

Introduction



It was probably inevitable that the years 2000–2001 would bring with them another series of reevaluations of the nineteenth century. Just as surely, while the United States and many other industrialized nations dabbled in a momentary technophobia incited by the anticlimactic “millennium bug,” Britain obsessed about its relationship with its own past. The *Observer* of 2 January 2000 reprinted articles from 1800 and 1900, noting hopefully that “[t]his time round, our first editorial of the century—and of the millennium—does not have to fear Britain suffering invasion, war and conquest,” even though the date technically opened neither the century nor the millennium (and meanwhile, Afghanistan, Iraq, and the so-called War on Terror were all waiting in the wings to mock the paper’s false hope).¹ Three days earlier, the *Guardian* had similarly led off with a look back, wondering “What would they make of us now, those cheerful, confident subjects of the old queen, secure in the certainty that Britain was great and progress would make it still greater, who launched us 99 years ago into the 20th century?”²

It is an impossible question to answer and a strange one to ask. It assumes that “those cheerful, confident subjects” might all speak with one voice and then agree in their assessments of their own era and of what a new century promised. Predictably, the *Guardian* could only answer

- 2 with ambivalence, noting that "[i]n some ways, they would find our world reassuringly familiar," but "elsewhere, our lives would astonish them": the continuity of the monarchy, cricket matches, and debates about electoral reform and hunting reflected the former possibility, while space exploration, a greater tolerance for homosexuality, genetic engineering, and the millennium bug exemplified the latter. The exercise itself is a peculiarly British one, and self-defeatingly incoherent in ways that recall the official centerpiece of London's celebrations in 2000, the Millennium Dome in Greenwich. That structure also claimed to look ahead via a backwards glance that simultaneously referenced the nation's imperial past, its staging of spectacles like the Great Exhibition of 1851, and the symbolic significance of Greenwich Mean Time: as one Londoner commented, "We may no longer own an empire, but we still own time."³ Ronald Thomas notes that the dome itself was surprisingly empty of commodities and big ideas, thus forming the reverse of 1851's Crystal Palace; indeed, as a kind of "entertainment experience" or "pure monument," it almost seemed designed to draw a negative comparison with the past. "Rather than 'Time for a Change,'" Thomas observes, "it took as its motto 'Essentially British,' in an effort to bolster attendance from the 'domestic market' and, it would seem, shore up the ruins of the lost Victorian fantasy of a distinctly British nationality."⁴

The disease of looking backwards at century's end also infected the *Economist*, which under the heading "Still Victorian" pointed out some striking commercial continuities and better-than-expected comparisons: for instance, the British economy had slipped just a little from third to fourth place worldwide, and investment was still high, surpassed only by levels in the United States. As if not wanting to sound too complacent, however, it also noted that "[t]he British citizen, of course, has changed out of all recognition, and the social structure has been overturned," before shifting back to a discussion of similarities that seem far less important: "Funny, though, that crowds still go to Ascot; Eton College remains the country's foremost school," and so on.⁵ There is something both shocking and symptomatic about this focus on the trivia of aristocratic life, as if it might cancel out what the *Economist* admits is a fundamental remaking of the British social structure and citizenry, just as the *Guardian* editorial appears to place debates concerning the ethics of hunting and genetic engineering as equal weights on a balance scale. *Inventing the Victorians* (2001), by *Guardian* journalist Matthew Sweet, also offers an inventory of the ways in which we resemble our predecessors. "Most of the pleasures we imagine to be our own," he argues, "the Victorians enjoyed first" in a culture "as rich and difficult

and complex and pleasurable as our own." Indeed, "they are still with us," Sweet concludes, "walking our pavements, drinking in our bars, living in our houses, reading our newspapers, inhabiting our bodies."⁶

