

CHAPTER 1

The Virgin Body as Victorian Text: An Introduction

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The high value which her suitor places on a woman's virginity seems to us so firmly rooted, so much a matter of course, that we find ourselves almost at a loss if we have to give reasons for this opinion.

Sigmund Freud, "The Taboo of Virginity"

The question of chastity, both of mind and body, is of the greatest interest and complexity.

Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas*

I

Virginity exemplifies paradoxes of the body. It signifies a pre-cultural state that seems to indicate the natural origins and to ensure the value and propriety of sociosexual codes. Virginity helps keep the system going, as Julia Kristeva suggests in noting that, when linked to the maternal, it is able "not only to calm social anxiety and supply what the male lacks, but also to satisfy a woman, in such a way that the community of the sexes is established beyond, and in spite of, their flagrant incompatibility."¹ In this process, virginity both displays hierarchies and orders of sexuality and works to naturalize them through offering the "illusion" of an ideally pure "attribute which one, particularly a woman, *has* rather than a socially constructed attribute into which a person is socialised."² Virginity is one of the means through which societies generally translate "sexuality as a natural and *moral* fact of life"

into a commonsense, unquestioned mirage that becomes “a natural fact of life.”³

When analyzing such so-called natural facts, it is notable that each is positioned at the intersection of many social texts. Virginity is an important topos in a context comprising discourses of nature, patriarchy, the family, economics, morality, religion, metaphysics, psychology, medicine, literature, even politics and royalty. In *The History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault writes that through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, western “sex became an issue, and a public issue no less; a whole web of discourses, special knowledges, analyses, and injunctions settled upon it.”⁴ The essays in this collection examine the ways that virginity is central to representations of sexuality and the body in Victorian literature and culture. What is significant about the texts that are discussed, and about the ways that they are discussed, is less their literary and thematic treatments of virginity than their use of the virginal to disclose different dimensions of this broader “public issue.” Through representing the virginal, these texts reflect upon and participate in the “web of discourses” which articulated ambivalent Victorian conceptions of the body “as either valuable or problematic.”⁵

As Foucault has also examined, the nineteenth century was a crucial period in the development of a system of “power-knowledge” through which “a productive body and a subjected body” could be set into social action.⁶ The discourse of virginity in Victorian culture operates as one means of constructing such a body. In depicting virginity as cultural *ideal*, the period’s literary texts reproduce this discourse and its effects of subjection. Yet as the essays in this collection reveal, in inscribing the virginal as cultural *process* these texts also question the origins and effects of Victorian “power-knowledge.” The virgin body discloses the interplay between a cultural icon and social process; as Herbert F. Tucker remarks in his essay, “virginity belongs among those ideals that culture posits in compensation for its own belated derivative-ness.” As an ideal state, virginity would reside prior to any knowledge; yet in being recognized and valued as the virginal, it implies an extensive construct of social rules and beliefs. Virginity seems to efface the cultural and sexual system that produces it. In Foucauldian terms, the virgin body hides power-knowledge behind a pure,

corporeal intactness that is itself produced by power-knowledge. The ideal, natural state of virginity in fact signifies the practical, social process of the virginal. If *virginity* names a mythical, originary physical state, then the term *virginal* can be used to name the productive, subjected virgin body that virginity would conceal.

As will be discussed in more detail in the second half of this introduction, these essays consider the virginal as central to many aspects of society and sexuality in nineteenth-century England. Through readings of literary texts, they examine the virgin figure's varying effects on and roles in the Victorian cultural imagination. Before proceeding to introduce those readings, however, I will discuss the virgin as a social, sexual, and literary phenomenon by trying to locate the virginal figure in a range of Victorian discourses of gender, social structure, and power. The approaches of the individual essays, and of the volume as a whole, will then be related to critical theories of the body, gender, and representation. For all the essays here, the Victorian virgin exemplifies historical and cultural interactions between sexuality and textuality.

II

One of the key episodes in Lytton Strachey's biography of Victoria comes with the death of William IV and the new queen's initial council. The young monarch emerges from her mother's "extraordinary watchfulness," a "mental atmosphere . . . almost entirely feminine," into a world of old and commanding men.⁷ This transition is full of social and personal significance; in entering the red saloon at Kensington Palace, Victoria is committed to a fateful construction of character. Recounted at the nexus of Strachey's second and third chapters, which record the shift from childhood through early sovereignty to imminent marriage, her entrance represents a personal passage from one social level to another, a rite of selfhood that incorporates crucial values of a culture. The continuity of political rule and power is staged through the site and sight of Victoria's person. In the moment of its affirmation and reinforcement, however, this power becomes complicated and uncertain in view of a figure it expects and recognizes, yet fails wholly to anticipate. The young queen both meets and exceeds speculation:

at half past eleven she went downstairs into the red saloon to hold her first Council. The great assembly of lords and notables, bishops, generals, and Ministers of State, saw the doors thrown open and a very short, very slim girl in deep plain mourning come into the room alone and move forward to her seat with extraordinary dignity and grace; they saw a countenance, not beautiful, but prepossessing—fair hair, blue prominent eyes, a small curved nose, an open mouth revealing the upper teeth, a tiny chin, a clear complexion, and, over all, the strangely mingled signs of innocence, of gravity, of youth, and of composure; they heard a high unwavering voice reading aloud with perfect clarity; and then, the ceremony over, they saw the small figure rise and, with the same consummate grace, the same amazing dignity, pass out from among them, as she had come in, alone. (62)

