Neo-Victorian Laughter: A Genealogy

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Abstract: This essay has two aims. The first is to assert that paying attention to the genre of critical 'revisionist' comedy directed at the Victorians may allow us to push back the chronological parameters of when neo-Victorianism began and to acknowledge its emergence well before the second half of the twentieth century. The second purpose is to suggest that, from the late-twentieth century onwards, there have been three distinct categories of neo-Victorian humour, each one different in its targets and attitudes, and each one reflective of changes in how the present has been positioning itself in relation to the Victorian past.

Keywords: Bloomsbury Group, Charlotte Brontë, Mary Dunn, John Fowles, neo-Victorian comedy, neo-Victorian comic strips, neo-Victorian fiction, neo-Victorian film, Oscar Wilde, Virginia Woolf.

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On or about 1968, the character of laughter at the Victorians changed. This is, of course, a paraphrase of a pronouncement in "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown", the 1924 essay in which Virginia Woolf famously claimed that "on or about December, 1910, human character changed" (Woolf 1950: 96). My statement, while more modest in scope, is just as open to dispute. Woolf acknowledged that she was being, as she put it, "arbitrary" in choosing that date, for the transformation "was not sudden and definite" – not as though "one went out, as one might into a garden, and there saw that a rose had flowered, or that a hen had laid an egg" (Woolf 1950: 96). Nonetheless, she insisted, an unmistakable "change there was" in literary representations, which both mirrored and produced a significant alteration in the sense of character itself (Woolf 1950: 96). An important cultural break of a different sort occurred in 1968, with the writing of John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, which was published in the UK and the US in June 1969. Fowles's novel both reflected and signalled a shift in how the twentieth century regarded the nineteenth century, coming after a period of

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nearly seven decades in which the Victorian age – its tastes, its manners, its beliefs, its material objects, and its people – had been depicted again and again, in literary fiction and in popular culture alike, as alien, appalling, and, most of all, ridiculous.

1.   Modernist 'High' Mockery of Victorian Seriousness

Until the late 1960s, the ridicule directed at Victorian figures and at Victorian culture had emphasised a relationship not only of distance, but of superiority, on the part of those who engaged in humour at their expense. That is, of course, one of the traditional functions of comedy in general – to assert unlikeness and thus to encourage the denial of identification between the joker and the butt of the joke, which is what helps to make laughter possible. As Anca Parvulescu explains in *Laughter: Notes on a Passion* (2010),

> Historically, seriousness, in its official tone and respectable dress, has intimidated, demanded, prohibited, oppressed. It has established value and rules of appropriate behavior […] If laughter could be called a project, it would be a project against deep, heavy, oppressive seriousness. (Parvulescu 2101: 5)

Across the first two-thirds of the twentieth century, the Victorians were constructed as the very definition of "oppressive seriousness" and then mocked for being so. This process began early. We need only think of the marvellous 1904 caricature from *The Poet's Corner* by Max Beerbohm – who, having been born in 1872, was himself as much a nineteenth-century figure as a modern one – in which he depicted Mary Augusta Ward, the late-Victorian novelist, as a child dressed in bright scarlet, like a tiny version of Red Riding Hood, asking Matthew Arnold, "Why, Uncle Matthew, oh why, will you not be always wholly serious?" (Beerbohm qtd. in Hart-Davis 1972: 24). As she does so, the great mid-Victorian poet-critic flashes his enormous set of teeth in an ugly, wolfish grin. Laughter, as Parvulescu notes, positions itself as the 'enemy' of seriousness, and for most of the twentieth century, the Victorians were enemies and thus targets on a number of grounds. Not the least of the charges brought against them was the assertion that they embodied a force that "intimidated, demanded,

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prohibited, oppressed" – or, as Matthew Sweet sums up the matter, "[f]or a century Victorian Britain was written up as a kind of prison" (Sweet 2013: 40). Cast by their successors as the supposed jailers of the spirit of play and openness, the Victorians were, therefore, foes to be vanquished with the sword of wit.

In *Victorians in the Rearview Mirror* (2007), Simon Joyce has levelled his retrospective gaze at the Bloomsbury Group's efforts to lead the early-twentieth-century charge against the Victorians and to finish them off. Referencing, as I too have done, Woolf's 'Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown', Joyce titles his chapter about Bloomsbury writers' responses to the Victorians 'On or About 1901' and focuses especially on the deconstructive "camp style" of Lytton Strachey, for whom one of the most unforgivable of the many sins that he attributed to the Eminent Victorians was their lack of a "sense of humor" (Joyce 2007: 35). Central to Strachey's "camp style", though, were paradox and self-contradiction – qualities that linked Strachey in his own doubleness with the "self-divided" Victorian Age that he castigated (Joyce 2007: 40). To Joyce, a critic who, after all, is using a "Rearview Mirror" – thus, looking from a neo-Victorian perspective at the Modernists looking at the Victorians – this commonality suggests a closeness, rather than a distance, between Bloomsbury and the nineteenth century. The Victorians have in general, as he puts it, "attracted as much as they repulsed those that have come afterwards, and each attempt at drawing a definitive line in the sand has subsequently been shown to disguise a more telling continuity" (Joyce 2007: 3).

Strachey would have disagreed violently with Joyce's assertion of continuity between himself and his predecessors. When in *Eminent Victorians* (1918) he painted in acid a portrait, for instance, of the aged Florence Nightingale, reduced to "the rounded bulky form of a fat old lady, smiling all day long", he certainly did not mean to suggest that she had at last attained a sense of humour, let alone that there was any common ground in attitude between the biographer and his subject (Strachey 1969: 201). The foolish smile on her face was not to be confused with the ironic smile on his. To Strachey, Nightingale's retreat at long last from her ferocious earnestness was due to no newfound appreciation of the comic spirit, but instead was merely evidence of the onset of an "ever more and more amiable senility"; a once fearsomely eminent Victorian had "melted into nothingness" (Strachey 1969: 201). As Leona W. Fisher has said, Strachey

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"derive[d] the most exquisite pleasure from leaving his reader with this culminating description" of dissolution (Fisher 2001: 86). Here, contrary to Joyce's formulation, it would seem that Strachey used mockery as a tool with which to draw an extremely strong and "definitive line in the sand" between himself and the Victorians (Joyce 2007: 3).

