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 **Samuel Butler's *Life and Habit* and *The Way of All Flesh*: Traumatic Evolution**

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

**Samuel Butler's *Life and Habit* and *The Way of All Flesh*:
Traumatic Evolution**

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Samuel Butler's seminal evolutionary text *Life and Habit* (1878) and semiautobiographical novel *The Way of All Flesh* (1903) instill in modern readers a sense of the social discord of the late-Victorian period. The more well-known novel advocates a break with Victorian morality as professed through the Anglican Church and explores the inability to exercise the free will Butler believed people experienced because of the repressive religious culture and, more interestingly, genetically inherited habits and dispositions. The novel also illustrates Butler's belief in the need to break away from one's past and family to obtain personal happiness. A joint reading of *Life and Habit* and *The Way of All Flesh* demonstrates Butler's textual interactions with and depictions of the British religio-cultural system. He shows that free will is unattainable and adaptation¹ (whereby one moves from a personal self controlled by ancestral memories to a self free of these memories) cannot occur unless an individual suffers a significant physical or mental trauma that releases her from the control of these inherited memories. The connection between Butler's nonfictional and fictional texts highlights late-Victorian angst about the place of religion in one's life and reveals an increasing desire to determine one's identity outside of the church and family. Moreover, Butler's hypothesis that psychological trauma encourages positive changes in personal identity challenges both pre-Freudian and Freudian conceptions whereby trauma was more likely to induce hysteria or other mental illness.²

While most critics have either ignored the evolutionary aspects in *The Way of All Flesh*³ or read *Life and Habit* and the novel as mirror images of one another, a closer, more nuanced reading appropriately situates them in the development of the era's psychological theories and literature. Butler's psychological and fictional works serve as a prelude to the trauma and (self-)destruction portrayed in modernist [End Page 79] literature. His rendering of isolation, however, need not be deemed harmful, for together *The Way of All Flesh* and *Life and Habit* show that seclusion, alongside trauma, enables one to utilize free will and escape the deadening effects of church and family.

Critical Background

Though Butler composed *The Way of All Flesh* in the 1870s and 1880s, the novel interrogates many of the same themes that modernists would explore forty years later: social (dis)connectedness, eugenics, and evolution in light of an increasingly mobile society. Butler's influence on the Bloomsbury group and other modernists has been well documented in both critical and primary sources. William Van O'Connor suggests that Butler significantly influenced major figures in the Bloomsbury group such as Virginia and Leonard Woolf, E. M. Forster, Lytton Strachey, and D. H. Lawrence. *The Way of All Flesh*, O'Connor argues, "prepared the way for Lytton Strachey's *Eminent Victorians*, his *Queen Victoria*, and the progeny that followed."⁴ George Bernard Shaw "popularized" the novel in the introduction to *Major Barbara* (published 1907), declaring that it was "one of the great books of the world," and John Galsworthy believed it to be "the best modern English novel."⁵

During the 1930s, the analysis of Butler's novel moved beyond praise as critics investigated major tropes in the text and the way it reacted to Victorian society. In his 1938 study, Edmund Wilson argues that the novel is "likely to survive as one of the classical accounts of how hateful life could become when the successful English middle class mixed avarice with religion."⁶ In a similar vein, Butler biographer Lee Holt suggests that the novel perpetuates and embraces a "subversive view of Victorian morality, and indeed of all morality too, which pervades the entire novel, whereby the traditionally virtuous becomes evil and the evil virtuous,"⁷ and Raby likens the novel to "an attack on the Victorian family as an institution, and a particular kind of family at that, middle class, complacent, propertied and above all religious."⁸ Religion and morality, family, and social class grounded Butler's critique. Contemporaries and later authors acknowledged Butler's attacks on Victorian society, and they...

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