"Recalling the Shadows" into the Light: Review of Steve Ellis, *Virginal Woolf and the Victorians*

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Steve Ellis' timely study highlights the ambiguities surrounding Virginia Woolf's anxiety about the long shadow cast by the Victorian age and its legacies over modernity. Ellis argues that Woolf's rejection of aspects of the Victorian was combined with a paradoxical commitment to historical and intergenerational continuity, a good portion of nostalgia, and reluctance to jettison the nineteenth century cultural inheritance in its entirety for an indiscriminate embrace of the new. On Ellis' reading, Woolf's work inadvertently pre-figures the complex contradictions inherent in much of today's neo-Victorian writing, in which acknowledged indebtedness to the re-imagined past goes hand in hand with an oppositional self-definition of 'us non-Victorians' against 'those Victorians' now passé.

Early on, Ellis makes a point with unintended implications for the neo-Victorian project, when he argues that such a simultaneous "affiliation with and dissent from [Woolf's] Victorian past […] reciprocally and necessarily signifies affiliation and dissent from her modern present" (p. 2). This raises questions as to what extent neo-Victorian aesthetics, frequently criticised for their implication in escapism and nostalgia, as well as their ostensible lack of political engagement with the here and now, might actually be better interpreted as expressions of a fundamental unease, dissatisfaction, and cultural critique of our present-day condition. Ellis himself, however, uses the term 'neo-Victorian' very differently to the sense of this journal, employing it to mean reactionary, as when stressing that his reclamation of "the Woolfian retrospect" is not intended to "convert Woolf into a simple neo-Victorian" (p. 3). Ellis' study convincingly counteracts

overtly partisan, past critical readings of Woolf, which have aimed to co-opt her wholly for the conservative or radical faction, without countenancing the possibility of a writer being both-and-neither, or purposefully shifting positions between different works and sometimes even within the same work.

Ellis' problematisation of the modern rupture with the Victorian in Woolf's oeuvre bears directly on debates currently occupying both Victorian and neo-Victorian theorists. These include periodisation; related questions of where the Victorian properly ends (if at all) and/or neo-Victorianism begins; possible overlaps and continuities between Victorian, post-Victorian, and neo-Victorian cultural moments; and the extent to which other writers, such as Mary Elizabeth Braddon, Thomas Hardy, or A. E. Housman, whose lives, like Woolf's, spanned the fin de siècle, should be read, and taught, solely as 'Victorian'. It seems a missed opportunity not to pursue the possibility of reading Woolf as a genuine neo-Victorian antecedent or even an occasional full-blown neo-Victorian writer – think of the later parts of *Orlando: A Biography* (1928), *Freshwater: A Comedy* (1923), or *Flush: A Biography* (1933), the last two of which Ellis barely discusses. His stress on Woolf's excavation of obscure histories of the marginalised, especially women, offers further scope for analogies with typical neo-Victorian endeavours. On one hand, Ellis expresses reservations about the tendency of most "re-evaluations of the Victorian period" to represent "Woolf (generally hanging onto the coat-tails of Lytton Strachey) as bête noire", holding her partly responsible for persistent popular misconceptions about the period (p. 5). On the other, he seems reluctant to follow through on the more radical implications of his analysis, which might disturb his view of Woolf as poised between past and future orientations but never 'futurist' in the sense of anticipating much later literary developments.

The strength of *Virginia Woolf and the Victorians* lies elsewhere, in the sensitivity with which Ellis enables a different Woolf 'voice' to emerge, one that has perhaps not been fully heard before now, except by dedicated scholars trawling through the minutiae of her complete writings. Ellis meticulously brings together a wide range of quotations, in which Woolf specifically reflects on the past-present relationship, juxtaposing the usual suspects, such as "on or about December 1910 human character changed" from 'Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown' (1924), with critically underrepresented sources. Combined with highly sensitive, detailed readings of Woolf's

novels, again closely centred on the Victorian-modern renegotiation, this makes for a readable and sometimes surprising text.

Ellis adopts a chronological approach, with a major novel providing the primary focus for each of the first four chapters and Woolf's late works reserved for the fifth. These are framed by a shortish introduction and conclusion, which, for neo-Victorian theorists, probably contain some of his most interesting deliberations. In the latter, for instance, Ellis notes Woolf's "characteristic device of introducing the term 'Victorian' as a kind of shorthand for conclusions that cannot be concluded" (p. 171). Indeed the subtitle of his conclusion – 'recalling the shadows' – conjures up typically neo-Victorian tropes of haunting and spiritual mediumship, the latter, of course, often compared to writers' own narrative reanimations of the past.

Chapter 1 locates the start of Woolf's reassessment of the Victorian past around 1916, from where on references to 'Victorian' multiply in her writing. According to Ellis, she formulates the Victorian-modern distinction around a different openness in emotional expression, though on other major themes her work proves curiously conventional, as in her preference to write on marriage rather than adultery or divorce. In *Night and Day* (1919), she prefers to borrow Henry James' mellow "half light" over Strachey's unmitigated "searchlight" exposure of the past (p. 16). Later sections of Ellis' study continue the fruitful exploration of light and shade imagery, which he deems crucial to Woolf's figuration of the Victorian-modern divide, but also of her refusal to construct a permanent antithesis or final break between the two. Ellis' eloquent reading of Woolf's second novel delineates subtle patterns of compensation, communion, and critique, as Woolf "allows full scope to a creative imagination that plays among the shadows rather than seeks to put them to flight" (p. 30).