It would take several more decades before the moment arrived when twentieth-century writers were prepared to acknowledge the continuity that Joyce claims to have sighted in works as early as the 1920s and 1930s. Early twentieth-century women writers (even those born during Victoria's reign) were no more eager than Strachey had been to own up to any link between themselves and the Victorians, whom they turned into literary punching bags. In *Flush: A Biography* (1933), a work of comic biofiction about Elizabeth Barrett and her pet spaniel, Virginia Woolf does go so far as to exempt the woman poet from explicit mockery, for she views Barrett not as a representative Eminent Victorian, but as a victim of mid-Victorian patriarchy. Given to absurdities, such as a belief in séances, Woolf's Barrett may be; yet she is also a defender of love and loyalty against the forces of domestic tyranny and later, in Florence, a champion of the Italian Risorgimento – qualities that render her admirable in the eyes of the judgmental Modernist author appraising her life. Woolf's feminist allegiances, moreover, lead her to portray the middle-aged Barrett's struggles to free herself from her father's grasp and to flee England as courageous rather than ridiculous acts.

There is nothing remotely favourable, however, about the descriptions of Barrett's physical environment, which Woolf paints with a complete lack of sympathy, snickering all the while. The narrator of *Flush* assigns no responsibility for the furnishings of Barrett's bedroom; whether they reflect the poet's father's, her late mother's or Barrett's own taste is left to the reader to decide. The room seems almost to have been created by the nineteenth century itself and to have sprung up miraculously, as in the Victorian segment of Woolf's 1928 fantasy, *Orlando: A Biography,* where the Spirit of the Age produces of its own accord a "drawing room", which leads on inevitably and most regrettably to

> glass cases, and glass cases to artificial flowers, and artificial
> flowers to mantelpieces, and mantelpieces to pianofortes, and
> pianofortes to drawing-room ballads (skipping a stage or

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two) to innumerable little dogs, mats, and antimacassars.
(Woolf 2006: 167)

Regardless of who has piled it with horrors, the interior of the Barretts' Wimpole Street house is a nightmare, not only in aesthetic, but in ideological terms. Through the strategy of repetition, Woolf gets all the comic mileage she can out of the crowding, covering, and masking that epitomises her notion of Victorianism as the antithesis of clarity and truth:

> That huge object by the window was perhaps a wardrobe. Next to it stood, conceivably, a chest of drawers. In the middle of the room swam up to the surface what seemed to be a table with a ring round it; and then the vague amorphous shapes of armchair and table emerged. But everything was disguised. On top of the wardrobe stood three white buses; the chest of drawers was surmounted by a bookcase; the bookcase was pasted over with crimson merino; the washing-table had a coronal of shelves upon it; on top of the shelves that were on top of the washing-table stood two more busts. Nothing in the room was itself; everything was something else. (Woolf 1983: 20)

Woolf's comedy in *Flush* works chiefly through analogy, *indirectly* mocking the bourgeois Victorian family's reprehensible values through the disorder and dishonesty of its physical and mental furniture.

2.   Popular Early Twentieth-Century 'Victorian' Target Practice

In contrast, other women writers of the 1930s make straight for the Victorians themselves and for their literary and political legacies. Among Woolf's younger contemporaries, no one was more savage than Mary Dunn. In his 1957 history of *Punch* magazine (for which Dunn wrote), R. G. G. Price speaks admiringly of Dunn's brand of humour as "bludgeoning and destructive" (Price 1957: 270). It was never more so than in her series of books about (and supposedly by) the fictional character of 'Lady Addle', which began in 1936 with the publication by Methuen of *Lady Addle Remembers*. In it, Dunn sent up the genre of the memoir, the British upper classes, and, above all, Victorian women, especially, the earnest and

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arrogant meddling of ladies devoted to charitable causes. Writing in the self-important voice of one Arabella Coot – who acquires her title through marriage to "John Hector Murdoch Hirsute McClutch, seventeenth Baron Addle of Eigg" after "a whirlwind courtship of only three years" (Dunn 1983: 43) – Dunn lets her first-person narrator skewer herself and her Victorian contemporaries all unawares in every line. The satire is indeed pointed, particularly when the subject is the intersection of Victorian imperialism and imperiousness with philanthropy, as Lady Addle and her husband, touring India at the height of the Raj, encounter the equally high-minded Agatha Slubb-Repp:

> I was struck by her intimate knowledge of Indian life and her vivid way of talking. She had a habit of emphasizing her points by bringing down her fist on one's knee to punctuate every sentence, which was very telling. Her life's mission was evidently the emancipation of women and she had been brave enough to ruin her marriage for the cause. For on her honeymoon, she told us, she felt it her duty to give lectures on the subject to the female hotel servants. She gave them in her bedroom every evening after dinner for five nights, and on the sixth her husband left her, never to return. Since then circumstances had led her to India, where, with great enthusiasm, she had taken up the cause of the Indian women in purdah. She was just then on a tour […] to try and enlist the sympathy of the Governors in a scheme for teaching knitting to the Zenanas. (Dunn 1983: 67-68)

With her garrulousness and absence of concern for the feelings of others (not least, the colonial subjects' sensibilities), Agatha Slubb-Repp is, in Lady Addle's words, a "splendid" advocate for this altruistic campaign: "Social barriers did not trouble her one bit, and when she did not know people she engineered an introduction on the slenderest pretext, in order to further her work by talking about it incessantly" (Dunn 1983: 69). Like the unsightly furnishings that crowd every corner of a room and block the light in Virginia Woolf's send-ups of Victorian domestic interiors, so this fictional Victorian lady reformer's self-serving monologues fill every inch of social space, while accomplishing nothing worthwhile.

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        As though verbal mockery were not enough, *Lady Addle Remembers*
also offered visual lampoons. Perhaps after seeing Woolf's novel *Orlando*,
with its spoof illustrations – photographs of family members, lovers
(especially Vita Sackville-West, who inspired the composition of the novel),
and friends, alongside captions suggesting that they were images of Woolf's
fictional characters from centuries past – Dunn conceived the idea of
accompanying the faux memoir with a selection of actual photographs of
anonymous Victorians. They are labeled here by Lady Addle as 'My
Beautiful Mother', 'Myself with Soppy and Mipsie, 1873' – the names of
Lady Addle's sisters – and 'A Charming Study of Agatha Slubb-Repp'
(Dunn 1983: 8, 12, 68, facing pages). All the images were, however,
doctored – after the practice of Max Beerbohm, who was given to what was
called 'improving' through caricature the photographic frontispieces of
books that he owned – in order to turn the subjects of the portraits into
hideous creatures with beady eyes, misshapen heads, or enormous jaws. In a
sense, Dunn turns period portraits into neo-Victorian comic gargoyles.
Whether she herself did the visual alterations of the photographs or worked
with an artist at *Punch* to produce such grotesque effects is unrecorded,
though the lack of other attribution suggests that it was Dunn who gleefully
disfigured and defiled these hapless Victorians.
        If Lytton Strachey, Virginia Woolf, and their Bloomsbury cohorts
stood for the High Art side of ridiculing the Victorians between the two
world wars, then Dunn's popular series of Lady Addle books and columns
for *Punch*, which continued into the late 1940s, demonstrated the extent of
the middlebrow and even lowbrow market for laughter at the Victorians'
expense. It also indicated the range of targets to receive satirical treatment.
In 'Modernity and Culture, the Victorians and Cultural Studies', John
McGowan notes that the "Bloomsbury group played a large role" in
transforming "the Victorian into the nonmodern by introducing the
(subsequently) endlessly repeated narrative" of the moderns' "progress
around sexuality", to the extent that "no restaging of Victorian life is
complete without reassuring us that we are more enlightened sexually than
those repressed Victorians" (McGowan 2000: 11). Nonetheless, it was not
Victorian sexual naïveté that served as the chief occasion for laughter in
Dunn's Lady Addle books, or that distinguished these fictional nineteenth-
century figures from Dunn's contemporaries. It was instead the alleged
narcissism, complacency, and misplaced earnest idealism of the Victorians

