

**“Shot through with Ambiguities”:  
Review of Simon Joyce, *The Victorians in the Rearview Mirror***

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**Simon Joyce, *The Victorians in the Rearview Mirror*  
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This book's key statements are made in the 'Acknowledgements' where Simon Joyce writes of how a work of this nature is really "a sampling of related topics ... an eclectic bunch" written by "a reluctant Victorianist" (p.ix). Joyce's disinclination to occupy the role of a Victorianist is, ultimately, this book's strength and weakness. The essays collected here are notes on the prevailing theme of the often uncomfortable indebtedness of the contemporary to the Victorian, but also, and perhaps more so, to the fractured interpretations of the Victorian circulating through British culture since the turn of the nineteenth century.

As the evidence of this journal's existence demonstrates, the neo-Victorian constitutes a particularly pressing theme in the post-millennial moment. That this moment is comprised of more than fictional recreations, rewritings and reconfigurations of the Victorian period is undoubted: neo- or post- or retro-Victorianism is as much a political, social and ethical idea as a creative concern. On these terms, Joyce's book offers a strong reminder of the ironic and oxymoronically 'enduring absence' of the Victorians in the present century, and for much of the last. Joyce neatly and smoothly re-tells the contrasting liberal and conservative readings of the nineteenth century that have come to dominate perceptions outside but also often within the academy. His penultimate chapter, entitled 'Victorian Values? Neoconservatives and the Welfare of the Modern State', for example, is a

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useful re-articulation of the dominance in post-war conservatism of the Victorians and their values; or rather, the highly selective reading and interpretation of the values of the earlier period. The Victorians, Joyce argues, are always with us, haunting us and confusing us in equal measure. The 1980s debate in the UK between Margaret Thatcher and Neil Kinnock as to what the Victorian really means (thrift, duty, self-help, individual responsibility for Thatcher; poverty, inequality, and collective social oppression for Kinnock) may serve as just one illustration of a much bigger conflicted understanding of attempts to find an impossibly singular signifier or definition of the period, its people and events. Instead of trying to re-tread this already well worn path, Joyce focuses his attention on locating the development of a reaction against the Victorians from Bloomsbury onwards. As he demonstrates, this reaction against an all-encompassing notion of the Victorian is riddled with inaccuracies, partial and partisan readings of the period, and an often un-nuanced binary conceptualisation of the post-Victorian as progress versus the Victorian as retro, indulgent and naive nostalgia.

From the outset, Joyce makes some pertinent points to which a journal named *Neo-Victorian Studies* and those working on neo-Victorian texts need to pay particular attention. His 'Introduction' contests the popular conception that "modernist anti-Victorianism" peaked in the mid- to late-1910s with Bloomsbury, demonstrating that this movement in fact began much earlier and significantly pre-dates the death of the Queen herself in 1901. Indeed, as this inaugural issue demonstrates, Joseph Conrad might be claimed as an illuminator of a neo-Victorian spirit in *The Secret Agent* (1907), just as Joyce suggests that much of the work of the "'decadent' nineties" might also be seen to anticipate the Bloomsbury backlash, itself "shot through with ambiguities" (p.41). It is on these interesting debates about periodicity that Joyce provides the most significant statements for critics of the neo-Victorian. We cannot be reminded too often of the importance of situating our notion of a current challenge or revisionist approach to the nineteenth century within the context of a period that was itself continually charged with ideas of renewal, regeneration, and opposition.

For a book so concerned with pinning down our reasons for wanting to fix the Victorians into a particular identity that we can then assert ourselves against, it is surprising that Joyce frequently prefers to focus on

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non-Victorian rather than neo-Victorian works. In this sense, I am not convinced that some elements of the book, such as the focus on Bloomsbury in Chapter 1, really add depth to our understanding of the contemporary post-Victorian moment, although his study includes some excellent and attentive readings of key texts such as Virginia Woolf's 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown' (1924) and Lytton Strachey's *Eminent Victorians* (1918); it is good, too, to see Leonard Woolf's insightful self-reflections used in discussions of the group. Nevertheless it seems a little too easy to take *Howards End* (1910) and *Brideshead Revisited* (1945) and their later filmic adaptations (discussed in Chapter 3) as somehow representative of 'nostalgic' approaches to the Victorian period. Indeed, in doing so, Joyce might be seen to fall into the 1920s trap of attempting to "reduce the Victorian to a style" (p. 11). He also grapples with the issues that arise from Virginia Woolf's rejection of the 'Victorian', which in fact constitutes more of a rejection of the 'Edwardian' failure to challenge the nineteenth century; arguably, it is this response that proves most central to the work of Forster, Waugh and others. Towards the end of Chapter 2, which discusses these writers, Joyce himself states that it is "worth asking the question: where are the Victorians in *Brideshead Revisited*?" (p.65) I'm not convinced that this study manages to provide the answer, although the discussion of the kitsch nature of Victorian objects in both the novel and wider culture is interesting, with Joyce admitting that Waugh's and other artists' reaction was as much against the earlier post-Victorian movement of the 1890s as the Victorian period itself.

