"Preserving the Name Alive" versus "Getting About": Samuel Butler and the Problem of Memorial Sculpture

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IF you read Samuel Butler's speculative 1872 novel *Erewhon,* with its antimachine rhetoric, its strange riffs on evolutionary thinking, and its eugenicist take on health and beauty, and you still come away with any memory of the novel's interest in statues, then almost surely what you will be thinking of is a scene early on in which our narrator, Higgs, finds himself lost in unmapped territory and suddenly before "a sort of Stonehenge of rude and barbaric figures . . . six or seven times larger than life, of great antiquity."[1] These terrifying giant heads have the notable capacity to make a dreadful "concert" of "moans" when the wind rushes through them; they offer up a weird mixing of racialized aesthetics and religious intimations; and perhaps accordingly, they, and Higgs's fear in their face, form a natural locus for readerly memorability. They have also drawn their share of energetic investigations by critics, who tend to read them as having "theological import" or as acting as a kind of "key" to Erewhon's aggressive refusal of machinery and its equally forceful embrace of physical strength.[2]

In what follows, however, I want to focus on another, more critically neglected set of statues buried deep in *Erewhon*'s pages, and I want to suggest that these forgotten figures are at least as well worth our attention. As Higgs passes through Erewhon, it turns out that he is consistently struck by a series of smaller, more recent statues, and the culmination of his interest in this strange aesthetic feature is the striking revelation that Erewhon has historically made good on a universal human inclination—"the instinct of preserving the name alive after the death of the body"—not with epitaphs on gravestones but with a proliferation of life-size statues made while those they commemorate are still alive (127–29). As oddities in *Erewhon* go—getting sick merits jail time;

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ethical lapses earn compassion; the educational system privileges "unreason"; and, of course, machines are forbidden—the satirical thrust around these odd artifacts can seem vague. (Don't be vain? Don't cling too much to the past?) Or it can seem tied in a possibly oblique way to Butler's biography (Butler trained as a painter before he began writing, and he practiced as an art critic).[3] It can also seem redundant—one of Higgs's chief ruminations across his discussion of these statues is that all art will inherently decline, and in this line of thinking he recapitulates some of the evolutionary ideas, and some of the skeptical rhetoric around the inevitability of "progress," that the novel more famously explores around machines.[4] But I will suggest that Butler's satire is keener than it initially appears, and that looking more closely at *Erewhon*'s later statues can help us identify a growing mid- to late nineteenth-century ambivalence toward the proliferation of memorial sculptures and monuments that glutted Victorian streets, squares, and churches, to catch the eye, and awe, annoy, or even bore the passerby—an ambivalence that was especially pronounced around the idea of proliferation itself.

Where recent art critical examinations of Victorian conversations about sculpture (such as they exist) have tended to emphasize sculptural surplus as a virtue, either in the context of looking at the Victorians' technical triumphs of production (the Yale-Tate Britain exhibition *Sculpture Victorious* and associated catalog) or in the context of the glories of "new sculpture" (David Getsy's *Body Doubles*), I identify the Victorians' multiplying sculptures as a site of more significant concern.[5] As I do, I suggest that the worries they engendered were heterogeneous, compelling, and often surprising.

From immediate logistical anxieties that too many statues would choke up flow through city byways to future-oriented fears that effecting too many statues of present-day unworthies might take up space better saved for worthies yet to come, to more aesthetic and philosophical frets about the debasement of taste and the weight of history, British periodicals of the 1850s through the early 1870s were full of a rich and varied kind of vexation over statuary excess. In response to these concerns, plenty of commentators argued for a moratorium on new production; others went further and proposed destruction—and their discussions took place sometimes in terms that have resonance for conversations we continue today around memorials and the desirability of their endurance.

Bringing together Butler's imagined landscape and the very real urban spaces familiar to his readers helps us recover a forgotten

conversation about glory, glut, and memory: about statue mania and statuary mortification. It expands the very limited scope of critical attention to *Erewhon*. It may also help us see that our own present-day discussions of the meaning, use, and potential harm of memorial statues have a longer-than-anticipated history, and that some of what we take as gospel about the necessity of preserving the past is in fact our own invention. Indeed, where many today have argued for a need to protect our connection to the past by protecting its statues, we will see that plenty of past people thought that the best way to navigate the present, or to ensure the future, was to ensure a clean slate and a cleared-off plinth. Unexpectedly, it may be that we honor the Victorians, or at least an important strain of Victorian thinking, as much by effacing or pulling down their statues as we do by zealously ensuring these works' endurance.

1. The Statue Mania Before "Statue Mania"

In his 2004 introduction to *Body Doubles*, his examination of the role of physicality and the body in late Victorian sculpture, David Getsy makes two key chronological claims surrounding statuary volume, and he suggests, first, that it was "[d]uring the last two decades of the nineteenth century" that "London experienced an unprecedented and rapid increase in the interest in sculpture," and second, that it was "[b]eginning with works such as the Albert Memorial (finally completed in 1876) and reaching manic proportions by the time of Queen Victoria's Jubilee in 1887–88" that "more and more statues began to sprout across the city and the Empire."[6] In his attribution of a surging "interest" and "sprouting" to the later nineteenth century, Getsy is no doubt correct, and the overview he gives is important. But a closer examination will show that his focus on the late nineteenth century gives short shrift to what had come before, and that if we look as much to popular periodicals as to the art critical ones he relies on, then already much earlier in the century, many factors had combined to contribute to a swelling attention to sculpture. By the century's middle decades, these same forces had also given rise to a widespread perception that statues were popping up and springing forth everywhere you looked—and often in a worrying way.