that rendered Lady Addle and her contemporaries "nonmodern"; it was their categorical refusal to see beyond the glass of their own lorgnettes. Readers of these texts in the 1930s and 1940s were implicitly defined, in contrast, as modern through their own breadth of vision, as they laughed at the shortsightedness of these condescending Victorian monsters, who prided themselves on their 'progressive' philanthropic endeavours, and at the stupidity of Victorian zealots determined to lift up oppressed colonial subjects of the Empire by teaching them how to knit. Further examples of neo-Victorian humour in this popular vein include Cecil Beaton's *My Royal Past by Baroness von Bülop, née Princess Theodora Louise Alexina Ludmilla Sophie von Eckerman-Waldstein, as told to Cecil Beaton* (1939) and Caryl Brahms and S. J. Simon's *Don', Mr. Disraeli* (1940). The latter was directly inspired by Dunn's work and featured spoof illustrations: photographs of the imaginary aristocratic author that were in fact images of Beaton himself in drag.

3.   Comic Hauntings since the Later Twentieth Century
For an account of what happened after the postwar period, in terms of critical (re)constructions of the Victorians, *History and Cultural Memory in Neo-Victorian Fiction: Victorian Afterimages* (2010) offers a useful guide, as Kate Mitchell provides a brief and valuable survey of "which characteristics of people, place and period" have been "depicted as Victorian […] and to what ends" (Mitchell 2010: 42), from the early 1900s through the start of the new millennium. She tracks the movement, for instance, from the mid-twentieth century "treatment of the era as a curiosity" that could be "controlled and contained" to a growing sense that the Victorian Age was "more vivid and interesting, more diverse and less straight-laced than had hitherto been imagined" (Mitchell 2010: 43). A fictional comic exemplar in this vein, who developed a veritable 'life' of his own via an extended series of pseudo Victorian 'memoirs', is George Macdonald Fraser's Flashman from *The Flashman Papers* (1969-2005). Replete with salacious and scurrilous revisions of famous historic figures, the popular Flashman narratives both look back to Strachey and forward to later 'high-brow' neo-Victorian comic fiction, such as J. G. Farrell's *The Siege of Krishnapur* (1973), that addresses serious issues including the moral hypocrisies, pitfalls, and vainglorious excesses of empire building.

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While the 1960s, according to Mitchell, still represented a time of "distance" from the Victorians, the 1970s saw "the intervention of the discourses of feminism, semiotics, psychoanalysis and materialism" into the debate, "contribut[ing] to new representations of the Victorian era" and refocusing especially on previously "excluded" Victorian populations: "women, the working and criminal classes and non-Europeans" (Mitchell 2010: 45). From the 1980s through the end of the twentieth century, Mitchell finds that comparable important shifts occurred within the field of history, recreating the period as a source of "popular fascination" and leading to the eventual emergence of an "affection for the Victorians", as commentators increasingly refocused attention from nineteenth-century culture's "difference and distance" to our own onto "the connections between the Victorians and ourselves" (Mitchell 2010: 55). This scholarly turn supported and reflected a corresponding new movement in fiction and popular culture, producing neo-Victorian comic figures such as Farrell's lampooned British imperialists brought low by the Indian Mutiny. Perhaps not coincidentally, *The Siege of Krishnapur* was published in the midst of the Irish Troubles and the accelerating independence movements among British colonies, which resonated uncannily with Farrell's depiction of the restive 'natives'. Similarly, the larger-than-life Fevvers, Angela Carter's ribald comedienne, circus performer, and covert socialist revolutionary in *Nights at the Circus* (1984), offered a timely ironic warning to twentieth-century readers that the Victorian struggle for women's rights continued even at the tail-end of Second Wave feminism and the approach of another millennium.

As already seen, that paradigm of continuity has also affected how critics such as Simon Joyce now read, in the rearview mirror, the relationship of the Bloomsbury Group to its declared Victorian enemies. One might think of the traditional definition of comedy as a literary form that heals and unifies and that, as Northrop Frye famously suggested, promotes social "integration" (Frye 1957: 43). In this light, we might even consider these positive developments in attitudes to and relationships with the Victorians across the century as constituting a sort of comic plot in itself – that is, as leading on from conflict and opposition to reconciliation and community, if not perhaps toward absolute unity.

Of course, another, less positive aspect of the trope that describes connections and continuities between historical eras has been expressed

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through the image of haunting – of the present as perpetually shadowed by the 'ghosts' of the Victorians. A wide array of published scholarly studies of neo-Victorian fiction and popular culture have taken up this rhetoric of the Victorian past as a spectral form, with one title after another of these works referring explicitly to 'ghosts', 'spectrality', 'shadows', and 'haunting'.[1] Ghosts remain ambiguous beings, and to be haunted by them is to feel vulnerable, as one is at the mercy of something beyond one's full understanding or control. Yet the proliferation of articles, books, and conference papers on this subject suggests that transatlantic culture today has agreed to accept and sometimes even to embrace these spirits as part of the landscape – to move from anxiety and/or hostility towards a willing opening of the channels of communication with them.

Clearly, the nature of the imaginative engagement with Victorian ghosts has changed. To the early twentieth century, the phantom of "The Angel in the House" may have been a ridiculous figure, covered in "blushes", who "never had a mind or a wish of her own", and who announced her presence with a "rustling" of her cumbersome skirts; yet she was a dangerous presence nonetheless, who meant no good to later writers, especially to women (Woolf 1970: 237). In Virginia Woolf's 1931 essay, 'Professions for Women', this spectre had to be slain, or she would murder her successors' impulse to create. Later, the eponymous *Victorian Chaise Longue* of Marghanita Laski's 1954 novella, too, was both haunted and deadly, returning its modern owner against her will to a nineteenth-century scene in which she was doomed to die. Just as the Victorians themselves were defined, up until the latter part of the twentieth century, almost exclusively through their otherness, and often cast as antipathetic characters, so the relationship with them was often one of kill or be killed. Laughter was, through mid-century, an important part of the effort both to deny and to strip the past of its supposedly malevolent power over the present. To joke, after all, as many theorists of stand-up comic performance have reminded us, is to engage in an activity where one 'slays' or 'murders' someone or something – whether an audience or the subject of one's routine – by means of cutting words. Thus, Yael Kohen, for example, has titled her 2012 history of twentieth- and twenty-first-century American women comic performers, *We Killed*.