It is tempting to infer from such accounts a kind of Victorian vampire that has suddenly reawakened to haunt Britain after a century's rest—except that such positings of an essential and unbroken connection with the past appeared throughout the twentieth century as well. The Victorians, we might say, have 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, as the following sequence demonstrates. In the year of Queen Victoria's death, 1901, the New Liberal theorist and politician C. F. G. Masterman opened his book *The Heart of the Empire* with the bold assertion that "[t]he Victorian Era has definitely closed."⁷ Yet Virginia Woolf, for one, did not agree with his assessment, famously noting in *Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown* (1924) that "on or about December 1910 human character changed."⁸ In that essay, as we shall see in chapter 1, she accuses the Edwardians of failing—especially in the cultural sphere—to enact the definitive break with the past that was being predicted on Victoria's death, and which Woolf now associated with the first postimpressionist exhibition in London ten years later. Among others, Robert Graves pushed back her date for the decisive change a few years, so that the experience of military service during World War I became the key transitional moment, just as Leonard Woolf's memoirs later concurred that "the war of 1914 destroyed a new, and civilized or semi-civilized, way of life which had established itself or was establishing itself all over Europe."⁹ Yet in 1935 George Dangerfield surveyed the recent history of Britain and wrote critically of the idea that it was the war that finally broke the hold of the past: "It is easier," he notes, "to think of Imperial England, beribboned and bestarred and splendid, living in majestic profusion up till the very moment of war. Such indeed was its appearance, the appearance of a somewhat decadent Empire and a careless democracy. But I do not think its social history will be written on these terms." Dangerfield concludes that an uneven but decisive shift in the national character had in fact already begun, almost subconsciously, in the early years of George V's reign.¹⁰

Clearly, these commentators found no consensus about what constituted the Victorian "character" or about what might constitute a final break with it. Indeed, if we wanted to bring the sequence up to date, we could add Stefan Collini's tongue-in-cheek suggestion that "in or about May 1979, human character changed," a reference to the election of the Thatcher

4 government with its stated intention of a return to “Victorian values”—presumably the same ones that, if we take his statement at face value, Collini believes had actually been retained up to that point.¹¹ The entire sequence is strikingly reminiscent of what Raymond Williams once described as a moving escalator of nostalgic remembrance in his work on the literary pastoral.¹² If that genre consistently finds the present wanting when set against an idealized version of the past, usually located in the writer’s own childhood, then assertions of modernity seem conversely to privilege the here and now as an escape from the pressing weight of history. On Williams’s account, however, we never actually arrive at the golden age of pastoral perfection, since one person’s youthful paradise is always also another’s debased present: thus, the escalator moves backward from Leavis’s disappearing “organic community” to Hardy and George Eliot recalling the 1830s, and back through Cobbett and Clare and Goldsmith and so on, until the search ends at Arcadia or Eden, or some other space that seems to exist outside of history itself. Modernist accounts throw the escalator into reverse, pushing the decisive point of transformation forward instead of back in time, but the effect seems almost identical; indeed, it is tempting to conclude that a pure moment of *modernism*, free from the hangovers of the Victorian past, is just as mythical as the Arcadian paradises of pastoral.

The starting point for this study, then, is the observation that we never really encounter “the Victorians” themselves but instead a mediated image like the one we get when we glance into our rearview mirrors while driving. The image usefully condenses the paradoxical sense of looking forward to see what is behind us, which is the opposite of what we do when we read history in order to figure out the future. It also suggests something of the inevitable distortion that accompanies any mirror image, whether we see it as resulting from the effects of political ideology, deliberate misreading, exaggeration, or the understandable simplification of a complex past. Margaret Thatcher’s call for a return to “Victorian values,” encoded in a 1983 speech that enumerated hard work, self-reliance, thrift, national pride, and cleanliness among the so-called perennial values inherited from her Victorian grandmother, is perhaps the most famous of these, and incidentally provides us with one example of the surprising closeness of the past.¹³

I argue that such elaborations of the essence of the Victorians provide a particular challenge for people who call themselves “Victorianists.” This may equally be the case with other periods, of course, each of which have suffered from the processes of simplification that are the necessary starting

point for descriptions of anything like “the Elizabethan World Picture” (in E. M. Tillyard’s famous phrase) or other versions of the periodic *zeitgeist* or *weltanschauung*. With few exceptions, though, those other periods have not had the kind of purchase on the present that Thatcher’s appeal exemplifies, in part because they are simply more distant in time; it is hard, for instance, to imagine anyone taking seriously a similar call to return to Jacobean or Regency values. This is not to suggest that Thatcher found unanimous consent for her particular version of the Victorian past, of course; in a strikingly ineffective example of what I will be describing as a strategy of simple inversion, future Labour Party leader Neil Kinnock responded that “[t]he ‘Victorian Values’ that ruled were cruelty, misery, drudgery, squalor and ignorance,” but his party nonetheless went on to lose the next election by a wide margin.¹⁴