When it came to the inception of a "rapid increase in the interest in sculpture," already by the very beginning of the Victorian period, the National Gallery's foundation (1824), the British Museum's increasing

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accessibility, and a continuing uncertainty over the proper role of the Royal Academy had opened out a provocative set of questions about the state of the nation's artistic achievement and national taste, and from early on these questions spilled over more generally into discussions of public art—with statues most definitely included.[7] In 1840, exemplarily, a writer for the *Art-Union* would invoke the National Gallery and the Royal Academy, and he spotlit the state of the nation's statues as he urged that a crucial end for artistic institutions was the improvement of public taste in the service of improving public sculpture: "it is more than time to . . . hinder our squares and public places to be disgraced with statues at which the tasteful smile and the vulgar hold out the finger."[8] (If the public was now to have a stake in art, then the same public must now be educated to support good statues.)

In the 1850s and 1860s, even more markedly, a serendipitous mixture of legal changes, notable deaths, institutional transformations, and important exhibitions fueled and consolidated an emergent interest in Britain's nationally held sculptures and also added energy to debates about them. On the legal side, a novel Public Statues Act passed in 1854 worked, in some sense, to invent the category of the "public statue" by placing a set of fifteen statues already in the metropolis newly "under the care of the Commissioners of Public Works and Buildings" and by adding the additional strictures that no future "public statue" could be erected "without the written assent of the Commissioners."[9] (Previously, the national government had not been explicitly responsible for statues *en plein air*.) This act and a subsequent 1862 audit of public statues in the capital made many pay new attention to old statues while also raising trenchant (if never exactly answered) questions about the criteria for what made a "public" statue. ("We are led to inquire what constitutes ownership in a statue?" wrote a commentator for the *Saturday Review;* "If George II in Golden Square is public property, why not William III in St. James Square?") The "public statue" was now a piece of public property but also a potential index of national achievement.

In the same space of years, discussions of plans to memorialize the Duke of Wellington and Prince Albert after their deaths (1852; 1861), and the installation of a set of controversial monuments—including two in Trafalgar Square to Henry Havelock (1861) ("a short legged hydrocephalus abortion") and Charles Napier (1855) ("the worst piece of sculpture in England")—gave rise to fervent debates about sculptural merits in popular periodicals, and these debates contributed further to a

widespread concern that foreigners would look to England's most prominent spaces and laugh, having "come to the conclusion that we have no artists equal to a great work."[10] Ongoing discussions across the 1850s and early 1860s about whether to relocate the National Gallery to a more protected area (to save its works from the grubby populace), and whether to move the Royal Academy out of the National Gallery building, followed the grand nationalist flourish of the Crystal Palace and accompanied the International Exhibition of 1862—where sculpture had its own court, but where good and bad were "jumbled together"—to force yet more attention to Britain's statues old and new, and to bring about more self-interrogation regarding questions of British achievement, national image, and the democratic ownership of art.[11] A series of unsuccessful or much-derided contests to design monuments and memorials for public spaces were then a particular locus of despair, and a host of critics found themselves in agreement that "committees of gentlemen and admirers [we]re not to be depended upon for public effigies—at least not of any merit."[12] Consensus achieved, a fear ensued that "artists of eminence" would "declin[e] entering a competition presided over by committees without knowledge or taste."[13]

By the mid-1860s, it might be the case that plenty of those commentators who turned their gaze to Britain's public sculpture found the view discouraging, and it was widely allowed that the "inventory of public statues in London" was "not a creditable one."[14] Older existing statues were seen as lackluster, while new ones were seen as lacking. Francis Turner Palgrave wrote that many perceived a "marked" "deterioration" in the nation's capacity for statue-making, and he suggested further that concern over this subject was so frequently reiterated as to become "a sort of common place in literature and in Parliament."[15] But that a wide and ranging set of people were taking increasing notice of statues, that there was in fact a growth in such notice, is hard to refute.[16]

It was at least as clear that there was a growing volume of commentary on what was seen as a growing volume of sculpture, and that already, by the early 1860s, a sense of "sprouting" sculptures was widely in circulation. The various formal and informal audits that took place after the passage of the Public Statues Act, and the press around contests for, and unveilings of, new memorials, made even casual onlookers aware of just how many statues of fallen leaders marked the capital, while at the same time, more discerning critics entertained an increasing feeling that spaces already full of statues were filling to capacity. Indeed, in April 1862 a writer for the *Edinburgh Review* found Westminster Abbey to have

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attained an absolute "want of space for more monuments," in containing "no less than sixty-two recumbent statues of life size . . . forty-six portrait statues . . . and ninety-three busts of medallion portraits . . . crowded into this sacred edifice."[17]

There then came an apparent flood of new statues. The same appetite for expressing personhood and selfhood through an acquisition of *things*—which many have examined in and around the Victorian interior—took an open-air sculptural turn as a new class of middle-class patrons sought to memorialize themselves and their loved ones in the streets, and in a range of periodicals there was frequent attention to Victorians' ongoing delight in commemorating the fallen great, but there was attention, too, to their newer delight in simply commemorating the fallen.[18] As Martina Droth, Jason Edwards, and Michael Hatt have noted, in the Victorian period, newly, "an industrial middle class of inventors, scientists, professionals and philanthropists" joined the ruling elites among those frozen by appreciation, and commentators came to realize that this opened a door onto proliferation of a potentially vast scale.[19] As a critic for *The Sheffield Daily Telegraph* wrote:

> Hardly a statesman of any prominence or a soldier of any distinction passes away but a "whip" is made for subscriptions for a marble or a bronze memorial of him. Philanthropists, engineers, lawyers, doctors, successful merchants, arrive with somewhat less frequency at posthumous honours, but still a considerable sprinkling of these are mounted each year on pedestals.[20] One writer estimated that "probably there has been no period since the Roman Empire in which so many statues have been erected as in the first sixty years of the century," and his remarks underscore the degree to which a "statue mania" was already well underway in the century's early decades.[21] Another writer observed that "the number of statues, especially in London, is increasing so rapidly that the time will soon come when no good site will be available for new comers."[22]

By 1872, an advertisement for a sculpture-to-order company would suggest that statuary proliferation was so prevalent as to have generated a veritable industry, and it trumpeted that "the largely increased desire which has of late years taken place for the supply of works of monumental masonry . . . has at length become so urgently apparent that Messrs. Searcy and Drake have been compelled . . . to make considerable additions to their already extensive works."[23] There were plenty of observers who celebrated this surge, including a writer for the *Saturday Review* who suggested that with all of London's building, "Innumerable niches sigh to be filled . . . the new Embankment presents an unexpected and

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grand opportunity for . . . decoration—and, above all, our noble bridges."[24] But strains of serious concern were also being sounded, and a turn to Butler's Erewhonian vision helps us define these more clearly.