The scenario of slaying, or at least of laying, the ghost of an earlier age through ridicule was, interestingly enough, one that the Victorians

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themselves foresaw – or, to be precise, that one Victorian in particular presciently outlined in advance. Both Joyce's and Mitchell's valuable surveys of the progress of the twentieth-century's relationship with the Victorians, which has moved from antagonism to connection, and sometimes even affection, bear surprising parallels to the plot of Oscar Wilde's short story 'The Canterville Ghost: A Hylo-Idealistic Romance' (1887). Set in the late 1880s, when it was written, Wilde's comic fantasy depicts the present day as drawing on the weapon of laughter to deal with the phantom of the past that threatens to overmaster it, but then opening itself up to both sympathetic and empathetic identification with its former enemy.

In Wilde's story, the Otis family, which exemplifies pragmatic modernity, arrives from America and buys Canterville Chase, an English manor house that contains a ghost from an earlier century. The figure of Sir Simon soon materialises in a series of creatively staged tableaux and theatrical personae that reveal him to be a true artist of haunting. Nonetheless, the Otises defeat him handily, merely by refusing to take him seriously. Subjecting him to practical jokes and mockery completely destroys his power.

Then, Wilde's narrative changes tone and direction. One member of the family, young Virginia Otis, comes upon Sir Simon – who is now "forlorn" and reduced to an attitude of "extreme depression" – and announces, "'I am so sorry for you'" (Wilde 1994: 223). The ghost tells her of the curse under which he labors: he cannot rest until a living girl weeps and prays for him and enters with him into the house of Death, to open its portals for him; to make this loving connection will not harm her, he says, for "'Love is stronger than Death is'" (Wilde 1994: 225). She succeeds in her mission, and what began as a purely comic tale of how the representatives of modernity vanquish the spirit of the past through ridicule becomes instead a lyrical tribute to love between the living and the dead and, moreover, an account of what the ghosts of the past can teach the living. "'Poor Sir Simon!'" Virginia declares afterwards to her fiancé, "'I owe him a great deal. Yes, don't laugh, Cecil, I really do. He made me see what Life is, and what Death signifies, and why Love is stronger than both'" (Wilde 1994: 234).

In recent years, Oscar Wilde has often been the subject (and sometimes the victim) of neo-Victorian fictional revisions – Gyles

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Brandreth's ongoing series of mystery novels featuring Wilde as the detective-hero stands out[2] – with many of these works attempting to approximate or to appropriate his own comic style and witty voice. It seems only fitting that we return to Wilde himself and read 'The Canterville Ghost' as an allegory *avant la lettre* that predicts the patterns in twentieth- and twenty-first-century responses to the Victorian past. Wilde should be given credit for that insight, in mapping how a later era would treat the phantom presence of another – first disarming it of power by laughing at it, before acknowledging and establishing bonds with it.

4.   1968: Laughing Differently at the Victorians

This returns us to the opening suggestion that something changed in the year 1968 – something that had to do with the character of the laughter occasioned by the Victorians, something that was evident during the writing of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. That new element would have been hard to foresee two years, or even one year earlier, when Bryan Forbes released *The Wrong Box* in 1966, or when Don Sharp directed *Those Fantastic Flying Fools* in 1967. Both films reflected the same dismissive attitudes toward Victorian things, people, beliefs, and conduct that had prevailed since the days of Mary Dunn's Lady Addle books and that had already resulted in the transatlantic success of earlier cinematic send-ups, such as Robert Hamer's 1949 *Kind Hearts and Coronets*, with its cast of Victorian hypocrites, buffoons, a drag aristocrat, and a title-seeking gentleman-murderer.

In *The Wrong Box*, everything from sets to costumes to dialogue was designed to distance the spectator and to stand in the way of identification – to keep the viewer from feeling anything but superiority to the film's absurd and laughable cardboard figures, who represent a stupid era laden with pointless rules and prohibitions. To increase this sense of the past as far away and antiquated, and to render the period doubly quaint, Forbes resorted to anachronisms such as using the sound of a harpsichord amidst the characters' conversations. Obviously, in the Victorian period, almost no one owned a harpsichord, and few people would ever have heard such an antiquarian instrument played in a concert hall. The dominant musical instrument of middle- and upper-middle-class domestic life in the later nineteenth century, when *The Wrong Box* takes place, was the piano.[3] Yet as the piano was perceived as too familiar to audiences in 1966 and thus as

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insufficiently old-fashioned and off-putting, it had to be replaced by an instrument which had, in fact, vanished from the cultural scene a century earlier.

The opening of *Those Fantastic Flying Fools*, on the other hand, emphasised largely through visual means the spectator's unlikeness to the Victorians, as personified by Queen Victoria herself. In a comic performance that turned her into a caricature of robotic stiffness, the actress Joan Sterndale-Bennett portrayed the monarch not merely as unsmiling, but as incapable of emotion of any sort. Simultaneously, the film attacked, by comic deflation, the Victorians' most revered achievements in technology and science, reducing Victorian inventors to failures and nincompoops. Viewers of the film's introductory scenes saw Queen Victoria cutting the ribbon for the opening of a new suspension bridge. When she did so, the entire bridge collapsed and immediately fell, piece by piece, into the water. This catastrophe, however, produced no reaction whatsoever on the impassive face of the Queen, who was obviously, in the eyes of the filmmakers, a more solid lump of stone than any to be found in the hapless Victorian engineer's project.