My argument in this book is that such efforts, however well intentioned, do nothing to unsettle commonsense assumptions about what the Victorians represented and may even paradoxically help consolidate them. Writing about the project of feminist art history, Janet Wolff has identified this strategy as “the politics of correction,” arguing that “filling in the gaps” in a male-centered canon of art will only “modify the discourse in minor ways, leaving it essentially unchallenged.”¹⁵ I will be arguing something similar about the interplay between a revivalist position like Thatcher’s and its critical mirror image, that what emerges from their encounter is a prevailing popular consensus about the defining features of the Victorian age—among which we could list a confidently triumphalist imperialism, a rigid separation of public and private spheres, a repressive sexual morality, and an ascendant hegemony of bourgeois values—that can easily accommodate elements of either argument. Thus, Thatcher’s personal morality can appear as the by-product of sexual repression and the Protestant work ethic, while Kinnock’s painful social conditions might be glossed as the regrettable flipside of industrialization. (Two press cuttings from 1998 illustrate this particular dichotomy: in one, referencing Thatcher’s emphasis on the personal, Britain is praised for “becoming less Victorian” in the wake of Princess Diana’s death, having finally abandoned “the phlegmatic belief in coping, the buttoned-up stoicism [that] were once not the outdated fashion of the ruling class, or only male virtues, but a visible part of the national character”; in the other, a striking manufacturing worker holds up a placard that insists on industrial relations as the hallmark of the past century, proclaiming that “BERISFORD/MAGNET ARE VICTORIAN EMPLOYERS.”)¹⁶

6 Faced with the persistence of what Roland Barthes termed the commonsensical "doxa" of public opinion about the Victorians, what should a Victorianist do? There is the sometimes laborious work of opposition, as illustrated by Kinnock's counterargument or the assorted reviewers who painstakingly redressed the blind spots and distortions in Gertrude Hoffmann's tendentiously Thatcherite diatribe, *The De-moralization of Society* (1994), which I discuss in chapter 4. Such corrective efforts clearly shade into ideology critique, asking what John McGowan has termed "the Bakhtinian question of whom this discourse addresses (answers, contests, affirms) and to what ends."¹⁷ I want to mention briefly two other strategies here, each of which has had some success while nonetheless leaving the basic shape of the doxological Victorian largely intact. The first is exemplified by Steven Marcus's study of nineteenth-century pornography, *The Other Victorians* (1966), which—as its title makes clear—is interested in those who do not belong in our received notions of the Victorians. This approach readily extends to other "others" (feminists, colonial subjects, socialists, sexual minorities, and so on): indeed, historical scholarship in the twentieth century is full of such efforts to elevate those excluded from the dominant records, from A. L. Morton's class-conscious *A People's History of England* (1938) through Sheila Rowbotham's landmark work of feminist recovery, *Hidden from History* (1974), to a text of the same name, edited by Martin Duberman and others (1989), aimed at "reclaiming the gay and lesbian past."¹⁸ Implicit in this rhetorical framework, though, and made explicit by Marcus, is the way in which it presumes a normative definition against which "otherness" can be measured: indeed, he notes that "this otherness was of a specific Victorian kind," and after exhaustive evidence of this he concludes that "[t]he view of human sexuality as it was represented in the subculture of pornography and the view of sexuality held by the official culture were reversals, mirror images, negative analogues of each other."¹⁹ The problem, of course, is that such an approach tends to leave uninterrogated that "official" view as the normative pole of definition, although it should be said that the work of Michel Foucault, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and others has done much to complicate this kind of binary thinking.

A second strategy, which resonates in part with Marcus's "others" and with Matthew Sweet's archaeology of surprisingly modern Victorian pleasures, is to stress those elements of nineteenth-century society or culture that most closely resemble our own. In their introduction to a collection of essays called *Victorian Afterlife* (2000), John Kucich and Dianne Sadoff sug-

gest that "[r]ewritings of Victorian culture have flourished, we believe, because the postmodern fetishizes notions of cultural emergence, and because the nineteenth century provides multiple eligible sites for theorizing such emergence. . . . [T]he cultural matrix of nineteenth-century England," they continue, "joined various and possible stories about cultural rupture that, taken together, overdetermine the period's availability for the postmodern exploration of cultural emergence."²⁰ Such an approach, which Jay Clayton terms "identitarian" in his *Charles Dickens in Cyberspace* (2003), yields some immediate benefits, enabling a full-fledged narrative—or multiple narratives—of Victorian otherness to be glimpsed beneath the surface, as it were, of our understanding of the period itself.²¹

