VICTORIAN SKIN

SURFACE, SELF, HISTORY

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Introduction

I protest against all our interest, all our effort at understanding being given to the young skins that look blooming in spite of trouble.
—George Eliot, *Middlemarch*

I began research for this study with a simple question: what did Victorians talk about when they talked about skin? For Victorians, the skin was a text to be read, a medium for the expression and interpretation of interiority. This function of the surface predates modernity, of course, but the nineteenth century contributed a scientific and philosophical perspective that refigured the role of the surface: no longer simply a wrapping, it became a substance integral to and having a creative role in the generation of the self. The Victorian period saw a flurry of publications on the skin. A midcentury reprinted lecture aimed at a general reader states flatly, "The skin is what you live in; it is your habitation. . . . It is also that by which you live" (Urquhart 229).

This book traces the development of an exuberant, anxious, and fertile discussion in the nineteenth century: where is subjectivity located? How do people communicate with and understand each other's feelings? How does our surface—which contains us, presents us to others, and mediates between our inner materiality and the larger world outside us—function and create meaning? And how should that embodied process be represented in literature? Though today we often think of this period and its narratives as the great age of interiority, the era's philosophical and anatomical knowledge in fact insists on a materialist self, located on the surface of the body. It is this move to a surface-self that enables realism as a dominant aesthetic mode of
narration, and in turn interpretation of the body and its affects as an ascendant mode of reading.

Whereas the eighteenth century saw new materialist views of the psyche that challenged dualism by locating the self in the body, the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries more definitively sourced consciousness in the nervous system and its distributed terminals on the body’s surface. The Terror of the French Revolution marks a radical break with more optimistic narratives of modernity and progress; it also marks a moment when a culture of appearances becomes both especially fascinating and an object of profound unease and suspicion. Challenging the belief that motives and emotions were readable and similar across different bodies, the Terror suggested an opacity and mystery in each human body. As the individual comes to be central to the period’s economics, politics, and literature, the surface-self, so available to the gaze, becomes the principal puzzle for the emergent psychology that underpins the period’s political and aesthetic theories.

Much scholarship after Foucault’s work on the body and governmentality focused on discipline and surveillance. After having grounded my own work for many years on disease and the disciplinary functions of public health, I wanted to know what “normal” understandings of skin might be. What did novelists and poets and journalists and scientists say about skin when they were not talking just about deviance or pathology? What did doctors think healthy skin was and did? And when pathology did come up, how did it relate to skin’s overall cultural meanings? The topic of skin, like skin itself, is both narrow and wide, depending upon the angle of approach. In fact, like any basic rubric, it is an inexhaustible one, the kind of topic that excites conference auditors to begin listing their own associations. Taxidermy! Flagellation! (Spoiler: this book is not about taxidermy or flagellation.) And of course, libraries can be written on the topics of color and race.

But four general thought-categories emerged fairly quickly: (1) skin as a surface for the sensing and expressive self; (2) as a permeable boundary; (3) as an alienable substance; and (4) as site of inherent and inscribed properties. These areas coalesced within two common themes: surface as perceiving, affective subject, and surface as aesthetic, affective object of interpretation. The first four categories became the structural divisions of the present work, and the last two themes, its overarching narrative. Within these parameters were articulated some of the largest questions in philosophy, medicine, and science: questions about the nature of the self, the boundaries of the human, and the progress of history.

The method of selection I have followed here is similarly both expansive and limited. On a first pass, I engaged in what Sharon Marcus has called a kind
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of distant reading for “patterns” (11)—looking for broadly iterated themes and terms through a mass of cultural texts from medicine to journalism to literature. It was only after finding those patterns that I began to select my examples for closer reading. These analyses aim at some traditional targets of close reading—to elucidate, through examination of context and intertext as well as of intrinsic detail, and often, generic and formal properties, a rich web of significations. This book also aims, as a history, to place those significations in terms of the development of a broad array of ideas that have been influential for the history of our aesthetics, literature, and bodies.

Though the book’s structure is expository and thematic, it also elaborates an argument about literary history, developing somewhat a slant that structure: this line of reasoning is about how realism enters Victorian aesthetics how it develops as the preeminent literary impulse of the period and a materialist mode of narration, and how it interacts with idealism, in part through invoking such nonrealist forms as myth and fantasy. In literature, the new physiology and the emergence of the historical concept of the individual subject meant that description focused with increasing keenness on the surface of the body, its actions and reactions. On the one hand, materialism permeated the newer techniques of writing such as realism, and on the other, the invention of the modern bourgeois individual celebrated by Romanticism emphasized ideas of free will, self-determination, and a teleology of human becoming that did not sit easily within a materialist frame.

Realism, which I treat as a discursive mode dominant in the period rather than a discrete prose genre, is known for its exhaustive cataloging of objects, and equally for its inventory of bodies’ surfaces. Understanding surface and skin’s history allows us a different, and fuller, understanding of the period’s literary modes and aesthetics. The midcentury realist novel, and its offspring, sensation (essentially a development of the gothic and romance narrative through the lens of the dominant techniques of realist discourse), focused on the psychology of individuals, on sensation and perception. Narrative poetry, especially in the spasmic movement, took up the same issues and narrative techniques. At the same time, authors influenced most heavily by German idealism, mostly poets and essayists but also a number of novelists throughout the period, diverged from the focus on materialist psychology, taking up the larger historical questions implicit in natural theology. They often sought inspiration in pre- or alternative histories such as mythology, read through an idealist lens. They are also less invested in the body’s surface as subject than in a model of deep, transpersonal subjectivity, and their interest in surface is less connected to materialist models of embodied mind than to an interest in artistic representations of suffering and transcendence. Yet they also often
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worked with realist techniques and modes of narration, even while having recourse to these techniques within other genres, such as myth and fantasy.