Given the transatlantic popularity of these mid-to-late 1960s Victorian cinematic lampoons, it was, therefore, something of a surprise for readers to arrive at the *French Lieutenant's Woman* so soon afterwards. Fowles's novel deliberately offsets the smugness of its present-day narrator – who necessarily knows more about the fate not only of the characters, but of the Victorian era itself – with commentary that suggests a newly sympathetic kind of weighing and balancing of the century past. Though not a comic novel per se, Fowles' text is replete with humorous touches and ironic flourishes. When judged against the nineteenth century, the modern age, it seems, will not always emerge victorious, having lost – not gained – depth and intensity of emotion, especially around the issues of sexuality and romance. Moreover, those discredited Victorians ironically turn out, in the Darwinian evolutionary framework that underpins the novel, to be closely related to the most cutting-edge of modern types. After the protagonist, Charles Smithson, reacts with disgust to the spectacle of a department store that foretells the capitalistic, consumer-centered future, the narrator intervenes. He addresses the reader in mocking tones, yet with a serious proposition to offer:

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> We can trace the Victorian gentleman's best qualities back to
> the parfit knights and preux chevaliers of the Middle Ages;
> and trace them forward into the modern gentleman, that
> breed we call scientists, since that is where the river has
> undoubtedly run. […]. Perhaps you see very little link
> between the Charles of 1267 with all his newfangled French
> notions of chastity and chasing after Holy Grails, the Charles
> of 1867 with his loathing of trade, and the Charles of today, a
> computer scientist dead to the screams of the tender
> humanists who begin to discern their own redundancy. But
> there is a link: they all rejected or reject the notion of
> possession as the purpose of life, whether it be of a woman's
> body, or of high profit at all costs, or of the right to dictate
> the speed of progress. (Fowles 2010: 294-295)

Here is an acknowledgement with a vengeance – and even with a touch of
admiration thrown in – of the principle of continuity with the Victorians that
Joyce would later note and project backwards onto the Bloomsburyans of
the earlier twentieth century. Moreover, it is expressed in the most didactic
terms, with no room for argument or objections. Thus, we laugh at Fowles's
protagonist, Charles Smithson, at our peril; if we do so, as Fowles's narrator
warns, we expose the narrowness and insufficiency of our own historical
vision and our blindness to an important trans-historical code of morality.

If this seems an unexpected development in representations of the
Victorians, how much more shocking it is now for us to discover what was
in the original manuscript, on which Fowles was working in 1968, that did
not make it into the published version of the novel in 1969. As his
biographer, Eileen Warburton, tells the story, Fowles

> had written a comic episode in the manner of Lewis Carroll's
> *Alice in Wonderland* in which the intrusive writer/narrator
> appears as a notorious ax murderer escaping from the Exeter
> Asylum on the very day of Charles and Sarah's assignation.
> A dead ringer for the bearded maniac, Charles is prevented
> from returning to Sarah while detained by very Tweedle
> Dum- Tweedle Dee-like policemen. Riding the train to seek
> her in London, Charles meets his lunatic double, who

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> threatens to chop him out of the story with a meat cleaver
> until recognizing him as his long-lost twin brother.
> (Warburton 2004: 294)

The reason for suppressing this extraordinary passage was simple. From Warburton again, we learn that Fowles's wife, Elizabeth, wrote to him about it: "'Positively *loath* [sic] maniac-author episode' so Fowles removed it" (Warburton 2004: 294, original emphasis). In doing this, Fowles excised from the novel what would appear to be the most significant detail within this surrealist fantasy: that the dramatised narrator-figure, who speaks to us both from and about the late 1960s, is also the "long-lost twin brother" of the mid-Victorian protagonist. Time has collapsed here, and so too has distance. What we have in other words, is not merely an expression of continuity or connection with the past, but an assertion of *likeness*. The neo-Victorian narrator and his Victorian character are comic doubles. While inaugurating a great wave of late-twentieth-century neo-Victorian fictional texts, Fowles also introduced with this novel what Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben would later distinguish as a hallmark of Victorian humour: "the simultaneous recognition of incongruities *and* congruities between ourselves and our historical forebears – or, put differently, of acknowledging the re-imagined Victorians as our doubled Others-*and*-selves" (Kohlke and Gutleben 2017: 17, original emphasis). Though it is common practice to laugh at oneself, it is impossible to do so in precisely the same way that one laughs at others – that is, with the same intent to deny or banish identification with the object of the joke. Therefore, I would contend that on or about 1968, the character of laughter at the Victorians changed.

If this suppressed passage did indeed give voice to a cultural shift that was entering the transatlantic *Zeitgeist* in the late 1960s, then we would expect to find the effects of this change going forward, evident in the neo-Victorian comedy that followed. Such a change did, in fact, occur. The remaining third of the twentieth century offers a neo-Victorian genealogy of laughter that descends, like a family tree, from this moment and that splits off into three main branches.

5.   Shared Laughter: Ridiculing the Past *and* Present
First, there is what we might call companionate comedy, which creates a version of Victorianism that is laughable, but that is no more laughable than the world of the present. Instead, it keeps both targets in its sights simultaneously, while revealing their resemblances to one another, as in the case of Brian Moore's *The Great Victorian Collection* (1975). Like Woolf in both *Orlando* and *Flush*, Moore's novel ridicules the oppressive material excesses – the fetishistic accumulation and unaesthetic piling up of objects – of the nineteenth century as a way to criticise the Victorians themselves. So, too, he makes fun of the Victorians' secrecy around sex, with their hidden stores of pornography. The mockery turns equally, however, upon Anthony Maloney, the modern-day scholar, who has dreamed back into reality the phantom collection of the book's title, and whose own sexual affair with a young Pre-Raphaelite-looking woman involves secrecy, fetishism, and exploitation. Simultaneously, Moore sends up the venal entrepreneurs of the present, who create a tacky Victorian theme park that proves more popular with visitors than does the actual Victorian collection, thereby demonstrating that twentieth-century mass culture prefers the gimcrack to the authentic and is no more elevated in its tastes than was its Victorian equivalent.

        Also in this same line of companionate comedy is Philip Ardagh's hilarious 'Eddie Dickens' trilogy for children (2000-2002), a lampoon of Victorian authors and of Victorian literary conventions – in particular of such Dickensian tropes as abused orphans, escaped convicts roving the moors, and eccentric relatives (in this case, through characters unambiguously named 'Mad Uncle Jack' and 'Even Madder Aunt Maud', with the latter accompanied everywhere by her stuffed stoat, a most unfortunate example of nineteenth-century taxidermy). But the laughter cuts in both historical directions. The jokes begin with the 'Author's Note', which opens the writer himself to derision: "Over two metres tall, with a bushy beard, Philip Ardagh is […] very large and very hairy" and "has been – amongst other things – an advertising copywriter, a hospital cleaner, [and] a (highly unqualified) librarian" (Ardagh 2000: i). Laughter continues throughout, for the benefit of young readers, via comic deflation of adults in the present day and of adult pretensions, along with jabs at the absurdity of modern popular culture. As the narrator tells the audience in the final installment of the trilogy, *Terrible Times* (2002),

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Gibbering Jane (the failed chambermaid) had been sent up the scaffolding to lash Mr Dickens to a plank of wood and lower him down to the ground on a pulley usually reserved for the chamber pot. […] If you think this is ridiculous, I should remind you that, near the end of the 20th century there was a film/movie/flick/motion picture called *The Silence of the Lambs* based on a book of the same name written by Thomas Harris. In the film (which I have seen) and possibly the book (which I haven't read) the baddy (played by a very well-respected Welsh-born actor) is, at one stage, wheeled around on a porter's trolley AND he's wearing a silly mask, and everyone took that very seriously; so you can understand why, in the oh-so-polite 19th century, Lady Constance Bustle was far too polite to giggle or to ask what was going on. (Ardagh 2002: 71)

Even young readers who did not know much about the 1991 film in question and did not recognise the allusion, for instance, to Sir Anthony Hopkins would have enjoyed the exhilarating freedom that came with laughing simultaneously at figures of the past and at the tastes of their own parents.