Strachey's account underlines the way in which an expectantly masterful scrutiny would frame and size this "girl" up. The assembled males wait for her to enter, not so much submitting to sovereign audience as assuming priority and control over it. They anatomize the new queen physically and culturally. Their perception oscillates between distinguishing her individually, in the image of girlhood, and as a ceremonial, queenly persona, each alternative a determination of social value. Her youthfulness, gender, and isolation reinforce through contrast their male solidarity. The synthesized perspective conveyed by Strachey's "they saw . . . they heard . . . they saw" suggests the enduring dominance of a patriarchal political vision.

In relating this episode, Strachey's text duplicates that framing of Victoria. The footnotes reveal that his version is based on both the autobiographical jottings of *The Girlhood of Queen Victoria* and the *Memoirs* of the "cold and caustic" Lord Greville (63). The "girlhood" perspective takes us up to the moment of entering the council, and the episode is then completed through references to Greville's work. The transition from body natural to body politic is reflected by this shift in the informing source of Strachey's account, from ingenuous autobiography to the reminiscence of a knowing subject. In addition, a significant change in the text's temporal orientation is represented. Up to this point, the narrative has been suspensefully projected toward the future, to what Victoria will become. Strachey's text has exercised a careful supervision over its

princess, almost matching that solicitude maintained by her mother, the Duchess of Kent—"An extraordinary watchfulness surrounded every step: up to the day of her accession, she never went downstairs without someone beside her holding her hand" (46-47). The entrance to the saloon, in itself a seemingly simple, everyday step, ends this process of becoming, definitively characterizing Victoria as a historical personage and a cultural symbol. While her reign is to continue for over six decades, with vicissitudes of popularity, personal happiness, and political power, from this point on she will always be acting within "the history of Queen Victoria" (203), a participant in a sociopolitical system that, though named after her, commands her cultural value.⁸ In assuming this symbolic place, she is circumscribed by a historical and political ethos.

Through these ideological and symbolic effects, Victoria's accession reveals changing constructions of virginal selfhood that come into play as she passes from one identity to another. At first it would appear that youthfulness and gender make her particularly susceptible to cultural determination, exemplified by the gaze of the patriarchal council: the virgin as sociopolitical and feminized object. It is also apparent, however, that Victoria's virginal status realizes a type of political authority which is more effective because of its surprising and unexpected intervention. Although the council members envision her status as the weaker opposite of their own familiar powers, it becomes one of the key means of imposing her sovereignty. Her virginity is not objectifiable, nor does it merely resist speculation. It commands the scene, reworking the conventions of authority through its "strangely mingled signs of innocence, of gravity, of youth, and of composure." The virginal mystery which veils Victoria translates into a charismatic social power:

it was not only the public at large that was in ignorance of everything concerning her; the inner circles of statesmen and officials and high-born ladies were equally in the dark. When she suddenly emerged from this deep obscurity, the impression that she created was immediate and profound. Her bearing at her first Council filled the whole gathering with astonishment and admiration; the Duke of Wellington, Sir Robert Peel, even the savage Croker, even the cold and caustic Greville—all were completely carried away . . . Among the outside public there was a great wave of enthusiasm. Sentiment and romance were coming into

fashion; and the spectacle of the little girl-queen, innocent, modest, with fair hair and pink cheeks, driving through her capital, filled the hearts of the beholders with raptures of affectionate loyalty. (63)⁹

The accession of Victoria may serve, in Kenneth Burke's terms, as a "representative anecdote" for the workings of virginity in nineteenth-century England. In passages like the ones discussed above, Strachey represents some of the significant effects virginity could have. More importantly, the biography demonstrates the means through which virginity is related to and represented in other social practices. Generally, this factor suggests that within the singular noun *virginity* we might recognize *virginities*, the different sociosexual meanings, values, and effects that the virginal assumes as it moves and is resituated, by the virgin and by others, in different contexts.

In the first place, the portrayal of Victoria's rise and of the charismatic sway her virginity exercises has a historical reference. Allowing for the weighted interpretations that a subsequent era may produce about the preceding one, Strachey's modernist text nonetheless suggests the intensified sociosymbolic power that virginity could carry with a queen on the throne. Recalling the overdetermined imagery through which Elizabeth I was depicted and through which she ruled, where the virgin body became a key topos in the political, sexual, and discursive relations between sovereign and subjects, the accession and persona of Victoria set into play a cultural emphasis on things virginal.¹⁰ (In subsequent years, this emphasis extended to things maternal, though as Kristeva's "Stabat Mater" underlines, these two emblems of woman are frequently reconciled: "We see in the maternal the highest conception of womanly purity," counsels one Lady Cook late in the 1890s.¹¹) This symbolic fusion reverberates through the period that bears Victoria's name. Analogous to the way in which queenness itself becomes the ontological goal of Ruskin's idealized image of woman—"queens you must always be"—virginity is used to signify and reflect upon a variety of sexual, cultural, philosophical, religious, and even textual issues and traditions, which the Victorian period both inherited from previous times and reworked in relation to prevailing social, economic, and political conditions.¹²