2. Butler and Statuary Pestilence

Indeed, looking now to the world of *Erewhon*, we can see that Samuel Butler (1835–1902) poses a set of diversely amusing problems for his subjects and their statues, and that, in an apt reflection of the investments of his time, a widespread interest in sculpture is frequently in evidence in Erewhon itself and creates many targets for humor. Early on, Butler seems to subtly mock a British failure to care properly for art, and he has Higgs evince outsize surprise to see well-tended shrines by the roadside.[25] Later, the comedy becomes sharper, and among other ridiculous features, it is the wealthy who are more likely to have statues made, so, much like contemporary Victorians, ordinary Erewhonians must put up "often enough with some wordy windbag whose cowardice had cost the country untold loss in blood and money" (128). Erewhon's statues are "generally foisted on the public by some coterie that was trying to exalt itself in exalting someone else" (128).[26] And its statues also tend toward misrepresentation because "If a person is ugly he does not . . . model for his own statue . . . [but] gets the handsomest of his friends to sit for him." Moreover, though women will sit for their own monuments, they "expect to be idealized" (127–28). There is much here that obtains to the novel's well-known larger ridicule of customs, though Elinor Shaffer's suggestion (made about Butler's larger oeuvre), that he is prone to "scathing and often hilarious critique of the institutions of art," is of course also pertinent, as is her more particular claim that *Erewhon* offers "a plea for the sweeping away of the mediocre public patronage of the past to make space for innovation and a new birth of art."[27]

Even so, to focus too much on custom or patronage is to miss that Butler clearly reserves his most developed statuary commentary and satire for problems of proliferation, and it is consequently to miss gaining insight into the nature not only of his, but also of his peers', more quantitative worries.[28] We learn that Erewhonians' insatiable appetite for statues has at various points driven them to create so many frozen figures that the results sometimes interfere with life itself, and that in the present, statues have become so rife in private homes that "the multitude . . . [is] beginning to be felt as an encumbrance in almost every family." Even more threatening: in former times, the public spaces of the city

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became "so overrun" with "pests," or statues of figures of various standing, "that there was no getting about, and people were worried beyond endurance by having their attention called at every touch and turn to something, which, when they had attended to it, they found not to concern them." The bad statues begat more bad statues, and the sculpted figures were left to "loaf about in squares and in corners of streets in all weathers, without any attempt at artistic sanitation," until finally the "evil" attained "such a pitch that the people rose and with indiscriminate fury destroyed good and bad alike" (127–29). Much in all of this is, of course, outlandish. But it all also embeds and articulates two areas of contemporary concern.

Butler's initial presentation of the multiplying statues, and his imagination of stopped streets, reflect back the fact that his peers fussed often, and in high key, about what I will call problems of *sheer quantity*, and they fretted furiously about the visual and physical impact of simply or literally having too many public sculptures.[29] They worried, as Butler did (or affected to), about impediments to urban flow, and they had nightmares too, about statues themselves suffering in crowded conditions, or about pedestrians being forced into rubbernecking. Indeed, though some might appreciate the pause of meditation an encounter with a public memorial might invite, writing, like guidebook author Elihu Buritt, that "It is a sight which a thoughtful man will carry in his memory for a life time to see the . . . life size statues of English heroes and sages turned serenely towards the pulpit [of Westminster Abbey]," there were plenty who were far less sanguine.[30] "We want no Marquis of Granbys to block up our streets as they do our old inn signs," fumed one critic, grumpily.[31] "If the statue mania lasts we shall have figures of political 'martyrs' and heroes in fighting attitude in every thoroughfare," wrote another.[32] Critics found that it was increasingly possible to imagine a literal blockade in the streets. Or they imagined a crowding out of them.[33] In a letter to the editor of the *Morning Advertiser,* George Ellis observed that everyone might want a statue of Shakespeare in their locality. But, he added, despite "some talk about one in the City . . . they have not room enough for themselves on the ground."[34] There were myriad expressions of a more general concern that, as Butler put it, "attention" might be called "at every touch and turn" by figures "found not to concern" the passersby, or that the passersby might be kept from simple physical movement, or even passage through life, by sheer statuary volume.

Yet as Butler also shows, and goes on to show more clearly in his developing treatment of the statues, on top of these concerns—ramifying them or being ramified by them—his contemporaries then had more philosophical and aesthetic concerns about what I will call a problem of *bad quantity*, and if anything, these concerns could feel to them (as, apparently, to Butler) even more pressing. The first "solution" to the plague of statues in Erewhon's past is, as we have seen, wholesale destruction, the casting down of "good and bad alike" to effect a return to open streets and open society. We learn that in getting rid of the statues, Erewhonians give themselves an aesthetic blank slate, and having done away with any corrupting examples or sources of bad influence, they can remake art from the ground up. Accordingly, when memorialization becomes irresistible again, a new generation of sculptors at first do better: "Not knowing how to make them, and having no academies to mislead them, the earliest sculptors of this period thought things out for themselves and again produced works that were full of interest." The new sculptors, not slaves to economic concerns or elaborate patronage structures, are motivated by something higher than "mere attempts to do for some man or woman what an animal-stuffer does more successfully for a dog, or bird, or pike" (128). They continue to come nearer and nearer to aesthetic "perfection."