As the themes of the book emerged, some topics were less surprising (blushing, tattoos) than others. I expected color to be important, and it was, but in ways less clearly and directly related to race than I predicted. I was interested to discover that Victorians talked about skin; they also talked—a lot—about history. Perhaps this is because in the context of evolution, any discussion of the body immediately raises the fraught possibility that the human body itself has a history beyond the individual and familial. However, the surface of the body seemed particularly to evoke the question of historical change. In an era when the self is to be read on the surface, individual history is supposed to be legible in the body’s habitual expressions, and signs of age and experience such as wrinkles and scars. However, Victorians also linked it to the longer sweep of history in some obvious ways (first, appearance as sign of heredity, and later in the period as signifying prior forms through atavism, etc.)—and some less-obvious ones. I did not imagine that skin, especially flayed skin, would be central to discussions of historical change. Yet, so it was, very often through the influence of Romantic ideas about historical progression linked to the French Revolution.

I also did not initially imagine I would be citing so many philosophers, but of course the most influential scientists, especially in the earlier part of the period, often were philosophers, or considered their work to be responding directly to philosophical debates. I began also by treating philosophical texts on a par with the others. However, it emerged that for many of the literary and scientific works I was dealing with, there was an (often explicit) engagement with these as authoritative: that is, the authors were either influenced by or in dialogue with the earlier philosophical texts as authoritative statements. The names from within the period that came up frequently (such as Alexander Bain or Herbert Spencer) were easily included in the first sweep of texts that directly addressed the themes in the moment. But working from my first selection of texts back to their own principal interlocutors, often located in a prior period, I was more surprised than I should have been to see the widespread influence of the Scottish Common Sense school, and very surprised to see the continued and powerful importance of the German idealists throughout the period—often coming through secondary sources into the British conversation. It was not until I saw the repetition of a pattern of dialogue between materialism (often modified through the Scottish Common Sense tradition) and idealism (very often coming up in the context of the historical trauma of the French Revolution) that I came to see those two influences, both in parallel and in dialogue throughout the period, as
a structuring narrative of the story I was telling. Moreover, although I am principally focused on the history of how these debates developed in Scotland and England, they developed in dialogue with German and French philosophy and medicine, and especially through French letters and art. I have therefore chosen to range beyond the island in my examples. It made sense to include, for example, Zola on realism or Nietzsche on tragedy, each influential in the period and British letters in different ways. Balzac, Carlyle, Collins, and Dickens likewise serve as examples of approaches to the question of the body's relation to the historical past, which is so often in this period explored through the foundational trauma of the Terror.

Finally, a note about the book's chronological structure: although each chapter traces a theme throughout the period, some themes lent themselves to greater development at different points in the period, and in relation to different genres. Roughly, the nature of sympathy, the emotions, and the significance of the surface of the bourgeois body were being elaborated in the eighteenth century, though their discussion continues throughout the period. The skin's permeable nature comes into sharper focus in the midcentury era of sanitary reform, and its problematic nature as alienable object reappears as a topic of interest around the same time with the decisive emergence of commodity culture and its critiques. As a representation of violent abjection, the alienated skin persistently evokes historical trauma—especially the trauma of the French Revolution, a persistent topic of midcentury representations trying to bridge the individual embodied self and a larger historical will. Tattooing, fingerprints, and other inscriptions were the delight of criminologists and anthropologists later in the imperial period who were determined to find objectively recognizable signs of atavism, savagery, and civilization on the body. In that sense, to borrow a Victorianism, although each chapter recapitulates the phylogeny of the century, each tends to highlight different moments in that ontogenic development, and the progress of the book roughly accords with that timeline's forward movement even as it cycles recursively back through it. The book's arguments emerge, as it were, in layers over the course of the chapters' progress.

**Embodying History**

To understand skin in this period, one must first understand how the body is emplotted in the period's understanding of its own history. The Enlightenment, with its hopes pinned upon scientific reason, interpersonal sympathy, and political innovation, saw an unprecedented development of materialist philosophy and science, especially in France. The major response to this
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development in German Romanticism advanced a religious and idealist perspective that nevertheless tried to grapple with the new insights of science. This conversation was radically disrupted and challenged by the ultimate crisis in what Europeans believed to be the center of civilized modernity itself: the Terror of the French Revolution. Involving the latest scientific technology (the guillotine), the latest political and philosophical ideas (including and especially materialist ones), and located in the most culturally sophisticated capital in Western Europe, the Terror introduced the mystery of irrationality and violence, seemingly arising organically out of modernity itself. Intellectuals all over Europe were challenged in the decades following to retheorize the basic terms of the Enlightenment—the nature of the human, the value of empiricism, and the notion of history as progress—in ways that could still salvage the fundamental terms of modern knowledge. And, just as the new knowledge of the body and subjectivity were essential to those discussions, the body became the center of an anxious elaboration of the human, from which the consideration of its shadow—the savage, the animal, the irrational—was never far.

Britons in the wake of the Terror inherited both the materialist and the idealist poles of the debate and the anxieties of its extremes. In addition to pursuing new insights in individual physiological psychology, thinkers sought to harmonize these new ideas with theories of a broader human history. Evolutionary history was quickly appropriated by those with a teleological view of progress, but of course, it was also subject to other logics, as Tennyson clearly saw: the aleatory logic of catastrophism and the potentially cyclical logic of species’ rise and fall, with the decline-of-humanity narratives that implied. Materialists increasingly concerned themselves with the individual and the extremes of the temporal spectrum—individual psychology and the deep time of evolutionary change—both of which could locate the impetus for change in the individual body and experience. Idealists, however, were most concerned with the mediate period of historical time and the social collective: how do societies change and grow or decline? What force, spirit, or will outside the individual body accounts for such change? How does history progress—dialectically, in cycles, or as a sort of “widenings gyre”? Or did it “progress” at all? Idealist visions of history were largely charted onto oscillating structures of myth (which was itself held to be evidence of and to encode historical change), whether the oscillations spiraled toward millennial perfection, as in Hegel, or simply a form of repetition, as in Nietzsche.