The accession of Victoria endows virginity with an added im-

fact in texts of nineteenth-century England, the biological concept working as recurrent sign in social discourse.¹³ The council episode in Strachey's biography draws out distinct meanings of this sign, ones that were frequently represented and reconceived in other texts. In the first place, at a social and an interpersonal level, the virginal is a topos through which relations of cultural and economic power are played out. The meeting between Victoria and her council propels peers, political factions, and bishops into contests for a hold on the power and status that she embodies in the renewed sovereign order. The underlying sociosexual links between the struggle for influence, if not control, over the virginal queen are suggested in the father-daughter imagery used by Strachey to depict the relationship between Victoria and her first prime minister, Lord Melbourne: "His manner towards the young Queen mingled, with perfect facility, the watchfulness and the respect of a statesman and a courtier with the tender solicitude of a parent" (74); "She found him perfect; and perfect in her sight he remained. Her absolute and unconcealed adoration was very natural" (75). As Strachey tells it, such mutual and "natural" attractions carry a range of consequences, from changes in court behavior—"after-dinner drunkenness began to go out of fashion" (79)—to political decision-making, as seen when Victoria uses a dispute over her household attendants to keep Melbourne's Tory antagonist Peel from government (90–95). The interpersonal, oedipal relation converts to sociopolitical power.

At the same time, as noted earlier in the new queen's charismatic success, the virginal figure is not unequivocally passive. Victoria's sovereignty draws upon a social force that may be exercised by the virgin toward those around her, "she had come suddenly, in the heyday of youth, into freedom and power" (75). Such power might be conceived ideally and transcendently (often under the guise of moral constraint), as is shown by Lady Cook: "if purity elevates man, it absolutely glorifies woman. It lifts her to majestic heights. It invests her with ethereal grace." Yet even here the contrast between an "active" purity and a "passive" innocence allows for the expression of the efficacy of virginity, in regard to both the benefits it may bring for the virginal figure, and its practical and symbolic effects upon those who would control it.¹⁴ Freud ponders this latter reversibility at one point in his essay on taboos that

surround virginity. The various constraints on woman's behavior may signify man's fearful subjection to, not his social mastery over her: "a generalized dread of woman is expressed in all these rules of avoidance. Perhaps this dread is based on the fact that woman is different from man, for ever incomprehensible and mysterious, strange and therefore apparently hostile. The man is afraid of being weakened by the woman, infected with her femininity and of then showing himself incapable."¹⁵ This hypothesis points to the politicosexual power and awe that figures like Victoria and Elizabeth could realize amidst a male-dominated setting.

A second implication of Strachey's scene is what could be called the *temporality* of virginity. In terms of social and personal sexuality, virginity marks the point when past turns toward future. Acceding to the throne, Victoria embodies an existing pattern of chaste conduct that, having been carefully constructed by her mother and minders rather than instinctively followed by herself, becomes oriented to her impending role. The effects of her virginity are in part orchestrated through a revelation which is *timed*, in the sense both of having been scheduled and of being presently full of significance for future events. Especially in the case of a queen, this temporal significance suggests links between personal and social experience.¹⁶ Such links are tied to a process of *defloration*.

Defloration condenses the temporality of virginity. The process is dramatized in Strachey's text not through the marriage to Albert but as Victoria enters the red saloon. This passage ends her pre-pregnant innocence by concluding her past and projecting a now-sovereign virginity onto future events. Defloration is a temporally ambiguous process that effaces and sustains the sociosexual value of virginity; after the event, it re-marks what is lost or passed. Lady Cook's image of a tested, Miltonic purity resolves this ambiguity by sublating it into moral terms: "purity is not the untried innocence of childhood, but the sustained virtue that passes unpolluted through the temptations of maturity . . . we cannot say of a woman that she is pure until she has passed through the fire."¹⁷ Lost innocence becomes experiential gain. In his comments on defloration, Freud charts a similar movement, but one in which the gain is not solely personal or to the virgin's benefit. He suggests that defloration leads to "a state of bondage," sexual bondage of the deflowered to another, and thus sets up the future of a relationship

based on dominance. At the same time, the demand for virginity is a masculinist attempt to survey and control a woman's past. Defloration is here being conceived in terms of a climactic present or happening through which personal and sexual authority may or may not be realized. Freud suggests that one of the motives for the taboos surrounding virginity is the traditional "fear of first occurrences," experienced by both virgin and would-be "deflowerer," and in this suggestion we might additionally see an anxiety that awaits the outcome of this bid for socialized dominance over the virgin.¹⁸