But eventually there is a tipping point; after they "reac[h] a perfection hardly, if at all inferior to that of several hundred years earlier . . . the same evils recu[r]"; and Higgs is driven to pronounce a truism that statues can only ever end up as "deformities" if they are made as part of a program of patronage and exaltation. Yet "as soon as the art of making them at all has become widely practiced," they can never be made under another guise. "I know not why," says Higgs, but "the noblest arts . . . soon reach a height from which they begin to decline," and once they have begun to fail, "it is a pity they cannot be knocked on the head for an art is like a living organism. . . . There is no way of making an aging art young again" (128). It is evident that Higgs is eager to apply to art an evolutionary thesis that Butler more famously has him investigate in relation to machines: the idea that stasis is perhaps impossible, and that forms are always straining toward evolution—or devolution.[35] It is likewise evident that part of the imagined mechanism of decay ties to problems of popular commission and curation—the more and more kinds of people take an interest in statues, the worse things get.[36] Some part of Butler's treatment here directly recalls the commentary of a critic for the *Edinburgh Review* that "in democratic ages the

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monuments of art tend to become more numerous and less important, and that the arts themselves are prone to sink from the loftier range of imagination and feeling to the trivial and mean details of real life."[37] But the role that statuary quantity itself, or "making . . . widely practiced," plays in bringing about decline cannot be overstated. If, on one hand, quantity leads to logistical challenges, on the other, it leads to loss of artistic vision.

From discussions of neoclassicism, we are familiar with the idea that many in the nineteenth century inherited a concern that having too much old art around might be paralyzing to modern creativity.[38] When it came to public statues, this could manifest especially as a disgust at the habit of putting modern subjects of commemoration in "the ludicrous dress of the last century" to produce a "learned mockery."[39] Tracking a variant of neoclassical discourse into discussions around the museum, Jonah Siegel identifies a slightly different concern around volume: that amidst a "surfeit" of art and artifacts, the wrong things might come to be valued and imitated.[40] As Siegel suggests, looking especially to Ruskin, there were fears that having too many bad statues might choke out attention to good ones or promote bad mimesis. For public statues, too, these concerns held good, and one contemporary fretted that Parliament had "funded too many statues to men of all sorts of character" to make its proposed monument to Prince Albert meaningful, while another worried that showing inferior public sculptures would invariably invite their recapitulation: that terrible statues would essentially breed with one another like rats or lice, to yield a London landscape "infested by bad statues."[41] Worries about glut and diminished or improper value could also take on special shape in a colonial context: a commentator for *Dublin Weekly Nation* complained that "[o]ur own opinion is that there are too many statues of foreigners in Dublin . . . whilst none of the great men of their own race . . . are thought worthy of a statue."[42] His concern was that "too many" idols of the English were effectually stanching the creation of works of Irish veneration.[43]

Yet in Butler's imagination there can seem to be a more basic, and hence potentially more unsettling, problem in evidence. Bad statues do produce more bad statues; sculptors do take the wrong examples from what is on offer. But still, after all of the statues in Erewhon are razed, quality declines in proportion to new creation. It is as though the problem isn't the surfeit of the past; it is the drive to make and to make multiply itself. When it comes to the novel's machines, one school of Erewhonian philosophers holds that having any machines will lead to

damnation—to the end of mankind; the machines, as Sue Zemka paraphrases, will inevitably "reduc[e] the members of th[e] master class to the status of slaves."[44] With the novel's statues—at least after the phase of glutted streets and arrested motion—the woe produced by generation and then multiplicity is artistic decay rather than mortal peril, but still things are not so great.[45] As with the machines, no matter the starting quality, no matter the intention, once there is a sufficiency, once there is growing production, then there are inherently problems, and the effect is terribly stultifying if not directly suffocating. Increased making and decreased quality and significance are seen to go directly, causally, together. And we see a persistent fear that once statue-making is "widely practiced," once there is an "encumbrance" of statues, or a "numerous" cast of sculptures, much might be lost.

3. Prevention and Beyond

There may be a solution in prevention, or at least Butler imagines one: he has the Erewhonians try to stop surplus before it starts, and in order to avert a "second iconoclastic fury," they pass an act that no statues of public figures can "be allowed to remain unbroken for more than fifty years" unless a jury made up of members of the public allows the statues a second term of "life" (130). In practice, in the world of the novel, this means that many fewer sculptures are made, and we learn that more often than not, "subscribers t[ake] to paying the sculptor for the statue . . . on condition that he . . . *not* make it" (italics mine); instead, "a small inscription is let into the pavement where the statue would have stood" (130).

Keeping quite close to Butler's satiric vision, some of his contemporaries, too, called for a moratorium on making, and they responded both to physical concerns about stoppage in the streets, and to fears of cultural debasement or aesthetic distraction and decay, by arguing that "a man may be wise and good, he may be learned and brilliant, and have taken an active part in public life; but it does not follow that he should have a statue."[46] They imagined that some kinds of planned statues could be canceled; they considered how to keep subnotable people from being memorialized; and they considered how to suppress "courtly sycophancy or party enthusiasm" from yielding monuments of only mild notables—or from further "desecrat[ing]"sites like Westminster Abbey with memorials to people notable only for such questionable achievements as "a poem on the qualities of cider."[47] Sir John Franklin had been a "gallant commander," allowed one critic, but "he was a stout

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middle aged man, and figured as such, in a naval uniform, his statue would be neither useful nor ornamental but on the contrary a grievous eyesore . . . except upon the top of a column like Nelson's, where its ugliness would be out of sight."[48] "Mediocrity should have no lasting memorial," wrote another critic, now for *Reynolds Newspaper*; "[i]f the statue mania which widely obtains amongst us be not abated, we shall shortly hear proposals for erecting bronze or marble monuments [not only to Albert but also] each male member of his illustrious family, not excepting the Marquis of Lorne and perhaps the equally eminent John Brown."[49] Keeping new statues, but especially new bad statues, or new statues of less than worthy (or less than attractive) people from being created, it was clearly hoped, might put the brakes on all the problems statuary surplus might bring about at once. (At the very least, argued the author of an April 1862 piece on "Public Monuments," it might be worth taking a beat before creation; in a modest proposal that may have inspired Butler's fifty-year time horizon for statuary evaluation, he suggested that no statue be made until fifty years had passed after a given person's death: "Contemporary monuments are apt to partake too much of the zeal of adulation or the poignancy of personal regret.")[50]