Though British materialism and physiology per se owe most to the Scottish enlightenment (and through it, French philosophy and medicine), literary writers, especially those educated at the universities in the classical tradi-
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tion, were also strongly influenced by idealist thought disseminated through classical and linguistic scholarship. These fields were dominated by German thinkers, who theorized new scientific information through an overarching idealist philosophy devoted to thinking the long durée of human history. British authors repeatedly return to the problem of history as they wrestle with the materialism of the body. From Carlyle and Arnold to Pater, Hardy, and Wilde, they place the body within a narrative of historical progression, alternating between a faith in teleology and an oscillating, cyclical model of destruction and creation. For the first several decades of the nineteenth century, the Terror remained a sobering spectacle requiring an explanation. Was it evidence of the evolutionary savagery physiologically present within every individual or was it driven by a larger transpersonal influence? Was such viciousness a productive force of history, or a random and meaningless energy capable of erupting and undermining human progress at any time? Realist narrative tended to favor a focus on the material and individual, but these larger considerations were never far, and from midcentury on, especially, often manifested within the realist text as mythic or grotesque elements. Idealist authors tended to approach the question of large-scale historical change primarily through myth, fantasy, and fable, yet they too worried over the problem of embodied consciousness, often importing realist elements into their texts as they worked through the representation of the individual in history. By the end of the nineteenth century, German idealism again becomes strongly significant to British psychology, this time through the newer social sciences of anthropology and history rather than through biology or medicine, which by that time had finally split off from philosophy, and remained firmly materialist. Through studies of myth, for example, idealism offered an explanation for images or narratives' persistence over historical time and cultural difference. Jung's theory of the collective unconscious reviving, under the banner of psychology, Kant's religious and idealist concept of archetypes.

I argue that in realist narrative the surface of the body, posited at once as radically transparent to interpretation and as obscure, is made pivotal and offered to the reader as a puzzle to be solved. By gathering data about the context of the body's responses, including facial expressions, the reader is meant to identify the true nature of the character's affects and motives—even unconscious ones. The reader is invited to consider a set of circumstances, and a set of bodily responses, and sympathetically imagine causes and effects—a kind of differential diagnosis of possible narratives. Is the red-faced young lady embarrassed, attracted, or just overheated? Is the pale gentleman angry, afraid, or guilty? Yet, when this ambiguous signification utterly fails
or is disrupted, crisis ensues. Through the early and mid-nineteenth century, moments when the individual in fiction risks being subsumed in the mass, the body's surface is often trod in terms of the permeability of the skin or its traumatic alienation—the seizure of individuality or individual affect by external forces is narrated as the mythical flaying of Marsyas, or the historical flaying of French aristocrats. By the end of the period, literature and psychology begin to turn away from the body's surface, toward mythic structures and metaphors of depth. They retain, however, the physiological materialism and realist technique absorbed from the earlier period, put to newer uses. The realist body emerges with the advent of realist texts; one teaches us to read the other, and to read with confidence because we can believe in a common embodied experience, which is thus, potentially, widely comprehensible. But it also teaches that affective experience is complex and often operates outside of conscious will or understanding. It teaches us to be close and even suspicious readers of fiction, a mode of reading that is strongly tied to the post-Enlightenment period.\footnote{6}

What: Parts and Chapters

The book is organized in four parts. Each part takes up a category of the nineteenth-century discussion of the skin: the skin as a sensing and expressive surface; as a permeable membrane; as an alienable substance; and as a possessor of intrinsic or inscribed properties. Within each part, two chapters explore individual themes important within those categories. Moreover, each part attends to skin's Janus-faced nature: that is, as a surface that faces both in and out.

Part 1, "The Self As Surface," establishes how the surface of the body became both a location of perceptual consciousness and a signifying medium for the display of affect. Chapter 1, "Sense," shows how during the Enlightenment and especially in France, where medicine and philosophy were tightly aligned in advancing materialism, new discoveries in anatomy corresponded to philosophical advances to suggest an increasingly important role for the brain and nervous system in embodying selfhood. In Scotland and England, Common Sense philosophers responded to the materialism of the French and of Scotland's own David Hume by seeking a way to integrate the body and its sensations into a religious (but not particularly sectarian) model of the world, showing the body's perceptions as reliable because God-given, rather than embracing either the traditional mind-body split or an anticlerical materialism. In the early nineteenth century, the Edinburgh surgeon and neurologist Charles Bell, educated in the Common Sense tradition, wrote
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an influential treatise on the anatomy of emotional expression that became a vade mecum for a generation of artists. (Darwin extensively debates this work in his later consideration of embodied emotions in his influential *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals.*) Consciousness is increasingly figured in this period as a phenomenon of the sensing surface of the body, and the discussion around sensation shows the skin’s role in mediating between inside and outside, body and environment, and self and awareness.

This focus on surface and perception is framed in part within an aesthetic shift. In Charles Bell’s comments on embodiment, and on the role of art, and in Ruskin’s later commentary on George Eliot, we see an uneasy alignment between neoclassical canons of beauty and the emergence of realist portrayals of the body. These conversations show Victorians’ awareness of the stakes of these developments for the emerging aesthetics of realism and its uneven and contested transformation of the role and meaning of art. Realism, which was not just a question of describing ordinary reality, but of situating that reality in embodied terms, was, even in the middle of the century, aligned with materialism and radicalism. Morally correct aesthetic perception, situated in a healthy sensorium, was at the heart of the reliability of the sensing surface and its appraisal of other surfaces—especially those of other bodies—and of art and literature. Aesthetic theories grappled with contradictory values implied by the mandate to realistically portray the body’s divine natural truth and the idealist tradition in which the artist’s duty is to ennoble and perfect.

Emotional expression is communicated physically, and skin-based involuntary expression such as blushing (as opposed to the conscious muscular actions of smiling or frowning) was of particular interest as a true index of inner states—states of which the person in the expressive skin might not be consciously aware. Chapter 2, “Expression,” offers a history of blushing. Commentators of the early nineteenth century identified blushing as involuntary moral communication by divine design, whereas later materialist discussions tried to account for its evolutionary function. All agreed that blushing expressed self-consciousness—not simply meaning embarrassment, but awareness of the self. In fact, there was an ongoing discussion of blushing and flushing as indicative of difficulties in the nervous system’s interior narrative, the brain’s representation of the self to the self.