Part of the symbolic importance of the virgin body thus derives from its role as a social site where the timing, meaning, and consequences of sexual actions, desires, and power interact. Discursively, it works as a spatial and temporal trope that figures links between personal and cultural histories and destinies. As Mary Douglas has pointed out, the virgin body functions synecdochically in symbolic transfers between self and society. It can become a vehicle for communal experiences, with "the powers and dangers credited to social structure reproduced in small on the human body."¹⁹ Control over virgin defloration becomes a symbolic enactment of control over communal integrity and purity. The body-vehicle's features may in turn influence the communal tenor, first through the rituals that are performed on or with the body and become part of social practice, and then through the understanding of the tenor that those practices afford: "The rituals enact the form of social relations and in giving these relations visible expression they enable people to know their own society. The rituals work upon the body politic through the symbolic medium of the physical body."²⁰ The virgin body may be specially valued because it signifies a closed social form, as in the case of early Christians attempting to distinguish themselves from surrounding groups: "The idea that virginity had a special positive value was bound to fall on good soil in a small persecuted minority group . . . these social conditions lend themselves to beliefs which symbolise the body as an imperfect container which will only be perfect if it can be made impermeable."²¹ This sort of idealized impermeability underlies various Victorian representations of the virginal discussed in this collection of essays—the interpersonal rapport of lovers, in Herbert F. Tucker's study of *The Ring and the Book*; the cultural

defensiveness of a colonizing empire against the colonized that Kelly Hurley traces through the fin de siècle gothic novel *The Beetle*; the wish for textual wholeness that Susan David Bernstein shows preoccupying Hardy through *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. Once conceptualized, even as an ideal, the virgin body contributes to the imposition and reinforcement of social rules and dispositions; its symbolic value is constantly practical.

The temporal ambiguity that virginity represents is paralleled by its uncertain visual status. As Virginia Woolf notes in *Three Guineas*, in Western traditions the question of virginal visibility emerges from Paul's "famous pronouncement on the matter of veils [made in one of the letters to the Corinthians], upon which the theory of woman's chastity seems to be based."²² Victoria's entrance into the council chamber and before the people at large recalls this equivocal visual impact. As noted above, the expectant male gaze seems to exemplify a controlling speculation that, as Luce Irigaray has mapped out, is "caught up in the dream of identity . . . the autological or homologous representations of a (masculine) 'subject'," wherein the virginal queen reinforces the phallographic sociopolitical structure.²³ Yet in nineteenth-century England, to see the queen is, if not entirely to succumb to her authority, at least to be surprized and shifted from one's vantage point. The unveiling has unforeseen consequences. It puts an end to an otherworldly ideal of virginity by revealing an ambiguous virginal power through which observer and observed interrelate. This equivocal visibility recapitulates and exposes the Pauline tradition which would mystify the virgin's cultural functions in either an aura of transcendent innocence, when the virgin performs to prescription, or a shadow of lapsed experience, when the virgin performs to proscription.²⁴

The political, temporal, and visual implications, conveyed through the impact of Victoria's virginity upon her subjects, suggest that against Freud's materializing and objectifying definition of virginity as "the state of a woman in being untouched," the virginal functions as a process that reflects and helps impose differing interests within a social system.²⁵ Although through the notion of taboo Freud does direct his study of virginity toward social rituals, he assumes that these rituals conform to a pattern which remains consistent from the old cultures he initially cites to recent

cases from his own analytic practice. This consistency derives from the abstract definition of virginity in a priori stasis, as a natural origin, with which his paper begins. Once framed in this way, virginity assumes a universal value which is continually perceived from objective, that is, "hidden," masculinist perspectives, first as "the right to exclusive possession of a woman, which forms the essence of monogamy"; next, as taboo, to express "a generalized dread of woman"; and last, in the "lives" of Freud's patients, as a function of the castration complex: "The danger which is thus aroused through the defloration of a woman would consist in drawing her hostility down upon oneself," where the final pronoun reveals the character-fusion of "Freud," the imagined reader, and the male deflowerer.²⁶

Freud's paper rests on a trans-historical male sexuality, whose sociopsychical features—monogamy, dread, and the castration complex—are taken as indices of the essential state of virginity. Hence, while virginity is defined and posited as prior to any sexual economy, it is depicted only through the features of masculinist systems that take this idea of virginity, which has been generated in their own image, as natural proof of the validity of their structure. The shift Freud makes at the end of the essay, from considering primitive cultures to considering his own, exemplifies the continuity of this process whereby virginity is constantly reinvented to suit the sexual status quo. Having referred to various patients, Freud concludes that postdefloration frigidity in women is a function of penis envy. The loss of her virginity underlies "woman's hostile bitterness against the man, which never completely disappears in the relations between the sexes, and which is clearly indicated in the strivings and in the literary productions of 'emancipated' women."²⁷ His comment reveals, as it would efface behind psychoanalytic truth, the sort of immediate social reference and impact that conceptions of virginity (and of psychoanalysis in general) might have.²⁸

It is through the work of one such "emancipated" woman that the implications of Freud's notion of virginity are revealed in social as well as theoretical action. In note 38 of the second chapter of *Three Guineas*, Virginia Woolf both records and questions the traditional construction of the virginal by "detouring" through its cultural background and political economy, especially as they

functioned in the Victorian period. The note seems to begin in the “objective” manner of Freud’s paper, accepting and using the pronouncement of St. Paul to explain the traditional values of virginity. Yet this discursive logic of objective and historical exposition is gradually undermined through various double-voiced tropes (repetition, excessive modifiers, understatement, parody) which effect a switch in interpretive focus that Freud’s essay defensively refuses to make. The virginal is revealed not as the preexisting subject that the Pauline—and Freudian—text seeks to elucidate but as the constructed object of a lasting and motivated cultural discourse. It is that discourse which Woolf would have us understand:

Chastity then as defined by St. Paul is seen to be a complex conception, based upon the love of long hair; the love of subjection; the love of an audience; the love of laying down the law, and, subconsciously, upon a very strong and natural desire that the woman’s mind and body shall be reserved for the use of one man and one only. Such a conception when supported by the Angels, nature, law, custom and the Church, and enforced by a sex with a strong personal interest to enforce it, and the economic means, was of undoubted power.²⁹

A seemingly archetypal male desire manifests itself in a physical, intersubjective, and discursive demand for the virginal. This demand is cloaked in a reification of nature through which religious, philosophical, economic, and political myths of a patriarchal ideology are installed. Woolf intimates the interlocking and reinforcing imposition of these myths on historical and cultural consciousness; and in the personal example from Victorian England of Gertrude Bell, she shows the direct and multiple effects of the masculinist demand for virginity. The historicized ideal weighs upon the single self. Not only are obvious cultural, intellectual, and vocational constraints imposed, but the covert ideological process of constructing the body—through limits upon what can be seen, heard, and touched, upon how she may move and what postures assume, upon where she may pass and with whom, and upon whether solitude or company may be sought—such processing of selfhood is carried out in the name of virginity:

Chastity was invoked to prevent her [Gertrude Bell] from studying medicine; from painting the nude; from reading Shakespeare;

from playing in orchestras; from walking down Bond Street alone.³⁰

The diversity of circumscribed practices suggests at once the convertibility of virginity's meanings across official social codes and the continuing attempt of the virginal figure, once marked as such and from within this pervasive network, to rework and contest the codes and limits of "virginal" behavior and identity. Virginity is revealed as a cultural motif through which numerous social myths and institutions may jointly seek to fashion a determinate personal identity: "Not only was the social stigma strongly exerted on behalf of chastity, but the Bastardy Act did its utmost to impose chastity by financial pressure."³¹ And while set up to be a subjected body, the virginal also affords a social identity under the guise of which apparently fixed social myths and institutions may be questioned, revised, or even evaded. The veil works both ways.

III

In studying nineteenth-century literary representations of the virginal, the essays in this collection employ a range of contemporary critical practices. The ideal of virginity is analyzed and unraveled in various, often interlinking, ways—in psychoanalytic terms as the impossible origin and goal of desire, in poststructuralist terms as the foreclosure of discursive reference, and in feminist terms as a paradoxical absence that subverts finality of patriarchal identity and discourse. Through focusing on writers from throughout the century, shifts in cultural estimations and textual uses of the virginal are also traced. The virginal is not a singular, unified concept through the Victorian period. The way it changes can be partially related to a broader social and historical backdrop, as dominant Victorian culture moves from celebratory heights in the 1850s and 1860s to various forms of cultural interrogation by the 1890s. This pattern of change is then reflected in shifting paradigms of representation, as the virginal moves from signifying creative transcendence to becoming a site of personal, social, and textual cancellation.

By marking the discontinuities in Victorian culture's myth-making, the virginal acts as an index to a "genealogy" which, as Foucault suggests, would be "situated within the articulation of

the body and history." In this light, the discourse of the Victorian virgin represents a significant historical corpus, a "body [that] is the inscribed surface of events (traced by language and dissolved by ideas)." Like Foucauldian genealogy, these essays would "expose a body totally imprinted by history," but in addition, they examine attitudes and beliefs that are molded to and through the changing possibilities suggested by the virginal.³² The virgin body is both culturally produced and textually generative.

This collection is divided into three parts which are chronologically based as early, middle, and late Victorian. This periodization is not rigid or absolute. Its first aim is to underline the intertextuality of a virginal figure that relates to a widening range of cultural issues and texts through the period. Secondly and more importantly, the distinctions are set up to show the absence of a purely linear development of social thought and literary practice: there is no resolution to issues which circulate around and are represented by the virginal, no final meaning which it can be taken to have. In different contexts and for different texts, the virgin means different things. The essays in the first section, *Virginal Texts*, deal with the ways in which some nineteenth-century works use the virginal to rework and interrogate generic patterns and values in eighteenth-century and Romantic texts. If the essays in the middle section, *Virgin Poiesis*, show mid-Victorian writers capitalizing on these generic shifts in order to fashion romantic, creative, and spiritual mythologies through the virginal figure, then the papers in the final section, *Virgin de Siècle*, discuss the contradictory limits of these myths, by considering the social, sexual, and discursive investments that produce such virgin ideals and texts.