Similar varieties of multi-directional humour also exist in the sphere of the visual arts, where we can locate neo-Victorian comic art that emphasises resemblance, rather than difference, in its constructions of the Victorian past and the present day, and that laughs equally at both targets. Among the many examples of these types of popular visual texts is the Canadian cartoonist Kate Beaton's volume *Hark! A Vagrant* (2002). Her collection of stand-alone cartoons and of multi-panel strips – along with several series of related strips assembled into informal narratives – begins with 'Get Me Off This Freaking Moor', subtitled 'Dude Watchin' with the Brontës'. In it, Charlotte, Emily, and Anne speak the *Sex and the City* language of characters in chick lit, as they check out passing men in Victorian garb. A dark and brooding figure stalks by them, with a bottle in hand. "SO PASSIONATE", says Charlotte, in her speech balloon; "SO MYSTERIOUS", says Emily. "IF YOU LIKE ALCOHOLIC DICKBAGS!", Anne replies sourly. "ANNE[,] YOU ARE **SO** INAPPROPRIATE!" Charlotte exclaims, while Emily adds, "NO

WONDER NOBODY BUYS **YOUR** BOOKS" (Beaton 2012: 7, original
boldface). Here, the laughter arises from the incongruity of supposedly
priggish Victorian women openly expressing desire and casually employing
sexual insults. Certainly, there is nothing unusual in Beaton's introduction
of such a device as a source of humour. The principle "that the comic entails
incongruity" stemming from "expectations thwarted in surprise" was, as Jan
Walsh Hokenson points out, identified as early as 1819 in William Hazlitt's
Lectures on the Comic Writers and has been a mainstay of humour theory
ever since (Hokenson 2006: 39). Yet the feminist joke in this strip goes
beyond mere matters of incongruity involving the ludicrousness of trash-
talking nineteenth-century authors; it is also levelled – in a spirit of sharp
correction – at Beaton's female contemporaries, both in and outside of
literature, who continue to condone and even to idealise masculine bad
behavior, and who thus ignore the wisdom that Anne Brontë's novels could
impart to them. To make this point plainer, Beaton appends a sarcastic
caption of her own, in a smaller typeface, at the bottom of the page:

> Anne, why are you writing books about how alcoholic losers
> ruin people's lives? Don't you see that romanticizing
> douchey behavior is the proper literary convention in this
> family? Losers who ruin people's lives are who we want to
> dream about at night. (Beaton 2012: 7)

The misguided community that constitutes "we", of course, is made up of
Beaton's own present-day (female and even feminist) readers, who continue
to swoon over Emily and Charlotte Brontë's dissolute heroes, just as these
Victorian authors and their nineteenth-century audiences did.

6.   Laughing at the Present in a Victorian Mirror
A second category of neo-Victorian comedy to descend from that important
shift in the tone and nature of laughter, inaugurated on or around 1968, is
one that takes as its target not the ideas, conduct, literary productions, or
material objects of the nineteenth century, but of the present. This branch of
the genealogy involves comic inversion, with a reversal of the implied
norms. The Victorians and their writings now serve as the touchstones
against which to mock and judge both the values and the value of modern
life, modern literature, and/or modern pop culture, and to find the latter-day

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manifestations wanting. In A. S. Byatt's 1990 novel, *Possession: A Romance*, there is nothing ridiculous about the Victorian poets Randolph Henry Ash or Christabel LaMotte, about the intense love affair that unites them, or even about the faux Victorian poetry that Byatt produces and attributes to these two fictional authors. But as someone who "wield[s] power of appointment, power of disappointment, [and] power of the cheque book", yet remains incapable of understanding his own "inner man" and knowing "who he was" (Byatt 1990: 110), it is instead Mortimer Cropper, the parasitical late-twentieth-century biographer and collector of Ash Victoriana, who is rendered ridiculous. Living merely to acquire things, whether by fair means or foul, Cropper personifies the same "notion of possession as the purpose of life" that Fowles's narrator had explicitly condemned, when vaunting the nobility of Charles Smithson's material renunciations. Throughout the novel, Byatt's narrator treats with comic irony this modern-day figure's greed and empty self-importance, which stands in contrast to Ash and LaMotte's idealism, while delighting in making his hopes come, so to speak, a cropper.

Alongside Byatt's *Possession*, we might place a work such as Jennifer Vandever's *The Brontë Project* (2005). Facetiously subtitled *A Novel of Passion, Desire, and Good PR*, Vandever's comic narrative uses biographical re-imaginings to juxtapose Charlotte Brontë's wise choices in her love life and career with the foolish ones of the modern-day protagonist, Sara Frost – whose name, of course, plays on that of Lucy Snowe in *Villette* (1853). In this comparison between a romanticised Victorian past and the tawdry, self-promoting worlds of early twenty-first-century academia and pop culture industry, both of which allegedly commodify and distort history, the comic kicker follows the end of the narrative. There, Vandever supplies the reader with an excerpt from the fictional fifth draft of a screenplay, which is attributed to seven different scriptwriters (all of whom have contributed so-called 'treatments' of the story, while working on the imaginary 'Charlotte Brontë Project'). The result is a ludicrously bad outline for a risible Hollywood biopic that plays fast-and-loose with Victorian reality, while revealing the paucity of contemporary thought and language. This final draft ends as Charlotte addresses her husband, Arthur Nicholls (who is now a physician, because no one today knows, as the film's producer explains, what a 'curate' is), by saying, "'Dear love, I do not know where you leave off and I begin. I am Arthur'" (Vandever 2015: 237) – thus,

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jumbling her words together with Cathy's famous speech about Heathcliff from Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847). Then, as the cliché-ridden screenplay informs us, "They kiss deeply, passionately – a kiss that suggests eternity, love, death, joy, and despair. A kiss that contains the whole world" (Vandever 2015: 237). The saccharine sentimentality being mocked here belongs, however, to present-day cinema rather than to the Victorians, recalling Fowles's musical accompaniment – "a thousand violins cloy very rapidly" (Fowles 2010: 460) – to the faux 'happy' ending of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, in which Charles is reunited with Sarah Woodruff, not resolutely rejected by her (as he is in an alternative ending that follows).