It seemed possible, however, to a more anxious camp of commentators, and based on past precedent, that mere prevention would not be enough, and then, as seems very likely in looking to Erewhon's currently clogged houses and its future prospects, the only answer might be repeated destruction.[51] In considering all the English "heroes" memorialized by statue in Dublin, a commentator for the *Dublin Weekly Nation* wrote that he had "no objection to see the greater part of them removed."[52] In a satirical piece giving voice to the "twin unlikenesses" of Napier and Havelock in Trafalgar Square, *Punch* had an animate Havelock feeling "disgrace" and pleading: "When will revived iconoclasm o'erturn / These bronze and marble monsters from our ways?" for "Those that have died, like me, firm at their guns, / Never looked to stand thus in pillory after."[53] The same writer for the *Athenaeum* who cited an "infestation" of bad statues urged the House of Commons not only to cancel an order for a memorial, as it had just done, but also to remove more statues (as it had just removed a statue of Robert Peel): "As to the abolitions of the figures of Peel and the Prince, we regard them as victories of Art-criticism over ignorance, obstinacy and personal feeling."[54] And in yet another takedown of superfluous statues, a writer rued the day's "statue mania" and urged that he would "look upon it

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as a real boon were most of the public monuments which disgrace the metropolis to meet the fate of the Vendome column."[55] For a society that had spent the first half of the nineteenth century terrified of a homegrown version of the French revolution, the references to "revived iconoclasm" and "the fate of the Vendome column," and the cheers at the "abolitions of the figures of Peel and Prince," might seem surprising. But surprising or no, we see here an undiluted feeling that one might need to keep destroying again and again. Only then could life and art proceed as one would wish.

4. (Re)Imagining Generative Destruction

In June 2020 Black Lives Matter protests broke out across the world, and as protesters in the Unites States began to topple Confederate memorials, British protesters found their own statues to target and promptly landed an 1895 memorial to philanthropist—and slave trader—Edward Colston in Bristol's harbor, while covering a 1905 bronze memorial to Queen Victoria in Leeds with the graffitied words "racist," "colonizer," "justice," and "BLM." Their memorable actions led to a fervent set of debates in ensuing days and weeks, and in forums stretching from the *Sun* and the *Daily Mail* to the *London Review of Books* and the *New Yorker,* commentators from across the political spectrum argued over whether the statues merited their fates (the right-wing tabloids gleefully pointed out that Queen Victoria hadn't taken the throne until three years after abolition) and whether the protesters had defamed or defaced (or debusted) history.[56] Notably, whether looking left or looking right, the heated discussion revealed that much conventional thinking about public statues has long assumed a "more is more" shape, and it also became clear that it has long been a matter of popular presumption—an article of faith, even, among those who study art and artifact—that all past works should be preserved, whether in the name of honoring "heroes" or of promoting "genuine debate and historical education," and whether on their original pedestals or recontextualized elsewhere.[57]

Yet it may be that as the dust of depedestalization settles, some of these present-day pieties about the endless protection of public sculpture are in for a more ranging reexamination—or even a reversal—and that we should be more concerned to preserve the past in a different sense. Arguing for rehoming displaced statues in museums and other educational contexts, Simon Schama has written that "statues are revelations

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—not about the historical figures they represent, but about the mindset of those who commissioned them"—and this is surely true. But his formulation leaves out of the story a whole cast of past onlookers, whose power lay not in purchasing or in producing, but in imagination, and the ambivalence with which they themselves approached their age's creations stands ready to be instructive.

The concerns a plurality of interested Victorians had about statuary permanence weren't, it is true, typically founded in fears of racial justice or injustice, or questions of social value and example, as are our concerns today. Their anxieties about a future of tricky logistics or bad art were very different from ours now about bad ethics and bad actors. Still, their frequently surprising lack of sanctity about their statues, and their capacious audition of these forms' potential erasure, destruction, and deposition, can seem like a breath of fresh air, and not least because their debates and discussions upend our expectations around what might be considered conservative and what might be considered radical. Between the iconoclasm of the French Revolution and that of the present, there stood an important forgotten chapter, when pulling down a statue was as likely to seem culturally protective as it was to seem revolutionary, and when the possibilities for discussion and imagined action, accordingly, were sometimes broader. It is a chapter whose ideas and conflicts may bear meaningfully on present-day dilemmas.

As synonymous as we commonly take the Victorians to be with making problematic memorial statues (Colston, Sir Francis Drake) or becoming the subjects of them (Queen Victoria, Cecil Rhodes), they were in fact full of lively debate themselves about whether to tear their public statues and memorials down or to leave them up. Many even among the monument-mad Victorians believed that there might come a time when statues that sought to recall the past could adversely affect life in the present. And precisely where they defy our conventional wisdom, they offer us the possibility of rethinking our own relationship with the monumental past.

"That which we observe to be taken as a matter of course by those around us, we take as a matter of course ourselves" observes Higgs in *Erewhon*. When it comes to the statues of the past, it is perhaps past time that even (or especially) those most art- and history-devoted among us make our own reckoning with what we have come to take as a "matter of course," and past time, too, to try on some fraction of the thought experiments that the Victorians themselves did about the idea of creative and generative destruction.