Bell and Darwin, as well as later physicians, psychologists, and criminologists, offer examples of a broad swath of thinking about surface from evolutionary and medical perspectives. The blush, figured as a "language of the soul" unique to humans, became a focus of the conflict between the early nineteenth-century’s Common Sense-inflected religious materialism
and the harder evolutionary materialism of the mid- to late nineteenth century. Literary representations of the blush demonstrate the importance and difficulty of the mandate to read the body, seen simultaneously as legible and as requiring interpretive expertise. Across several genres, Victorians use such expressions in pivotal scenes that stage the close reading of an ambiguous body as central to making narrative meaning in realist discourse. These moments often display the tendency Fredric Jameson identifies with the affective "scene" crucial to the realist mode: that is, countering the forward movement of the narrative in favor of a visual display of the body's affect stopped in time. Though Jameson associates this technique only with fiction, it is ubiquitous in a broad range of examples across the period and genres, including lyric and spasmodic poetry. From Keats and Austen to Barrett Browning and Mary Elizabeth Braddon, these moments illustrate the interpretive and moral stakes of the body's ambiguity as it becomes crucial to literary representation.

Part 2, "Permeability," concentrates on the skin as a porous boundary between self and world. Chapter 3, "Out," considers what is expressed through the skin. Whereas the healthy body in the 1830s was not itself dangerous to others, by the 1860s, the body is essentially hazardous—if it excretes healthily for itself, it poisons the environment for others. The linkage of an individual body to the political body through disease is important in both French and British literature, but is most frankly explored in French realism, which overtly links political corruption to syphilitic disfigurement of the (woman's) skin. By midcentury, the British novel parallels the French exploration of a materialist and embodied self situated in a complex relation to a larger historical (and increasingly evolutionary) narrative arc. Both French and British fiction use skin disease to make connections between individual morality and historical immorality, often of the ancien régime or the Regency.

The chapter traces the filiation of this representation through Balzac and Zola, as well as in the British fiction of Conan Doyle. It may be in part the influence of these authors of ambitious and encyclopedic French novels that leads British authors at midcentury to stage larger historical connections and analyses in the otherwise more domestic and individually focused British novel.7 However, French realism shades into naturalism earlier and more decisively than the British. Whereas literature by Balzac or Zola tends to represent individuals as symptoms or exemplars of social problems and their fates as subject to external forces, British literature tends to valorize the individual's capacity for self-invention and transformation. And whereas the French locate historical evil in the present body of the immoral woman,
the British tradition often makes the individual a victim of corrupt historical antecedents not yet exorcised from the body politic.

Chapter 4, "In," reverses the focus of the prior chapter; instead of attending to what comes out of the body, it works through the midcentury preoccupation with what might enter it. Texts on bathing and dermatology provide a new understanding of the imperial, masculine body's concern with the skin as a way of eliminating the pollution associated with barbaric or filthy practices. At the same time, practices focused on the care of the body risked compromising the masculinity of the subject, as can be seen in many texts complaining about the "relaxing," "enervating," and generally effeminizing effects of bathing. Many were concerned about the body being penetrated through the pores. Porosity meant that the most characteristic element of the individual consciousness, his or her feelings, might be invaded by outer forces. The interpretation of emotion crucial to both realism and Common Sense ideas about social cohesion, shown to be so important and yet potentially so difficult in part 1, was based on eighteenth-century theories about sympathy between the body of a spectator and the object of that spectator's gaze. By the mid-nineteenth century, the novel and techniques of realist narrative are increasingly used in the service of attempts to link the individual body to a larger community and history. Explorations of sympathy often reached back to the French Revolution as a prime example of a breakdown in affective community bonds; the "natural" tendency of bodies to sympathize and communities to function healthily could easily fail, in which case the emotions transmitted between and through embodied minds could take on the nature of contagion and the force of a flood. The physiological theory finds its metaphor in the figures of bathing and soaking. The French Revolutionaries, and especially Jean-Paul Marat, are often represented as bathing in blood. Theorists of emotion return to this moment as an example of when sympathetic interpersonal reading failed to create a principle of social coherence. Dickens's *Tale of Two Cities* retells the Terror as a model of sympathy thwarted and affect perverted through the illegibility of the expressive surface and its inappropriate or inadequate porosity.

The focus on the continuity of a porous surface with the self thus suggests the problem of autonomy. Part 3, "Alienated and Alienating," continues to explore the period's theorization of history through skin, this time focusing on its excision. By the mid-nineteenth century, psychologists conceptualized the skin as a site of subjectivity's development, where the mind, formed largely by sensations, took in experience of the world and defined the self against it. Chapters 5 and 6 examine midcentury explorations of a skin alienated from the self, specifically, through grotesque body objects. Chapter 5,
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"Flayed," explores the fantasies of flaying associated, again, with the Terror. Skinning, traditionally done by humans to animals, also has the capacity to undo the distinction between human and animal or object, especially when done by humans to each other. Magical animal skins and grotesque representation of flayed human bodies become a way to narrate an incomprehensible history; situating these objects in the heart of the quotidian English narrative allows the sensation novel both to remind the reader of the body's implication in a history beyond rationality and individual self-containment and to distance the present-day English individual from that dark and incomprehensible story.

Fable and myth allow for a fuller exploration of this theme than a realism rooted in materialist epistemology, and authors move toward embedding such forms in realist narrative. Midcentury British texts, in their fascination with the excesses of the French Revolution, frequently cited reports of the skinning and tanning of humans as the ultimate expression of the rejection of the old order and its ruling class. The flayed skin of French aristocrats shows up in Carlyle's *French Revolution* as an important theme; it comes into Collins's *The Law and the Lady* as a gruesome symbol of the vexed relationship of modernity with its immediate past. When the human body passes into the realm of alienated objects, the category disruption enables the realist author to explore the uncanny clash of two mutually exclusive domains: not, as in the gothic, the rational and the magical, but the realm of moral humanity, ruled by sympathy, and considered to be the saving force that makes society possible, and that of the market, ruled by competition, and increasingly understood as amoral and depersonalizing. The ancien régime and the Regency evoke both nostalgia for a time before the rise of the bourgeois market economy and disgust for the antimodern excesses of aristocratic history.