In a related vein, Patricia Park's *Re Jane: A Novel* (2015), which transfers the plot of Brontë's 1847 *Jane Eyre* to present-day New York City, proves through its deployment of deflating metatextual humour that, unfortunately, the great nineteenth-century romantic characters and their passionate entanglements have no modern equivalents. Park's text exemplifies, moreover, a neo-Victorian use of laughter as a strategy for introducing critical perspectives on the operations of race, class, and gender in modern life. The novel's protagonist, a down-to-earth Korean-American nanny to a little girl, briefly falls in love with her older employer, a white American man. In Park's hands, however, every aspect of the original narrative has been reduced and diminished for maximum comic effect. The raging madwoman-in-the-attic figure is now nothing more sinister than a slightly dotty feminist academic, babbling jargon-laden phrases about gender roles, and her male partner, a rather passive and insufficiently ambitious house-husband, is certainly no Mr. Rochester. Near the end, Jane, Park's first-person narrator and protagonist, breaks free of what turns out to be a highly unsatisfactory relationship, rids herself of the illusion that she is destined to be with the man who employed her, and declares with relief, "Reader, I left him" (Park 2015: 321). The audience smiles, even as it registers her disappointment with the prosaic options offered by contemporary life, which fall far short of the standards represented by romance in the Victorian world.

7.   Laughing Once Again at the Victorians
A third distinct and identifiable strain of neo-Victorian laughter harks back to the Modernist mockery with which I began. Although these works, too, follow from that acknowledgement, on or about 1968, of a deep connection

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between the Victorian past and the present day, comic texts in this third category nonetheless deny this linkage. In a deliberate move to affiliate themselves with the debunking mode of Strachey's *Eminent Victorians*, they choose, to paraphrase a song by Prince, to party like it's 1918. Sometimes, their laughter is driven by the demands of mass-market entertainment; sometimes, it is underpinned by more political motives. Here, we can locate many iconic works of popular culture that construct grotesque versions of the Victorians and subject them to ridicule, from the 1970s 'Naughty Vicar' sketch by the Monty Python troupe and 1980s Cambridge Footlights parodies of Victorian domestic dramas to the 'Vile Victorians' episodes of British children's television series, *Horrible Histories* (2009-2015). Also in this third strain of laughter is the mock preface – called 'My Message to Our Readers' – that opens Alan Moore and Kevin O'Neill's influential neo-Victorian comic book/graphic novel, *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (2000). Written in the voice of a fictional Victorian author, identified as "Mr. Scotty Smiles", the preface begins,

> Greetings, children of vanquished and colonised nations of the world o'er. Welcome to this Christmas compendium […and] allow us to wish both many hours of pictorial reading pleasure and also the jolliest of Christmas-times to those of you who are not bowed with rickets, currently incarcerated, or Mohammedans. (Moore and O'Neill 2000: 5)

In political terms, it is a short distance from the anti-imperialist satirical thrust of Dunn's *Lady Addle Remembers* to this assault on self-satisfied Victorians, happily celebrating their racial and class hierarchies. For an even more direct evocation of the scathingly critical spirit of the Lady Addle series, however, there is Sandi Toksvig and Sandy Nightingale's illustrated mock-memoir, *The Travels of Lady "Bulldog" Burton* (2002). Throughout this fictional first-person account by an aristocratic adventurer of her journeys across the Continent in the nineteenth century, every arrogant, over-the-top pronouncement unwittingly sends up the very air of Victorian superiority and self-congratulation that the narrator wishes to endorse as the proper attitude toward foreign sights.

As Kohlke and Gutleben have suggested, neo-Victorian humour-writing "seems to achieve its greatest comic effects" in cases such as these, when it is at its most polemical and "harnesses unruly energy to a clear agenda, demonstrating partisanship and demanding the same from its audiences" (Kohlke and Gutleben 2017: 28). Whether, as critics such as Glen Cavaliero have claimed, comedy in general "is something shared between those who are in the know" already (Cavaliero 2000: 9), or whether its function is to recruit and convert the spectator to the creator's point of view through its promise of shared laughter, remains a point of contention – especially as self-conscious appreciation of the comic critique and hence (ideological) conversion are by no means guaranteed. The cartoonist Jacky Fleming is among the most successful wielders of pen-and-ink for the purpose of what Kohlke and Gutleben call forcing "readers/viewers to surrender 'innocent' pleasure (or amusement for its own sake) for the implicitly ethical – and sometimes also unethical – pleasure of taking sides" (Kohlke and Gutleben 2017: 28). An openly political artist, Fleming is committed to promoting feminism and to skewering examples both of masculine misogyny and of modern women's own internalised misogyny, which she has done often in British newspapers, such as the *Guardian* and the *Independent*. With the publication in 2016 of *The Trouble with Women*, Fleming has also entered the field of neo-Victorian satirical art. The black-and-white drawings and short commentaries throughout that volume focus almost exclusively on arousing disgust, through comic exaggeration, at the stupidity of sexist Victorian theories about female bodies and minds and at their deleterious effects. Over the spectacle, for instance, of a woman in mid-Victorian dress, who has collapsed onto a chaise longue, hovers this sentence: "Women found lifting a pen very tiring as it caused chlorosis which disrupted blood flow and in some cases led to uterine prolapse"; just below the same image comes a slyly ironic question: "Or was that the corsets?" (Fleming 2016: 42). So too, a crude representation of a nineteenth-century sampler is accompanied by a statement reflecting Victorian complacency about the gendered status quo – "Women with domestic servants could devote themselves to their embroidery samplers" – while the faux-stitching in the image itself expresses its maker's unheard cry of desperation: "HELP ME" (Fleming 2016: 13). Fleming is unsparing throughout in her treatment of the Victorians. The volume's closing visual image shows a group of tiny women in nineteenth-century costume

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climbing out of an enormous trash bin (presumably the metaphorical trash bin of history, to which their names and lives were consigned by their male contemporaries) and sliding down a chute to freedom, a happy prospect that would appear to exist not in the past, but only in the present.

   A similar strand of venomous mockery also operates in some works from higher-culture genres, such as literary fiction, discouraging any trans-historical identification with the ghosts of the past on the part of present-day audiences. Among the most popular of these texts has been Lynne Truss's 1996 novel, *Tennyson's Gift* – a sustained and utterly unsympathetic comic assault on Eminent Victorians from Julia Margaret Cameron, Charles Dodgson, and G. F. Watts to Alfred Tennyson himself. In Truss's narrative, all of these nineteenth-century celebrities take it as a given that they are justified in being unabashed egoists and in abusing, manipulating, or exploiting, whether sexually or artistically, everyone around them, including children and underage girls. As a result, they are a collection of monsters, as grotesque as anything Lytton Strachey penned in his 1918 portrait of Florence Nightingale.