Chapter 2 traces Woolf growing concern with the risk of becoming cut off from the past, highlighted by the historical rupture of the First World War. Accordingly, the evanescent moment, lost even as it is experienced, assumes increasing prominence, demanding new stylistic innovations to depict not just the Victorian period's but modernity's own perishable transience. Again imagery of light predominates. While *Jacob's Room* (1922) adopts a harsh, "alienating and exposing" illumination, "an index of an isolated modernity that can find no sustaining traditions to shelter in" (p. 47), *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) reverts to half light, with its moonlit terrace at Bourton, its "treasuring of the past" (p. 58), and its insistence on

"'synchronising' past and present" (p. 75) within consciousness and text. Yet the latter novel's emphasis on country houses, traditional decorums, and privileged leisure simultaneously reinscribes the social conservatism for which Woolf has repeatedly been criticised by Alex Zwerdling and others.

Chapter 3, somewhat problematically, positions *To the Lighthouse* (1927) as Woolf's most successful Victorian-modern reconciliation, as indicated by the title 'Integration'. Woolf's depiction of the Ramsay's "deeply unequal" but romanticised marriage, with all its obvious gender injustices and recycling of the 'Angel of the House' theme from the previous novel, is probably not as easily made good by Lily Briscoe's final painting, with its performance of "the mystical rite of remarriage […] a symbol of partnership and union that reconciles a range of oppositions" (p. 79), as Ellis would have it. Rather than figuring "a Victorian-modern unification" (p. 87) or what he calls "an androgyny of historical period" (p. 87; p. 107), the post-impressionistic ambiguity of Lily's artwork arguably resists any such definitive reading. Ellis' approach is especially curious, since parts of this chapter are concerned with defending Woolf's novel against similarly "one-sided" (p. 80) feminist readings. There are probably more continuities between *Mrs Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*'s treatments of loss and recuperation than Ellis wants to allow; for instance his description of the association of the maternal and the past with twilight and darkness, as opposed to "the rational, the phallic, the day-lit and […] present time" (p. 86) seems equally applicable to both novels. Yet Chapter 3 still manages to offer a perceptive elaboration of Woolf's politics of light, in terms of her espousal of a technique of "chiaroscuro […] that is, light *coexisting* with shade", as contrasted to modernity's rejection of "all that shadow stands for as oppression, obscurantism and outmoded sentiment – a stance imagined as an inundation of electric light" (p. 98).

Chapters 4 and 5 explore a "switch of focus from mother to father" figures, which Ellis regards as indicative of "a change of emphasis in Woolf's relation with the Victorian" (p. 109). Henceforth, positive images of rapprochement give way to less sympathetic, harsher portrayals of the unredeemed past, suffused with a sense of permanent "exile from the garden presided over by the Victorian mother" (p. 112). Emotional and spiritual impoverishment, trivialisation, and disillusion make the Victorian appear increasingly distant and unreal, and render intergenerational relations more fraught. Towards the end of *The Years* (1937), for instance, Peggy and the

elderly Eleanor cannot agree on any shared meaning of the Victorian, with the younger woman's desire for escapism into the past juxtaposed against her elder's pleasure at having escaped it (pp. 119-120). Ellis suggests that "the very terms 'Victorian' and 'modern'" become "increasingly unstable and unproductive" (p. 120) for Woolf as structural categories. This statement is also pertinent to neo-Victorian novels, like A. S. Byatt's *Possession: A Romance* (1990), in which (post)modern protagonists often prove paradoxically *less* individualistic and *more* emotionally and sexually stifled than their 'repressed' Victorian counterparts. Ellis suggests that Woolf's loss of faith in modernity's promise issues in a "Post-Victorian mysticism" or contradictory re-valorisation of the Victorian, as in her evocation of the father-librarian, who afforded her unlimited access to an autodidactic education (p. 152). At times, it seems almost as if the Victorian age itself is equated to the ideal she outlined in 'The Leaning Tower', evocatively described by Ellis as "a kind of eternity of time and provision where the heavenly library never closes and no-one is denied a reader's ticket or has a limit on the number of items he or she can borrow" (p. 152). The 'Victorian', then, perhaps becomes as much, if not more, a private refuge for Woolf as a shared public resource or "well" (p. 154) from which to draw on for cultural continuity.

Though mostly persuasive, Ellis' argument at times determines his readings, rather than other way around, most obviously so in Chapter 3. The same tendency becomes apparent in the overall structure of the book, which seems to want to impose a too neat, overarching pattern on Woolf's work, from the opening chapter 'Reclamation', via 'Synchronicity', 'Integration' and 'Disillusion', to abject 'Incoherence'. This smacks somewhat of the prescriptive Victorian patterning of a text such as Charles Dickens' *Hard Times* (1854), didactically divided into the three books 'Sowing', 'Reaping', and 'Garnering' so as to direct readers towards the author's preferred interpretation. There are other small quibbles to be made as regards Ellis' frequent reiteration of phrases and quotations within the same and/or between different chapters, his somewhat limited index, and the annoying absence of a bibliography.

Nevertheless, *Virginia Woolf and the Victorians* contains much of genuine interest to neo-Victorian researchers, as well as scholars of Woolf and Modernism.