The relationships among the three sections are, then, interactive rather than discretely contrastive (or, to echo Thais E. Morgan's recent formulation, dialogic as well as chronological³³). Taken together, these essays examine the ways that texts from different times and settings through the Victorian period react to and contest cultural values signified by the virginal. The essays in each section consider a "history of morals, ideals, and metaphysical concepts . . . as they stand for the emergence of different interpretations" of the virginal.³⁴ Through the collection, two main critical moves are made in order to review these differences: to

examine the contrasts between different Victorian interpretations of the virgin body, and to trace the relationships these interpretations have with previous discourses of virginity. The essays discuss the intertextual processes through which works as varied as the paintings of the Pre-Raphaelites, the odes of Patmore, or the gothic narratives of Mary Shelley, Bram Stoker, and Richard Marsh cite and revise conventions of virginal representation. The diversity of these nineteenth-century texts reveals that the concept of the virginal is used to review and represent changing historical and generic positions in relation to various traditions of cultural, sexual, and literary discourse.

In the opening essay, "Virginal Sex, Vaginal Text: The 'Folds' of *Frankenstein*," Gerhard Joseph explores a primal narrative scene for nineteenth-century discourse on the virginal. Beginning with Victor Frankenstein's disturbing dream of his bride-to-be Elizabeth, Joseph traces Victor's recurrently ambivalent efforts to keep both himself and this "more than sister," mother-substitute virginal. Victor does so through a process of displacement, burying objects in the folds of women's dresses, which themselves etymologically figure the "woven" text. These thematic folds and displacements supplement the text's series of structural foldings or invaginations, the story's compounding tales-within-tales. Joseph suggests that rather than presenting presocial ideals of asexuality or instinctual sexuality, Shelley's staging of Victor's dream recounts the deferral of desire through the incest taboo. The ambivalent loss and sustainment of, plus the attraction to and revulsion from the virginal, are revealed within the deep structure of Shelley's narrative.

L. J. Swingle examines a network of references and allusions that extends from eighteenth- to nineteenth-century British texts, wherein virginal characters are also used to problematize responses to narrative forms. His essay "The Reader and the Virgin: What Next?" outlines two patterns of reader manipulation that run through this network and intersect in Tennyson's *The Idylls of the King*. The one pattern, dependent upon traditional notions of value (and so itself traditional, whatever its nineteenth-century metamorphoses), plays upon the thrills and chills range of moral, psychological, and sexual responses which the witnessing of the virgin's trials can generate in the reader who thinks in convention-

al ways. The other pattern, which Swingle suggests is an emerging nineteenth-century countermovement to the former, reflects preoccupation with the question "What next?" How can the narrative be resolved? This question puts in danger ideas of value and threatens the very notion of the virginal both in the text and in the reader. It unveils a conceptual threat to cultural and textual values that is more devastating than any immediate phallic pressures exerted by mere sexual seducers against individual virginal figures.

Joseph's and Swingle's essays also note the reader's voyeuristic involvement in deflowering the virgin body. Such involvement seems to exemplify Peter Brooks's account of narratives that "both tell of desire—typically present some story of desire—and arouse and make sense of desire as dynamic of signification."³⁵ From early in the nineteenth century, however, these representations of what Swingle calls the "Virgin's Tale" also unsettle and displace the conventions of literary and social desire that Brooks points to, by forestalling their neat resolution. Diane Elam's paper, "White Narratology: Gender and Reference in Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White*" questions the notion of cultural closure through considering the contradictions of narrative structure and reference that the virginal may represent. Collins's novel is read as an interrogation of mimetic narrative. Rather than taking the woman in white as the quintessential Victorian figure of woman as innocent virgin, Elam considers the ways in which the woman in white poses a problem for the referential premise of the realist novel. First of all, the title figure genders the problem of referentiality and truth, but not simply in the sense that the body of the woman in white functions univocally as a blank page, as virginal space, to be inscribed by the pen of an authorial and authorizing male. Instead Elam suggests that the woman in white inscribes the figure of reference itself, uncannily haunting the mimetic claims of the realist novel and upsetting its vision of presenting truth. As a result, we find that the essentialist image of woman in virginal whiteness paradoxically reveals her as a gap or absence in representation. Her virginal sexuality and textuality thus pose a fundamental riddle for any ideal of discursive presence: to what might *woman* refer?

As the four essays in the second section of the volume, *Virgin Poesis*, examine, in the mid-Victorian period a number of writers

use the above types of discontinuity, signified by virginal repetition, suspension, and absence, to create their own myths of personal and poetic presence. Revisionary notions of defloration and temporality take on a constructive textual function. In "Representation and Repristination: Virginality in *The Ring and the Book*," Herbert F. Tucker traces this movement from absence to affirmation in Browning's epic. Noting that virginality is hard to discuss because it belongs among the idealizations of natural origins that a culture posits to compensate for its belatedness, Tucker asks whether this difficulty is as much an effect of an ideal construction of discourse as it is of virginality itself. In *The Ring and the Book*, which begins with and repeatedly turns on virginal tropes, it is Browning's purpose to expose this doubled idealization, to challenge unthinking socialization, and to restore, in the fallen present, a quantum of culturally originative power. The poet's notorious ring-figure from Book 1 centers attention on his larger subject, the verbal and imaginative processes that generate meaning to begin with. Then, at the heart of the poem in Books 6 and 7, the reciprocal repristination of Caponsacchi and Pompilia as freely loving souls proceeds from a shared mythology of a belated virginality, which they invent—discover and create—within the inimical cultural ambience that the poem represents. This heroic, mutual rescue figures the poet's historicist stance vis-à-vis the text's problematically original sources and the pristine epic tradition that his work renovates for modernity.