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Notes

1. Butler, *Erewhon*, 66–67. All subsequent references to this edition are noted parenthetically in the text.
2. Patrick Parrinder notes that Peter Raby reads the statues as "a representation of the dreadful gods that man has set to guard received tradition and convention," while A. Dwight Culler reads them as a version of the Ten Commandments. See Raby, *Samuel Butler*, 127; Culler, "The Darwinian Revolution and Literary Form," 234; cited in Patrick Parrinder, "Entering Dystopia, Entering Erewhon," 16. Parrinder himself reads them as a key to Erewhon's "abolition of machinery and its cult of health, strength and physical beauty"; he also suggests that the statues play a crucial generic role in Butler's dystopia, acting as a threshold between the known world and the dystopic space (17).
3. Elinor Shaffer offers a comprehensive overview of Butler's art career in *Erewhons of the Eye*. Curiously, Shaffer writes of *Erewhon*'s treatment of art that "Like the rest of [Butler's] writings on art, it has received less comment than his insights onto religion and technology or his ingenious reversal of sin and disease"—but then she herself gives the novel's treatment of statues only a scanty read (37).
4. Peter Mudford comments on both areas of engagement and writes that Butler's "attempt to apply the idea of Darwinian evolution to the machines and to extend the relevance of the survival of the fittest from the biological to the mechanical, reflects not merely the influence of Darwin's theory but a wide-spread fear about the nature of progress in mid-nineteenth-century industrial society" (Mudford, "Introduction," 14). Butler was famously driven to write "Darwin among the Machines"—the essay that became a source text for "The Book of the Machines" in *Erewhon*—after reading *Origin of Species* (Mudford, "Introduction," 7). From early on, as Chris Danta suggests, contemporaries read the novel as an engagement with Darwin's thinking, even if there was some debate about the nature of the engagement (Danta, "Panpsychism and Speculative Evolutionary Aesthetics," 288).
5. As recently as 2016, Angela Dunstan has suggested that "the place of sculpture in Victorian culture" remains "rarely interrogated." Dunstan, "Reading Victorian Sculpture," 3. As she suggests, it was only in 2014 that museums—the Yale Center for British Art and

the Tate Britain—hosted the "first major museum exhibition dedicated to sculpture produced during the reign of Queen Victoria in *Sculpture Victorious: Art in an Age of Invention, 1837–1901*" (3–4).

6. Getsy, *Body Doubles*, 2, 4. Alex Potts also suggests the last decades of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth were "the age of public monuments" (Potts, "Eros in Piccadilly Circus," 107).
7. I give a short overview of issues raised by the museums in the Victorian period's early years in *The Victorian Novel and the Space of Art*, 65–67.
8. "Public Statues and Monuments," *Art-Union*, 89–91. The author noted with approval rising attendance at the National Gallery and hoped that other museums and galleries would open their doors more widely in order that "true taste would be more generally diffused in the land." At the same time, s/he argued for protecting the original art-training mission of the Royal Academy rather than forcing it to be a free institution (90).
9. "Abstracts of Important Public Acts," *British Almanac* (1855). The act also made the desecration of statues into a misdemeanor. Statues suddenly under public care included the statue of Nelson in Trafalgar Square, two statues of Wellington, and a number of statues of royals.
10. The closing quotation is from "The Story of a Spoilt Life," *Cornhill Magazine*, 698. In 1869 one critic wrote: "As to the Great Duke, the controversies concerning his statues have been almost interminable" ("Our Public Statues," *Chambers's Journal*, 216). As Benedict Read notes, after Albert died "statues and monuments were set up all over the country to a scale and extent that was unprecedented" (*Victorian Sculpture*, 95). A *Punch* wag gave supposed voice to the subject of the controversial monument to Havelock: "Although a Christian I was not a Guy / My head and body were in due proportion / I was not that which [artist] Behnes sets on high—a short legged hydrocephalus Abortion" ("Havelock's Humble Petition," *Punch*). The quotation about Napier is from "Our Public Sculpture," *Art-Journal*, 98. The *Saturday Review* singled out Havelock's and Napier's statues as particularly problematic in its takedown of public monuments: "[W]hat right have the respective admirers of Napier, Havelock, and Jenner to fasten upon the Board of Works . . . funds for preserving the three last and most

wretched statues which have disgraced the public taste of the country?" ("Public Statues and Monuments," *Saturday Review*, 77).

11. Anthony Trollope was one of many commentators to call for removing the gallery to the country, the better to preserve its works (Trollope, *The New Zealander*, 204–5). Proposals to move the Royal Academy were accompanied by questions about its function, and in Parliament the idea of having the academy somehow responsible for or involved in judging public monuments was discussed ("National Gallery Commission Moved For," *Parliamentary Debates*, 607–8). Indeed, suggested Lord Elcho on the floor of Parliament, while debating the removal of the academy: "If there was one thing more generally admitted than another in this country, it was that our public monuments and statues were egregious failures"; could not the academy "be made useful in improving and developing public taste?" The International Exhibition had a sculpture court, though some, like Francis Turner Palgrave, found that there "the good and bad are jumbled together with embarrassing profusion" (Palgrave, *Handbook*, 92). J. Beavington Atkinson was among those who came to a more positive verdict on British sculpture, arguing that "Anglo-Saxon works contrast not unfavorably with the foreign productions just passed in review" (Atkinson, "The International Exhibition, 1862," 215).
12. "Fine Art Gossip," *The Athenaeum*, 24. As a critic for *Chambers's Journal* wrote, when it came to even well-composed committees, "the upshot is that some of them check the rest and are checked in turn, until a general checkmate is effected" ("Our Public Statues," 315).
13. "The Story of a Spoilt Life," *Cornhill Magazine*, 698.
14. "Public Statues and Monuments," *Saturday Review*, 77. The second quotation is from "Public Monuments," *Edinburgh Review*. Following the audit, the act was extended to cover more than its initial crop of fifteen statues, but some works remained outside of its purview, and questions arose accordingly ("Public Statues in London," *Parliamentary Debates*, 1085–88. "As a London Valhalla," wrote the *Saturday Review*, "we must say that this list of notables in marble and bronze is sadly deficient. It may be a question whether in a climate such as this, open-air statues are other than a mistake" ("Public Statues and Monuments," *Saturday Review,* 77).
15. As Francis Haskell suggests, by midcentury there was a concern about "retrogression" more broadly in discussions of English art (Haskell, *Rediscoveries in Art*, 55). See also Palgrave, "Public Statues in

London," 525–27. For Palgrave, indeed, this reflected a decline in Britain's sculpture full stop: "Sculpture remains the forlorn hope of modern art," he wrote elsewhere. "In lieu of speaking to men's hearts, it has sunk to the job of the competition, the toy of the patron, or the wonder of the parish-clerk" (Palgrave, *Handbook*, 91). Palgrave was not alone in his poor estimation of the state of the country's sculpture more generally. In a report on sculpture at the Royal Academy, a writer for *The Era* rued that "[a] love of decoration takes the lead" and that a turn to "pictorial taste" crowded out attention to and pursuit of good sculpture accordingly ("Sculpture at the Royal Academy," *The Era*, 6).