   In his otherwise illuminating study of neo-Victorianism, *Nostalgic Postmodernism: The Victorian Tradition and the Contemporary British Novel*, Christian Gutleben is perhaps excessively charitable, when he decides that *Tennyson's Gift* "is devoid of the satiric essence" and "exempt from moral or ideological indignation"; instead, he asserts, "the funniness" that Truss "derives from her Victorian characters" merely aims "at pure entertainment" (Gutleben 2001: 32). If several decades of academic writing on comic theory and practice have taught us anything, it is that no entertainment derived from laughter is pure, whether in its ideological intent or its effects. Indeed, use of the defensive rejoinder, 'It was just a joke!' is the surest sign that a comic insult was nothing of the sort. As Gordon Hodson et al. explain, attempts at "defending jokes as mere jokes, as opposed to meaningful and impactful social communications, facilitate the expression of social dominance motives" (Hodson, MacInnis, and Rush 2010: 660). In this case, the social dominance motive behind Truss's comedy involves one era attacking the dignity of another, as though to saw away at the very foundation that underpins the Victorians' claims to importance. We might, therefore, view works in this third category of neo-Victorian laughter as signs of a backhanded tribute to the undiminished power that inheres within the spectre of Victorianism. Evidently, the ghosts

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of the nineteenth century are still intimidating enough that they must be exorcised or slain anew with satire's cutting edge.

8.   Reconsidering the Genealogy of Neo-Victorian Laughter

If we bring together the issue of comedy with the definition of neo-Victorianism that Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn have supplied (and which has rapidly become the standard one since its publication in 2010), what else might we see about the genealogy of neo-Victorianism itself, as well as about the genealogy of its various forms of laughter? According to Heilmann and Llewellyn's formulation, for texts to be neo-Victorian they "must in some respect be *self-consciously engaged with the act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision concerning the Victorians*" (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 4, original emphasis). Comedy is, by its very nature, a self-conscious critical enterprise. Through its use of deliberate stylisation, exaggeration, and distortion of a phenomenon, in order to generate laughter, it is always a form of "*(re)interpretation*". Thus, what we now call the neo-Victorian impulse may not have its origins in the latter decades of the twentieth century, where scholars today often locate it, but much earlier. Did neo-Victorianism really begin on or around 1968, or did it start in 1904 with Max Beerbohm's *The Poet's Corner*?; in 1933 with Virginia Woolf's *Flush*?; or in 1936 with Mary Dunn's *Lady Addle Remembers*? Or was it already present from the very first moment when a reader somewhere saw the word 'Victorian' and laughed?

Looking at comedy inspired by the Victorians as a critical practice with a long history and, moreover, seeking it in spaces other than High Art or literary fiction might encourage us to push back even farther the origins of neo-Victorian revisionist humour – perhaps to recognise its foundations within the nineteenth century itself. That is one possible conclusion to draw from a groundbreaking exhibition curated by Elizabeth Siegel that travelled from the Art Institute of Chicago, to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, and to the Art Gallery of Ontario during 2009 and 2010. As Siegel reports in her published catalogue, *Playing with Pictures: The Art of Victorian Photocollage*, "whimsical, often-surreal collages of watercolor paintings and albumen photographs" were a common feature of the albums created by British women in the 1860s and 1870s; "Playful, witty, and at times subversive, the compositions flout both the conventions of nineteenth-century photography and the restrictions of middle- and upper-class

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Victorian society" (Siegel 2009: 13). Overturning conventional social (and even evolutionary) hierarchies, while pillorying the absurdity of the physical furnishings of Victorian domestic life just as effectively as Virginia Woolf would do later in both *Orlando* and *Flush*, these transgressive amateur image-makers used "scissors, paste pot, and paintbrush – along with no small amount of humor", in order to alter comically the "original meanings of the pictures with which they played": "Producers of photocollage pasted cut photographs of human heads atop painted animal bodies, placed real people in imaginary landscapes, and morphed faces into common household objects and fashionable accessories" (Siegel 2009: 13). At the very least, the line of influence from past to present modes of laughter, along with their targets, is unmistakable. It leads directly to neo-Victorian surrealist comic images – from Terry Gilliam's animations for *Monty Python's Flying Circus* in the 1970s to the current work of American artists such as Chet Morrison, who construct their photomontages out of actual Victorian photographs – that make palpable their creators' disdain for nineteenth-century ideologies of respectability and propriety, which they present as at once risible and still culturally resonant.

   Comedy, according to Ted Cohen in *Jokes: Philosophical Thoughts on Joking Matters*, is a response to a problem, "and the problem that inspires joke-creation often comes simply from one's sense of what people currently are thinking about, or at least are immediately aware of" (Cohen 1999: 38). The long genealogy and the multiple strands of joke-making that involve the Victorians – whether or not the particular form of laughter employed does or does not also address the flaws of the present or emphasise the continuity and likeness between different eras – indicate just how *current* and *immediate* the Victorians have continued to be, from one century to the next, as well as how often they have been associated with problematic matters. As Kohlke and Gutleben have speculated, neo-Victorian comedy may have served (perhaps against the will of its creators) as an important means of preserving the Victorians' place at the forefront of our consciousness: "by re-presenting period terminology, outmoded attitudes, and questionable ideological discourses in order to comically deconstruct them, neo-Victorian humour itself becomes implicated – even if only ironically – in their reproduction, inadvertently giving them new life and keeping them in cultural circulation" (Kohlke and Gutleben 2017: 2). The space massively overcrowded with Victorian furniture that Virginia

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Woolf described with such humorous distaste in *Flush* may no longer correspond to an actual room. Today, it may instead be entirely inside our own heads. But that does not make it any less real or, as new examples of neo-Victorian comedy go on demonstrating, potentially any less funny.

Notes

1. See for instance the essays about spectral presences in Arias and Pulham 2010, as well as Kontou 2009.
2. Gyles Brandreth's series of six novels includes titles such as *Oscar Wilde and the Candlelight Murders* (2007) and *Oscar Wilde and the Murders at Reading Gaol* (2012). In each of these, Wilde plays detective and encounters many fin-de-siècle figures from Arthur Conan Doyle to Sarah Bernhardt, while speaking all the while in fluent epigrams.
3. For more about the gendered meanings and importance of the piano in Victorian bourgeois life, see Gillett 2000: 3-4 and 99-101.

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