Moving beyond representing historical events to representing the nature of history itself, Victorians had recourse to mythic representations of flaying. The figure of Apollo flaying the satyr Marsyas embodies the pain associated with historical change. Chapter 6, "Flaying," explores this figure in the nineteenth century, in stories often retold within a specifically German idealist model of historical succession derived from myth criticism. Portrayals of Marsyas shifted from justly punished hubris in the premodern period to an Enlightenment interpretation as a victim of tyrannical cruelty to a late Victorian manifestation as a sensitive martyr to artistic and historical transformation. In the art and literature of the period, Marsyas turns up again and again to mark the ambivalence of nineteenth-century artists toward their Enlightenment heritage. As materialism comes to less problematically underlie sci-
ence and psychology, idealist-humanists from midcentury onward return to German Romanticism to take up questions that midcentury materialists such as Alexander Bain seemed not to address. In late nineteenth-century Britain, German Romantic ideas were taken up through classical myth criticism, literature, and psychology rather than philosophy per se.

From the specifically mythical poetry of Arnold to the aestheticism of Wilde, Oxford idealists retold the story of Marsyas as a way to situate their time within a longer durée of historical becoming, which is less simply triumphalist than earlier formulations. Sympathy with embodied suffering comes to seem morally superior to the bright disinterest of the Olympian Apollo’s "cruel reason," and Enlightenment materialism seems to yearn for the supplement of pantheistic, "primitive," or exotic spiritualities such as those of the Eleusinian mysteries. Chapter 6 traces the changing aesthetic and cultural fortunes of Marsyas in the writings of Charles Bell on visual art (where Marsyas is treated neoclassically and dismissively), to idealist valorization in the French artist Paul Chénard’s massive painting Divine Tragedy. In Britain, literature shows authors’ increasing affirmation of Marsyas in the works of Arnold, Pater, and Wilde, as they reach for mythic forms and references to link the idealist treatment of historical will to the individual suffering body. The revaluing of Dionysus made his minister, the flayed Marsyas, a powerful figure for the violent depredations of historical change.

Part 4, "Inscriptions," focuses on qualities seen as inherent in or permanently inscribed on skin. By the end of the century, especially, new materialist approaches to the body insisted on the skin as a site of visible individual identity that could be objectively verified. Chapter 7, "Markings," considers color and its somewhat elliptical relation with both race and morality in tandem with the scar. Though color was less absolutely tied to race in the UK than in the Americas, racial color was there assimilated into an older aesthetic and moral hierarchy of color tied to class and ethnicity. Color was not a reliable index of racial identity, nor was it the most important attribute of race. But it still served as an immediately visible cue about subjectivity, and that was assimilable to more explicitly racist narratives. The visual turn to surface combined with scientific racism to give color new meaning, meaning that turned particularly on the immutability of visual markers. Literary attempts to harmonize materialism and idealism were especially challenged by the increasingly common assumption that skin markings provided an easily read, fixed identity. Charles Kingsley uses both realism and fantasy to promote a materialist-idealistic vision of a mutable physiology in which race and color are labile. His attempt in the realist novel Two Years Ago to bridge this divide between idealism and materialism in his representation of the body,
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history, and aesthetics meets limited success. The effort is more fruitful in his scientific fantasy narrative for children, *The Water-Babies*.

Chapter 8, “Tattoo,” focuses on a more deliberately acquired kind of scar. Tattooing as a marker of contested identity came to widespread public attention in the 1870s in the case of the Tichborne claimant, but it was familiar as a marker of travel long before then, and a significant body of work on tattooing in the late century from Lombroso and other criminologists was important to anthropometry’s project to identify criminals (as well as to associate criminals with “savage” aesthetic tastes). At the same time, a fad for tattooing emerged among the aristocracy and other elites. This interest in skin markings is showcased in a number of texts based on the theme of identity, from guides to the emerging field of forensic medicine to mystery fiction. The late Victorians focused on the marked skin as a mode of “fail-safe” identification not only through criminological work on tattoos, scars, and other lesions, popular in use in crime fiction and the like, but on the newer technology of fingerprinting, imported from the imperial context. Thomas Hardy at the end of the century more powerfully engages the problem of balancing a materialist-realist individual story with an idealist mythic historical narrative, by making the tension thematically central and staging it as both unresolved and essential to human character. *A Laodicean* shows in a realist and comic register what Wilde is doing around the same time in the darker and more fantastic vein of *Dorian Grey* and the spiritual autobiography of *De Profundis*, discussed in chapter 6. The story showcases visual markers of identity with a tattoo, painted portraits, and photography, in a novel that hinges on the problematic relation of the individual to history. Hardy works ironically at the intersection of the materialist and the Romantic, pitting the modern against the medieval, and the Hellenic against the pre-Olympian, while putting the empirical truth-claims of the confessing body into question.

Both Kingsley in chapter 7 and Hardy in chapter 8 use photography to discuss realist aesthetics and their relation to truth. Both gesture to photography’s appeal as a form of supposedly unmediated truth-telling through the direct reproduction of surface. Both also critique its reliability. While Kingsley focuses on photography’s mismatch with natural (and therefore reliable, Common-Sensical) human visual perception, mediated by affect and physiology, Hardy’s later critique insists on photographic representation’s capacity to trick the viewer, in contrast to the more obvious conventions of painters. Kingsley critiques a materialist realism that uses objectivity to deny the transformative power of the spirit, but correct perception is still finally located in the individual body—and in its human capacity to see selectively, even “incorrectly.” Hardy suggests, however, that all representations are mediated
rather than objective; readers have learned to perceive just the earlier mediations and not yet the new ones. That said, there is both a material and an ideal truth that persists through time, though its meaning, as its form, is liable to change and interpretation. Truth can be only partially available to any one perceiver as each is caught within his or her own historical contingency. Like his predecessors, Hardy reaches for myth to represent that temporally larger story within his otherwise realist novel. He also moves away from surface, toward a model of an essentially deep, unknowable self current in psychology and anthropology of his period, and that will become the signature of the literary generation that follows him. The conclusion outlines this change and limns its roots in midcentury idealism in Eliot's later work.