16. Bearing out Haskell's remarks, a review of a guide to London proposed that "the metropolis of the British Empire, with its incalculable wealth, its energetic population, and its cultivated intelligence, contains scarcely an edifice or a monument of modern construction of which we have not reason to be ashamed" ("Public Monuments," *Edinburgh Review*, 276). Meanwhile, a piece in the *Building* News suggested that "Where to hide our public statues ought to be the question the authorities should ask themselves if they have a perception of the ridiculous, and a regard for external appearances" ("The Prince Consort's Memorial," *Building News*, 79). This piece found an echo in an observation by *Punch:* "We cannot make a statue that is not ridiculous ourselves" ("The Wellington Model Monument," *Punch*, 168).
17. "Public Monuments."
18. I am grateful to one of the anonymous readers of this essay for pointing out parallels here between the Victorians' rapacious sculptural appetites and their lusty appetite for material goods more generally, as critics like Benjamin and Deborah Cohen have elaborated them. Cf. Cohen's discussion of aesthetic crowding in *Household Goods*, 34ff. Of course, the artistic turn was not only to sculptures. Middle-class patrons were also newly rapacious patrons of painted portraits (Gilmore, *The Victorian Novel,* 38–39).
19. Droth, Edwards, and Hatt, "Sculpture and Commemoration," 340.
20. "Summary," *Sheffield Daily Telegraph*, September 6, 1864.
21. "Public Monuments," *Edinburgh Review.* Deborah Cherry is among the modern-day scholars to use the term "statue mania" to describe the Victorians' enthusiasm for statues ("Statues in the Square," 683).
22. "Summary," *Sheffield Daily Telegraph.* One version of this problem was framed by an observer who listed twelve different figures

commemorated in St. Stephen's Gallery and then said that about them "there has been no end of grumbling; because neither in this Gallery nor in Westminster Hall is there a statue of Oliver Cromwell, which, as regards our national history is something like leaving out one whole section from Hume" ("Our Public Statues," 217). The author's invocation of quantity to frame their concern is striking.

23. "Monumental Sculpture," *Nottingham Journal*. The language of the advertiser must always be taken with grains of salt, but this ad was followed immediately by one from another company that claimed to be "the only works in the midland counties solely for memorial purposes," so the described market was presumably not entirely the stuff of puff.
24. "Public Statues and Monuments," *Saturday Review*, 77. David Getsy ties some of the "statue mania" that continued into the 1870s and 1880s specifically to the building of new infrastructure: "Monuments to engineers were erected throughout the city, and development projects used sculpture to beautify or mask new kinds of urban sites such as underground stations" (Getsy, *Body Doubles*, 4).
25. Comments Higgs: "My hosts always bowed their heads as they passed one of these shrines, and it shocked me to see statues that had no apparent object beyond the chronicling of some unusual excellence or beauty, receive so serious a homage" (78). Whether or not the British could be made to care for art—or whether they could even physically take care of it—was a running concern throughout the Victorian period.
26. In the same passage, Butler also satirizes the patronage of sculpture, writing that often the point of commissioning a statue "had no other inception than desire on the part of some member of the coterie to find a job for a young sculptor to whom his daughter was engaged." This echoes a critical observation by Francis Turner Palgrave that "the sculptor works—not like the painter, for the sympathy and interest of thousands—but for the personal fancy of a patron or the conventional order of a committee" (Palgrave, *Handbook*, 85).
27. Gooch, "Figures of Nineteenth-Century Biopower," 55. Gooch ties Butler's idea on custom to Walter Bagehot's imagination of the "Cake of Custom." Peter Mudford writes that the "common enemy" in *Erewhon* is "blind adherence to attitudes inculcated in childhood or handed down from past generations" ("Introduction," 13). See also Shaffer, *Erewhons of the Eye*, xvii, 37.

28. Thomas Remington tries to make the case that the "Rights of Animals" and "Rights of Vegetables" sections that Butler added to a revised version of the novel are distinctive from the rest of the novel because in these sections, Butler "parodies conven[tion]" rather than "reversing" it. This is perhaps debatable, but the same may be said of the treatment of statues; Butler's satire around the statues works through exaggeration rather than through opposition. See Remington, "'The Mirror Up to Nature,'" 48.
29. It is worth noting here that Sue Zemka reads Erewhon's "cultural landscape" as "a pastiche of temporal signifiers" (Zemka, "*Erewhon*," 447).
30. Buritt, *A Walk from London*, 49.
31. "London Statues," *Meath People*, 6.
32. "Ireland," *Kendal Mercury*.
33. Some critics also argued that the statues themselves would suffer from crowding. "When the crowded character of our streets is taken into consideration with other features which make people anxious to pass through them as rapidly as possible," wrote one commentator, "it will be evident that a statue is not only out of place, but also that it appears to every disadvantage when erected in a public thoroughfare" ("The Prince Consort's Memorial," 79). Deborah Cherry calls attention to Freud's consideration of a version of this problem. In a lecture, Freud used the statue gazer as a metaphor for the neurotic, and he wondered, "what should we think of a Londoner who paused to-day in deep melancholy before the memorial of Queen Eleanor's funeral instead of going about his business?" (Freud, *Standard Edition*, 9:11, 16–17). Cited in Cherry, "Statues in the Square," 684. Alex Potts notes that in late-century debates about public monuments, there could be manifest "anxieties about the uncontrollability of public spaces in the metropolis" riven through the discussion (Potts, "Eros in Piccadilly," 111).
34. Ellis, "The London Statue Mania," *Morning Advertiser*.
35. Elinor Shaffer writes about Butler's larger interests in what he called "The Decline of Art" in his *Alps and Sanctuaries*, and she suggests that "Butler's merit lay in understanding that any attempt to ape the past would fail" (Shaffer, *Erewhons of the Eye*, 137).
36. Shaffer's argument that the novel makes a strong case for the "sweeping away of the mediocre public patronage of the past" is founded especially on this passage (Shaffer, *Erewhons of the Eye*, 37).
37. "Public Monuments," *Edinburgh Review*, 276.