In Browning's account, virginality becomes a shared experience of self-fashioning that involves self and other, rather than being an individual state. This concept of the virginal as interpersonal process may be represented by other mid-Victorian poets in terms of a mixture of rivalry and mutuality. Dolores DeLuise and Michael Timko's paper, "Becoming the Poet," traces such a mixture through the verse of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, where a female voice comes to transcend a traditionally male poetic persona used in the earlier poems. Although in her 1838 and 1844 volumes of poetry, Barrett Browning demonstrated a preoccupation with the figure of a male poet-genius, she started to endow the figure with female characteristics. After this time, she feminizes one male poet in particular, Robert Browning, who reappears as the poet-hero in *Sonnets from the Portuguese*. In the *Sonnets*, this poet-hero and

the feminine speaker attain equality. When the poet-genius again appears in the work of Barrett Browning, it is as a transformed female figure, Aurora Leigh, who synthesizes the qualities of both the male poets and the female speakers who preceded her.

Barbara Garlick's "The Frozen Fountain: Christina Rossetti, The Virgin Model and Youthful Pre-Raphaelitism" examines the opposing perspectives of Rossetti and the Pre-Raphaelites on the virginal woman and the way in which this conflict fed into Rossetti's own work. The female figure played a central role in the early Pre-Raphaelite aesthetic credo, featuring in their literary journal *The Germ* and in their drawings and paintings. Garlick notes, however, that this textual figure, in contrast to the Brotherhood's professed iconoclasm, was depicted entirely in accord with prevailing beliefs and attitudes toward sexuality. Christina Rossetti's writing against the Brotherhood's dominance is evident in her interrogation both of important elements of their pictorial method and of the traditional use of women within and in relation to nature. In her poems, moreover, Rossetti indicates the possibility of retaining the inviolability of the virginal self after lived knowledge through the exercise of a poetic creativity, which increasingly celebrates a sexually charged relationship with a male godhead. Virginal absence leads to a spiritualized self-fulfillment.

A related notion of a virginal *telos* emerges in John Maynard's study, "Like a Virgin: Coventry Patmore's Still-Unknown Eros." Maynard argues that virginity, not as a form of antisexuality but as a marker of potential consummation, is Patmore's central concern in numerous poems that place religious chastity and the myth of the Virgin in relation to sexual desire, especially the odes of the too-little-known *The Unknown Eros*. Within Patmore's corpus, these poems reverse the celebration of married love and sexual fulfillment represented in the too-popular *The Angel in the House* and return the poet to the anxious issues of sexual loss, or unfulfilled desire, or satiation raised in his virtually forgotten early work. Written after his first wife's death, the sequence moves from observing sexuality in its absence (a story of love and loss by death) in the external world, to a more direct focus on virginity itself. In increasingly mythic and religious poems, the poet invokes the sexual experience now lacking in his world by creating a language of virginity as desire removed from its object. Religious subjects, such as the nuns and their dream of the love festival of the Lamb of

"Deliciae Sapientiae de Amore," become potent symbols by which the speaker expresses and hopes to realize his disappointed desire. Eventually the text itself is the locus of a new poetry of sexuality, as a sexual myth created by the celebration of a lack. Yet Maynard concludes by noting that eventually Patmore must recognize the limits as well as the force of this unleashing of desire, and the ode series ends by focusing on the human virgin as a sign of our need rather than on the fulfilled figures of Eros (God) and Psyche (the human as God's lover).

The acknowledgement of limits that Maynard discerns even in Patmore's ecstatic rendering of virginity becomes dramatically marked in the late-Victorian works considered in the volume's final section. The personal and discursive affirmations discussed in the essays of *Virgin Poesis* give way to darkened notions of culture, sex, and textuality. A number of texts from the 1890s seem to revive the sort of questions about narrative and textual closure raised earlier in the century by works like *Frankenstein*, *The Idylls of the King*, and *The Woman in White*. Unlike the virginal poetics of Browning and others that could be built upon this discontinuity, for later works the impossibility of closure seems to figure a lapsed cultural mythology. These fin de siècle texts represent virginity as an ideal which involves its own loss, and thus signifies the period's sense of the incompleteness of its prolonged discourse of virginal innocence.

In "What Lily Knew: Virginity in the 1890s," Adrienne Auslander Munich focuses on the dissolution of a virginal semiotics. At the end of the nineteenth century, the lily, a traditional emblem of virginity, begins to turn into a more equivocal sign. Not only does it no longer signify absolute virginal purity, as referring to the Virgin Mary, but its gender also carries a power generally defined as "phallic." Flowery maidens, represented as knowing more than a true virginity allows, connote a challenge to binary oppositions and to a Victorian sexual economy. In such various texts as Oscar Wilde's *Salomé*, Henry James's *What Maisie Knew* and *The Turn of the Screw*, and Freud's paper on anxiety neuroses, the boundaries separating virginal innocence from carnal knowledge are challenged, though not without an anguish associated with ultimate loss. The age "knows" that the virgin center can no longer hold. Knowing virginity, lilies unflower themselves.