**With Whom, with Thanks**

This book is indebted to a number of excellent studies, although it of course aims also to provide something those have not. The two most significant broadly historical works on skin are Claudia Benthen's *Skin: On the Cultural Border between Self and World* (2002) and Steven Connor's *The Book of Skin* (2004). Both Connor and Benthen identify the late eighteenth century as a moment of change for understandings of the skin; it is in this moment that a truly modern notion of skin (one that is still in many ways current) emerges, and it is at this point that my study begins. Claudia Benthen argues that this is the period in which “the epidermis was able to develop into a surface that could bear semantic meaning and on which individuality could reveal itself” (313). As the art historian Mechthild Fend, who draws on Benthen, remarks, in the period between the late eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth century, “new notions of the nature and properties of the skin emerged” (“Bodily and Pictorial Surfaces: Skin in French Art and Medicine, 1790–1860,” 311). Drawing on the work of Claudia Benthen, Bakhtin, and Elias, she agrees that this model of the body, with its new emphasis on the skin, was brought to full development in the French Revolution. She notes that the term "surface" supplants terms like "envelope" in being principal terms for the description of the skin around 1800, and suggests that this shift "signals a new attention to the visual appearance of the body" as part of the Enlightenment’s visual turn (313). Dermatology, she notes, arises at the same time, "whose diagnostic principles are based upon ... reading the surface of the body" (313). While older medical tracts "had described skin as a membrane for the exchange of fluids, late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century physiologies of the skin, especially those belonging to the vitalist school associated with physicians such as Albrecht von Haller, Théophile Bordeu and, later,
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Xavier Bichat, described the skin as an interface transmitting information reciprocally from inside to outside" (313). Steven Connor similarly summarizes the shift in purely medical models of the skin from one in force "as late as the early eighteenth century" (39). In the humoral model, "skin was understood as a porous layer with a multitude of possible openings, many of which would no longer be seen as such today... ‘Fluxes’ that... continually change their form exit the body as blood, pus, urine, phlegm, or sperm. Wounds and bloody discharges from the skin, which today are regarded as pathological... were seen as quite the opposite" (39).

Benthiel argues that the shift toward seeing the body as a closed vessel covered with an impermeable skin moved the location of dirt from inside to outside over the course of the nineteenth century (42–43). But as we shall see, the process emerges as rather more complex upon a closer look. (In fact, as Benthiel notes, although the medical vanguard moved away from this humoral model of the body, ordinary doctors still routinely bled, cupped, and blistered throughout the nineteenth century, though with decreasing venge.) Although the existence of pores had long been known, the widespread availability of microanatomical images sparked a more general anxiety about the skin’s porosity just as the body’s closure became central, and the idea of the body’s interior as inherently dangerous intensified through this period. Unlike “fluxes,” which were essentially normal but could go awry, the life process came to be seen as essentially toxic, productive of deadly filth. The skin became a covering not only protective of the body’s interior, but of the world outside as well.

Of scholarship more specifically focused on Victorian literature, William Cohen’s lovely Embodied: Victorian Literature and the Senses (2009) has been particularly influential for me, and though he focuses on a more limited portion of the period, the present work is very much in dialogue with his. Cohen argues that nineteenth-century thinkers were deeply engaged with the question of what it means to be human and were specifically thinking through materialism; this is a foundational insight for my work. He observes that the traditional explanation of this discussion limns it as a conflict between faith (tradition, belief in the soul as separate from the body, religious certitude) and doubt (modernity, science, materialism). Cohen shows, however, that Victorian authors often came to believe that the essence of humanity was in the human body itself and began to present the famed interiority of the literary individual—the keystone novelistic character of the period—"through the depiction of physical substance, interaction, and incorporation" (xii). Cohen charges that this practice challenged, rather than supported, the concept of the Enlightenment subject, a subject he defines as transcending the
physical. I identify this as an antihumanist trend, which located humanity in the human body rather than in some transcendent identity. The age of interiority and the Victorian realist novel were, he argues, “desacralizing,” as they locate their subject in embodiment itself as the “horizon of the human” (xii). Although I suspect Cohen sees this use of the body as more radically antihumanist than Victorians themselves did, his reading is crucial in showing us the complexity and sophistication of Victorians’ engagement with the body and especially sensation and perception. Although Cohen is not interested in the scientific history per se—he claims that often, the literary representation of sensory processes preceded the scientific understanding, which I think demarcates literature, science, and philosophy too decisively for the period—he usefully points to our tendency to understand the period’s debates on materialism in overly simplistic terms. Particularly in the United Kingdom, the materialist/religious dichotomy does not stand up under scrutiny in the early nineteenth century, despite the disproportionate attention given to simplified popularizations of Darwinian debates later in the century.

Cohen’s book is most focused on those later Victorian writers who are most directly engaged with what we would now see as a materialist self. I widen the frame, not only temporally to the earlier part of the period, but philosophically, to show how thinkers committed to what I will call an idealist notion of the spirit, such as Arnold and Wilde, also participate in the period’s focus on the material body’s surface. Cohen suggests that “although physiological psychology and evolutionary biology are under development” throughout the century, “their findings are not widely disseminated until the 1870s”; he thus believes that the novelists “anticipate those of the scientists” (xii). He identifies the beginning of the materialist trend with the writings of Herbert Spencer and contribution of such thinkers as Alexander Bain and George Henry Lewes (3–4). I see the development as more continuous than Cohen allows, as the material bases of emotion and perception had been widely discussed by scientists and philosophers and theologians—who were often the same people—since the mid-1700s. If we see the work of such scientists in a continuous context, there is, I think, less reason to suppose that the artists are ahead of the scientists, though indeed the scientists drew on literature for inspiration and examples, just as authors were often more deeply interested in science than required by Cohen’s notion of wide dissemination. At the same time, there is no doubt that artists took the capacities of the new ideas in directions that developed the culture of the embodied mind and the experience of mind as embodied, in ways hitherto unimaginable. And of course, many Victorian authors were scientists or doctors themselves. The historian John Henry points out that the “science of the mind”
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in relation to the body and especially the brain “took over from the soul in natural philosophical debate” in Britain since Locke’s 1690 Essay Concerning Human Understanding (249–50). Identifying the Common Sense school as a psychology-based theory, he notes that in the Scottish Enlightenment, “the study of the mind became the special preserve of moral philosophy” (252)—that is, philosophy itself encompassed physiology and psychology within its purview. Common Sense was particularly important to British aesthetics in the first half of the nineteenth century as well.