38. In 1976 Haskell referred to this line of scholarly thinking as so prevalent that he felt "no need . . . to do more than mention the point" (Haskell, *Rediscoveries in Art*, 45).
39. "The Proposed Statue to Sir John Franklin," *Nottingham Journal*. Palgrave summarized his thinking when he wrote "the very best modern-antique bears its sentence in the simple fact that it is modern-antique" (Palgrave, *Handbook*, 89).
40. Siegel treats this subject throughout *Desire and Excess* but is particularly sharp on this subject in the contrast he draws between Ruskin and Hazlitt in chapter 6 (194–97).
41. "The Prince Consort's Memorial"; "Public Statues and Public Monuments," *Art-Union*, 89–91; "Fine Art Gossip," 24.
42. "College Green," *Dublin Weekly Nation*.
43. Butler picks up many strands from these ideas, and he echoes neoclassical thinking especially in Higgs's critique of how the Erewhonians "let their poor cold grimy colourless heroes and heroines loaf about in squares and in corners of streets . . . without any effort at artistic sanitation—for there was no provision for burying their dead works of art . . . whereby statues that had been sufficiently assimilated, so as to form part of the residuary impression of the country might be carried out of the way" (129).
44. Zemka, "*Erewhon*," 464.
45. The statues and machines can in fact be seen to operate in a similar way; the statues too would seem to represent an extension of Butler's larger worrying of the categories of the organic and the inorganic or the inanimate and the human. Indeed, Sue Zemka has suggested that the novel "all along" foreshadows "the demise of even a biologically stable identity for the human species," and if, in the words of Joshua Gooch, the novel's chapters on machines "trace evolutionary processes that allow organic life and inorganic life to become problematically indeterminate" (Gooch, "Figures," 66), then rather more literally than the machines, the statues confuse the categories of the "organic" and the "inorganic"—they take on animated activities like "loaf[ing]" about, and when Erewhonians have their attention arrested by the statues, they seem to literally confuse the statues with living figures (Zemka, "*Erewhon*," 465). Zemka more fully suggests that "Butler's playful inquiry into the evolutionary future of the machine-species expressed the loss of certainty that attends an expanding category of humanness" (463). For Zemka, the collapse of the human as a stable category has much to do not only with

debates emerging out of Darwin but also with specific developments in the field of ethnography (451). Chris Danta writes at length about Butler's investment in panpsychism and suggests that Butler had a sustained commitment to trying to "imaginatively inhabit nonhuman objects so as to imbue them with subjective experience and a moral platform of their own." He also notes that Butler posed the stone as one such inanimate object, worthy of imaginative inhabitation. It is interesting to consider the stone statues also by these lights (Danta, "Panpsychism," 296).

46. "Summary," *Sheffield Daily Telegraph*. This critic was echoed by another in "Public Monuments" who wrote: "Far too many statues are erected and this at a time when less need than ever exists for raising them." Wrote *Punch*, with uncharacteristic literalness, of a proposed memorial to Wellington: "We have too many statues of the Duke already" ("The Wellington Model Monument," *Punch*, 168). I am speaking mostly about London here, but the problem was not specific to London, and outrage in Dublin in 1864 over plans to give a statue of Prince Albert pride of place on College Green found commentators noting that there were "too many statues in honour of Foreigners in Dublin, and we have no objection to see the greater part of them removed" ("College Green," *Dublin Weekly Nation*). David Getsy points out that "rapidly expanding northern towns . . . engaged in ambitious sculptural programs" while in the later decades of the nineteenth century, especially, "British sculpture was also distributed across the world in conjunction with the sweeping expansion of the Empire" (Getsy, *Body Doubles*, 4).
47. "Public Monuments"; "Monumental Sculpture: Westminster Abbey and St. Paul's," 290.
48. "The Proposed Statue to Sir John Franklin."
49. "Justifiable Vandalism," *Reynolds's Newspaper*.
50. "Public Monuments." A piece in the *Art Journal* took up a very similar position: "We should have better sculptures if statues of our great men were postponed until their contemporary generations had passed away" ("Our Public Sculpture," 97–98).
51. In the novel, notes Ella Mershon, as in Victorian organicism writ large, "all organisms . . . can be viewed as living machines dependent upon the vitalizing effects of dying matter," and we could say that the personified statues are no exception; for good ones to come about, old ones must be destroyed. In the discourse of Butler's

contemporaries, a position not far distant was embraced (Mershon, "Decay, Scale," 276).

52. "College Green," *Dublin Weekly Nation*.
53. "Havelock's Humble Petition," *Punch*.
54. "Fine Art Gossip," *The Athenaeum*, 24.
55. "Justifiable Vandalism," *Reynolds's Newspaper*.
56. These tabloids, of course, missed the point that protesters might also have been taking fully legitimate issue with Victoria's deep involvement and investment in imperialism.
57. Schama, "History Is Better Served." Schama was one of many to argue that objectionable works might be rehoused and recontextualized in a museum or other context of display. Consider also the reported position of the Museum of London (Styles, "Black Lives Matter").

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