In further contrast to the realizable goals of virginal poesis,

Susan David Bernstein notes a cycle of narrative repetitions that lack the sexual and spiritual *telos* of Rossetti's and Patmore's verse, by examining Thomas Hardy's efforts to reinscribe a virginal narrative, when inscription itself would seem to forestall that possibility. Bernstein's essay, "Confessing and Editing: The Politics of Purity in Hardy's *Tess*," examines the novel's revised prefaces and plot, through which Hardy attempts to preserve the "purity" and moral rectitude of a text whose narrative recommends an essential purity of its sexually "fallen" protagonist. The author struggles to recover Tess's and the text's bodies from interpretive and substantive violations, to reinstate and protect the pure text as a corollary to a pure Tess. Yet like Tess's admission to Angel Clare, Hardy's compulsively repeated, prefatory confessions disclose that neither in the editing history of *Tess*, nor in the narrative history of Tess, does an "original," virginal body exist. Nonetheless, the image of the presexually pure body determines a demand for the virginal through Hardy's prefaces and narrative.

In his essay, "Gender and Sexual Dis-Ease in *Dracula*," Jeffrey L. Spear studies the psychosexual undertones of this revised knowledge of the limits of virginity. Stoker's text posits a radical duality between a self-sufficient manliness that threatens to slide into dependency and a pristine womanhood whose ostensible purity, gender without sexuality, has no power to resist the vampiric possession that inverts those characteristics. *Dracula* works as a perfect projective screen for theories of unconscious motivation that can explain what the surface of the text seems to deny, particularly the sexuality of the pure woman and the nature of masculine desire. Spear contends that all the sexuality in *Dracula* can be understood as projections of forms of male fantasy that represent male desires and fears, especially fantasies of dominance, of the "omni-available woman," and of lesbian sex. Underlying these fantasies, which are depicted through the characterizations of Jonathan and Mina Harker, Lucy Westenra, and the vampires themselves, is an extreme fear of male sexual desire. Desire is treated in terms of contagion, thus associating the text with the late-century fear of syphilis, quite likely the cause of Stoker's own death. The end of the novel removes the mark of contagion from Mina's brow at the expense of her agency and turns her into a revirginalized maternal icon in order to restore conventional gen-

der distinctions. Like Dracula and the potentially nonbinary sexuality he represents, the ideal of a virginal motherhood as a male psychic refuge from sexuality refuses to die.

The fin de siècle emphasis on the paradox of virginal knowledge questions virginity as transcendent ideal of sexual absence and cultural origin. Its temporality and chastity are complicated through simultaneous loss and sustainment. The cultural and discursive work that goes into preserving the natural ideal becomes increasingly apparent. This paradox extends to different social practices which would use the virgin body to figure their wholeness—literary discourse in the case of Hardy's *Tess*, heterosexuality in the case of *Dracula*. Kelly Hurley's reading of Richard Marsh's 1897 novel, *The Beetle*, reveals that the virginal ideal might also be used to attempt to shore up the sociosexual politics of imperialism. Marsh's narrative is saturated with perverse sexualities, particularly in its representations of a monstrosity gothic and oriental female sexuality. Yet the text will not implicate itself in its own perversities, maintaining a certain virginal reticence through the strategies of euphemism, indirection, and displacement it deploys to describe this sexuality. Hurley's essay is particularly concerned with one crucial displacement that occurs within *The Beetle*, by means of its conflation of gothicized female sexuality and a gothicized Orient. Paranoiac representations of aggressive femininity slip imperceptibly into paranoiac representations of the aggressive Easterner, so that anxiety about female sexuality becomes covered up by anxieties about racial conflict and the sexual vulnerability of the white Anglo body. Marsh's text represents an extreme effort at cultural defense through virginal myth.

Hurley's paper discloses a process where representations of virginal impermeability can suggest the sexual undercurrents of a sociopolitical phenomenon like Victorian imperialism. In addition, Marsh's gothic narrative becomes a final example of a generic opposition between depictions of the virginal that is drawn through these essays. Narrative representations tend to problematize the virginal by revealing its presuppositions of cultural and literary closure and their conflictual effects. In contrast, poetic accounts, though not naive about an unequivocal virginal ideal, nonetheless move toward disclosing the affirming powers of a virginal origin and supplement to sociosexual discourse. As we have

seen, these generic contrasts are also related to shifting sociohistorical outlooks, from early- to late-Victorian values concerning the possibilities of cultural integrity and progress.

In both narrative and poetic texts of the Victorian period, the virgin works as a figure able to cite orthodox ideals from different historical and cultural traditions and so become a starting point for reworkings and revaluations of the notions involved. As the essays in this volume show, the virgin body plays an ambiguous role in Victorian literature. The apparent certainty of its sexual absence triggers discursive strategies that seek to comprehend and depict both this absence and the social and sexual presence which frames it. The figure of the virgin is one of the central literary tropes through which complex relations in the Victorian discourse on sexuality can be articulated. The virginal operates in terms of textuality and sexuality, revealing the generative interactions between these cultural fields.