In focusing on the late eighteenth through the nineteenth century, this book engages a period in which modern medicine, evolutionary biology, and new understandings of society reconfigure understandings of the skin in specific ways often lost in the larger sweep of earlier projects. Several hitherto unnoiced but important themes emerge upon this closer scrutiny (the ongoing importance of permeability, and the importance of Marsyas to the period, for example). This book also situates those developments not only in the history of medicine and the body, but reintegrates that history in its philosophical context. Moreover, it claims an essential place for these developments in the history of the dominant literary mode of late modernity: realism. My broader literary argument is that materialism, in addition to being of longer pedigree than Cohen discusses, makes the body, and specifically its surface, foundational to the realist mode of narration that characterizes post-Enlightenment narrative. I am influenced in this analysis by too many insightful literary critics to enumerate here, but three offered particularly useful interventions: Fredric Jameson’s recent The Antinomies of Realism (2013), Rae Greiner’s Sympathetic Realism (2012), and Nancy Armstrong’s foundational How Novels Think (2005). Jameson’s book posits that realism is distinguished by two characteristics: the narrative impulse, which leads the story forward in time (the récit), and the emphasis on affect, which always tends to instantiate the present as durable, resisting narrative and temporality in favor of what Jameson calls the “scenic” (11). The scene is the moment of affective elaboration that counters the forward movement of the story with a claim to a stable truth about character or history or society (for Jameson, this is usually a claim for the permanence of bourgeois society and values). “Affect, or the body’s present” is key to realism in Jameson’s model; affect here is a “nameless bodily state,” a sensation that “activates the body” (32–33), without yet being assigned a name as an emotion. The “temporality specific to affect” is the “incremental” (42); it runs to “description” rather than “narration,” and tends to the open-ended (44). In Jameson’s book, these observations are in service to a somewhat different set of questions than those I engage here, but I would like to take them out of his more strictly lit-
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Every context to observe that the physiological and philosophical thought of the period posits a body—and a radically embodied subjectivity—that both invites interpretation (a kind of physiological detective work on the part of the reader) and insists on its difficulty (when the affect is named, bounded as a specific emotion, narrative restarts, and we move away from character and toward plot). Within literature, this is elaborated as a new emphasis on the description of bodily states and appearances, as well as the use of a new vocabulary in which those states and appearances have shared meanings, some readily apparent to readers and some requiring readerly work to construct, often through the complex workings of sympathy.

Rae Greiner’s work on realism in Victorian fiction offers a more direct influence, in arguing that sympathy and feeling are not identical, a fact often forgotten by later critics. Insisting, as does Nancy Armstrong, on the influence of Adam Smith, Greiner notes that sympathy is not an easy or automatic process, but a hard-won achievement as often represented in narratives of failure as in those of success: “Against the standard claim that knowing more and seeing further into the hidden hearts and minds of characters heightens our sympathy . . . , novels . . . are dubious of the tie that binds sympathy to knowledge” (4). For Greiner, realism is distinguished less by extensive lists of objects (that is, things\textsuperscript{11}) than by devotion to the “imaginative social affectivity through which human communities generate the meanings they hold dear. . . . It depicts the sympathetic consciousness as the basis of reality itself” (10). For Smith (in contrast to Hume), sympathizing was an intellectual process first and foremost, creating feeling rather than deriving from it (Greiner 18). Greiner sees realism as indexing reality “by reading its visible signs” for characters and readers. In constructing a causal relation that is understood to be a shared view, we feel “ourselves to be of the same mind as others,” which allows “continuous, mundane reality to take shape” (32). I would like to build on Greiner’s excellent analysis by observing two things: first, the “social affectivity” she discusses is extensively theorized by the debates of the Scottish Common Sense school beyond Smith, and second, that school of thought specifically built their analysis on a theory of mind based on the experience of the human body. In that model, the surface of the body came to be experienced not only as the source of meaning, but as a realist text itself.

Reading the body was an essential skill. A host of recent books has focused on visuality. In an argument that parallels Greiner’s later one (as well as her use of Smith), Nancy Armstrong persuasively argues that the novel as we know it—fundamentally a realist form—coincides with the rise of the individual. While other forms, notably the gothic, dramatize the limits
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of individualism and the fear of the undifferentiated "mass man," the realist novel (what Armstrong identifies simply as the novel) is essentially committed to the idea of the individual subject. That subject is largely available to others' understanding through vision (even if often only of the "mind's eye"), and in other books devoted explicitly to visual culture, Armstrong has insisted upon visual primacy in realism. In Jameson's "scenic" moment, where affect is detailed yet not yet named, surface invites the reader's continuously self-reinforcing creation of the norms that enable the construction of the realist universe. These insights are foundational for me, but I want to insist on the distinction between realism as a genre associated with particular novels, and realism as a mode of narration that is associated with the individual body and psychology, yet crosses over into other genres and forms. The nineteenth-century individual is inscribed and perceived, joyously and relentlessly, on the surface of the human body.