The same comment might be made about Chapter 3 and the commentary on 1980s 'heritage cinema', in the sense that it too reads the nostalgic a little too straightforwardly as a return to the Victorian. While the point is valid in some senses, it fails to provide a clear enough insight into the self-consciousness of these attempts to return, in many cases, back to Realism. That this return *was* highly self-reflexive in both its portrayal and reception by audiences is clear: as highlighted by Sergei Eisenstein's comment in 1940 that filmic technique began with Dickens' novels, though this is not the only such example. More attention to these elements of deliberate play and echoing, shadow work and mirroring, would have firmed up Joyce's analysis and struck out into less familiar territory than the readings of Francis Ford Coppola's *Dracula* (1992) and Karel Reisz's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1981) adaptations provide. The point here is

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that the contemporaneous Thatcherite return to Victorian values and the resulting debates about heritage and nostalgia have themselves become as much a part of the neo-Victorian cliché as the mythic Victorian values the politicians of the period or the film makers attempted to promote and explore. Turn-of-the-millennium writers and directors are at the point, one might suggest, where metafilmic and metatextual engagements are more related to these earlier adaptations than they are to their Victorian precursors.

Joyce aims to challenge the assumption of the Victorian we have inherited over the last century in the 'Epilogue: Postcolonial Victorians', where he crucially interrogates whether "a label like 'Victorian' [is] applicable to the present or past subjects of colonial rule" (p.166). For what does it mean to speak of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) as a neo-Victorian novel, for example, when it is palpably not set in the British nineteenth century context? And how alienating is that all-inclusive reference to the 'Victorian' when dealing with the colonial history of the period? This "imperial way of thinking" (p.169), which I would argue is actually neo-imperialist in its intentions, has significant dangers attached to it, although Joyce seems more determined to draw out the positive and negative possibilities of the colonial "inheritance" (p.167). It seems a shame to keep the epilogue so short, but this brevity is perhaps revealing about our continued inability to deal with this aspect of the nineteenth century. Hence, it is presented as an add-on to the text as a whole, a kind of postcolonial postscript. In reality, the global political situation of the present century is more indicative of a need to address – directly and without nostalgia – contemporary Western culture's continued exportation of the ideologies of the earlier century of empire, and challenge the ground on which we base our political, social and cultural assumptions.

Indeed, as theorists of contemporary culture we perhaps need to be more attuned to the most apparent but still hidden factor in discussions of the neo-Victorian: that we continue to debate, albeit in different ways and often more explicitly, the issues that confronted and challenged the Victorians themselves. Joyce asserts aspects of this need to think harder about the relationship between now and then, and about the often contradictory nature of our seeming 'modernity' compared to the Victorians' staid moralities. But he also draws back from signalling that, when looking into that rear view mirror, our more explicit engagements

with the sexual or gendered lives of those ‘Other Victorians’ often blind us to social and cultural issues which were far more evident and explicitly narrated in the nineteenth century. He writes of Sarah Waters’ version of the Victorian or rather ‘Dickensian novel’ as both a homage to the precursor text/s and a criticism of the “explicit limits” of that kind of social realism’s enforced “boundaries of national identity and cultural respectability” (p.15). But it seems rather odd not to point out that the neo-Victorian novel is often guilty of precisely such limitations, albeit on different terms. In their focus on sexuality and gender, often above all other issues, many neo-Victorian novels elide other topics that the Victorians confronted head-on, such as class, social reform, and religious or scientific belief. The best neo-Victorian texts are alert to this blind spot in the mirror, and a novel like Waters’ *Affinity* (1999) exploits this to a high degree in making us relish the depiction of Victorian ‘forbidden’ desire while ignoring the class issues at the heart of the novel’s mystery and Gothic invocations. In Joyce’s reading of Waters’ *Fingersmith* (2002), in a final chapter on the ‘Other Victorians and the Neo-Dickensian Novel’, he gives much attention to the text’s commentary on the “blind spots of Dickens” but not enough the novel’s contemporariness, which says as much about our own period’s selective approach to identity politics, gender, sex and class as about Victorian novel writing. This chapter as a whole also feels a little loose in its definition of the ‘Neo-Dickensian Novel’ as a genre: sometimes it appears as if any attempt at a panoramic realism is inevitably and unarguably Dickensian. But Dickens was not the only Victorian realist. We might just as easily say the neo-Eliotian novel for some of these texts, but we do not, because that would be less catchy and less functional as a neat signal of what the neo-Victorian responds to or argues against.

Ultimately, then, Joyce himself might be read as setting up shorthand versions of the Victorian, since that is sometimes easier than delving beyond our own reluctance as a culture to take on the contradictions, tensions, and diversity of the nineteenth century in all its uncategorisable reality.