[18] A. S. Byatt, *Possession*, Vintage, London, 1991, p. 283.
[19] ibid., p. 507.
[20] ibid., pp. 276-277.
[21] Faber, p. 268.
[22] Fowles, p. 309.
[23] See T Castle, *The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1993.
[24] S Waters, *Tipping the Velvet*, Virago, London, 2002, p. 243.
[25] M Atwood, *Alias Grace*, QPD, London, 1996, p. 133.
[26] ibid., p. 27.
[27] ibid., p. 457.
[28] ibid., p. 275.
[29] ibid., p. 139.
[30] S Kumamoto Stanley, "The Eroticism of Class and the Enigma of Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace*", *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, vol. 22, no. 3, 2003, pp. 371-386, p. 371.
[31] Atwood, p. 87.
[32] ibid., p. 252.

[33] ibid., p. 213.
[34] ibid., p. 365.
[35] ibid., p. 377.
[36] Faber, p. 284.
[37] B S Turner, *Orientalism, Postmodernism and Globalism*, Routledge, London, 1994, p. 98.
[38] M Alloula, *The Colonial Harem*, translated by M Godzich and W Godzich, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1987, p. 3.
[39] Turner, p. 183.
[40] E Said, *Orientalism*, Vintage, New York, 1978, p. 3.
[41] Alloula, p. 3 and p. 95.
[42] Faber, p. 71 and p. 72.
[43] ibid., p. 263.
[44] Ibid., p. 336.
[45] Waters, p. 312.
[46] Fowles, p. 356.
[47] King, p. 78.
[48] Byatt, p. 253.
[49] G Spivak, cited in B Harlow, "Introduction" to M Alloula, *The Colonial Harem*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1987, pp. ix-xxii, p. xviii.
[50] E A Haddad, *Orientalist Poetics: The Islamic Middle East in Nineteenth-century English and French Poetry*, Ashgate, Aldershot, 2002, p. 25.
[51] Fowles, p. 233.
[52] ibid., pp. 233-234.

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