Theoretical perspectives that have been productive for Steven Connor and Claudia Benthien have also offered fruitful insights for my work. Didier Anzieu's enormously suggestive psychoanalytic model of the skin ego has been foundational for recent studies, including Connor's. However, the otherwise productive presentism of psychoanalytic theory has for many readers obscured the fact that it has a history as well. Anzieu's late twentieth-century focus on the skin cycles back to the late nineteenth-century question of how to reconcile a physiological model from embryology that privileges surface and a psychological model that increasingly privileged depth, one that Freud was at the forefront of formulating when the question was relatively new. Anzieu's compelling conclusion that the skin is identified with the projection of the ego upon the surface of the body, and that the developing child creates an imaginary relationship with this skin ego as the container and embodiment of meanings about the self, can in fact be seen to emerge directly out of modern materialist ways of understanding the body's surface as the location of subjectivity. Anzieu sets out to account for the ego as a kind of skin of the self. He posits three functions for the skin ego, which relate to my historical reading of the functions of the skin ego in relation to consciousness, and which have largely structured the current theoretical literature on the skin produced in the last twenty years: it operates as a "containing, unifying envelope for the Self; as a protective barrier for the psyche; and as a filter of exchanges . . . and site of inscription . . . a function which makes representation possible" (9). I have been concerned with a prior period in which psychoanalysis yet played no influential role, and so Anzieu appears sparsely here. But his model develops directly out of Freud's own reliance on the embryology of the mid-Victorian period, and this project provides a kind of
intellectual prehistory of his very interesting findings. As we shall see, these ideas derive initially from Bichat, and then through embryology, to become crucial for the midcentury psychology of Spencer.\textsuperscript{13}

Bodies, whether referenced in philosophy, anatomy, or literature, are rarely "just" bodies in this period; they imply also a set of ideas in conflict, and very often a conscious position in relation to this conflict. The new realist and materialist focus on the individual body is embedded in the period’s concern with the progress of history, both evolutionary and social. The textual archive is replete with attempts to integrate the new emphasis on the individual body into a longer narrative, often one of transpersonal, historical development framed as being at odds with the materialist focus on the individual body.

For both Enlightenment and nineteenth-century thinkers, the French Revolution marked both the decisive high point of materialist physiology and a point of rupture. The Terror prompted efforts to account for a logic of historical development that would integrate that catastrophic event into an acceptable narrative of human development. The long arc of the debate that followed focused both on the body as the locus of human exceptionalism or continuity with the animal kingdom, and on its surface as a site of subjectivity whose legibility was necessary to social cohesion, but dangerously liable to misreading. Its porousness showed the fragility of the self-enclosed subject, liable both to inherited dangers from within and to affective intrusion from without. Likewise, the alienation of this surface came to represent both the vulnerability and the potential brutality of all humankind, even while individual identity was ever more insistently inscribed upon this surface by forces both evolutionary and aleatory.

Surface, in other words, becomes discursive: skin communicates, but like any signifier, it must be read and interpreted. Skin’s materiality perpetually claims to be transparent, to exist in a tight coupling with the signified itself; however, its visibility both invites the gaze and evades certainty. George Levine has said of Victorian realism that its authors both yearn to embody the referent in language and are keenly aware of the impossibility of doing so (The Realistic Imagination, 20 and passim). Realism analogously presents the body as a language: attention to visual detail through a scrupulous, almost clinical, articulation of the body’s surface and reactions directs a reader’s focus to the process of interpretation. On the surface of the body to be scrutinized, subjectivity is often least knowable to itself. Readers are invited to construct a legible and meaningful world by inspecting characters, their actions, and most of all, their reactions; in so doing, we construct a "common sense" of how a shared (human, embodied) reality works and contrib-
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ute to its moral evaluation. Our bodies are affected by readerly contact with the imaginary textual bodies before us, as we evaluate and interpret both them and other characters, as well as our own responses to them.

I argue, then, that as the surface of the body becomes the site of self, realism becomes a dominant aesthetic mode of narrating that self, one that is profoundly embodied, and deeply enmeshed, in a materialist theory of mind. Realism's commitment to embodiment models a level of surface detail that invites suspicious and close reading. However, like materialism, it continually struggles to engage a more encompassing representation of history, will, and community. It is throughout the period associated with a troubled attempt to engage the foundational modern historical trauma and anomaly of the French Revolution, and to model a version of history, intention, and community that is rendered more attractively in the idealist tradition. It reaches to intersect with and even absorb other forms—myth, fantasy, and sensational grotesque—to compass that end. By the time psychology, anthropology, and modernist aesthetics turn to "depth" psychology and a notion of a shared unconscious that transcends individual bodies as well as structuring perception and will, realism has been absorbed as technique into an aesthetics that begins to turn away from surface, even while it retains a model of embodied mind that has been elaborated over the prior century.
Victorian Skin
Surface, Self, History
PAMELA K. GILBERT

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In *Victorian Skin*, Pamela K. Gilbert uses literary, philosophical, medical, and scientific discourses about skin to trace the development of a broader discussion of what it meant to be human in the nineteenth century. Where is subjectivity located? How do we communicate with and understand each other’s feelings? How does our surface, which contains us and presents us to others, function and what does it signify?

As Gilbert shows, for Victorians, the skin was a text to be read. Nineteenth-century scientific and philosophical perspectives had reconfigured the purpose and meaning of this organ as more than a wrapping and instead a membrane integral to the generation of the self. Victorian writers embraced this complex perspective on skin even as sanitary writings focused on the surface of the body as a dangerous point of contact between self and others.

Drawing on novels and stories by Dickens, Collins, Hardy, and Wilde, among others, along with their French contemporaries and precursors among the eighteenth-century Scottish thinkers and German idealists, Gilbert examines the understandings and representations of skin in four categories: as a surface for the sensing and expressive self; as a permeable boundary; as an alienable substance; and as the site of inherent and inscribed properties. At the same time, Gilbert connects the ways in which Victorians “read” skin to the way in which Victorian readers (and subsequent literary critics) read works of literature and historical events (especially the French Revolution.) From blushing and flaying to scarring and tattooing, *Victorian Skin* tracks the fraught relationship between ourselves and our skin.

PAMELA K. GILBERT is Albert Brick Professor at the University of Florida.

“Fascinating and capacious, *Victorian Skin* invites us to rethink the surface of the body and what’s at stake in those discourses—medical, philosophical, political, and literary, that describe the body’s relation to the world. The result is a stunning interdisciplinary intervention in Victorian Studies and a new way of reading Victorian realism’s investment in the body’s surface.”
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“This stunningly original study shows how the permeable human epidermis (blushing, pallid, tattooed, rouged) reflects changing and contested beliefs about identity and interiority, body and feeling. A major contribution to our understanding of 19th century literary realism, Gilbert brilliantly discusses how skin’s mediating properties demand nuanced and historicized methods of what’s literally surface reading.”
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