In suggesting that such an attention to emergent formations allows for a reconsideration of the temporality of historical rupture, by positing instead multiple and overlapping processes of transition, the approach laid out by Kucich and Sadoff would presumably problematize the conventional modernist historiography, which sees "the Victorian" as superseded by something else—variously termed "the modern," "the Edwardian," or "the Georgian." We might, however, see emergence itself as a problematic concept, which only defers the troubled question of definition: after all, if what draws us to the nineteenth century are those ways in which it anticipates the postmodern present, then how do we characterize *that*? As was the case with Marcus's "other Victorians," it is hard to shake the suspicion that our understanding of the norm has remained, even if (as famously for Marx's version of capitalism) it can be shown to contain its own grave diggers; regardless of whether it is seen as being transcended by its own emergent possibilities or challenged by its debased and dissenting voices, a baseline conception of "the Victorian" has essentially stayed the same. In a way, we are back to Thatcher versus Kinnock and a logic of split perception that only reaffirms the ways in which such binaries get set up in the first place. (Who, after all, would question that periods produce their own others and/or anticipate their successors and/or contain unprocessed elements that might turn out to be potentially useful in the future?) One possibility I consider in this book is that our idea of "the Victorian" in fact serves as a condensation of contrary tendencies and oppositions, which we can see hardening over the subsequent century into doxological assumptions and attitudes that are henceforth available for a range of political and cultural forces; these in turn advance by positioning themselves as for or against a partial image of the whole, in the process helping to constitute each other in a form of dialectical spiral. In a sense, "the Victorian" has become a kind

- 8 of style and is thereby subject to the vicissitudes of twentieth-century fashion, with its rapid cycles of obsolescence and revivalism.



Each of the assessments I have noted up to now has begun by posing what would seem to me to be false questions: was the Victorian age a good or bad thing, and are we for or against it? In each case, what goes unremarked is precisely the extent to which these questions are always already inflected by those doxological assumptions about what the age represents in the popular consciousness. Matthew Sweet's *Inventing the Victorians* is the most obvious example here, with its telling opening inviting his readers to "[s]uppose that everything we think we know about the Victorians is wrong."²² Setting aside his imagining of a contemporary consensus here—would "we" all agree?—what seems most remarkable about his book is that it focuses so heavily on the everyday lives and mass culture of the nineteenth century: sensation, advertising, drug use, table manners, furnishings, and so on. As each chapter ends with the repeated revelation that the Victorians in fact anticipated contemporary attitudes and amusements, it is hard not to conclude that this could be true in each case and still not fundamentally revise our understanding of the period. Such a conclusion is even more explicit in journalistic accounts like the *Economist's*, which can recognize a continuity in the daily lives of the privileged and also a fundamental reorganization of the national social structure, or the *Guardian's* counterbalancing of space exploration and cricket matches. I am not pointing to a category mistake here, as if economics were necessarily more crucial than entertainment in our retrospective assessments. Instead, it is the central premise of critical judgment that seems to be at fault, with the associated inference that any such listing or balance sheet might point us to "the spirit of the age," to use an appropriately Victorian phrasing.²³ Even Margaret Thatcher and Neil Kinnock could have been equally right about the inheritances of the past and yet hopelessly mistaken to the extent that they each sought to identify the *definitive* values of the time.

Interestingly, there was little consensus about the central meaning of the period on the near-simultaneous ending of the nineteenth century and (a month later) Victoria's reign. Some retrospective summaries in the press might strike us now as just plain odd, as when the normally conservative *Saturday Review* listed as the three abiding features of nineteenth-century life "Darwinism, tractarianism, and socialism," before suggesting that the period dispelled forever "the false sentimentality and ideality which used

to ignore the body, or despise it as an impediment to the soul."²⁴ Looking in the opposite direction, the *St. James Gazette* wrote that the "material progress" of the Victorian age had unfortunately brought with it the debilitating assumption "that mankind was going to settle everything by logic and common sense" or "supply and demand." Darwinism, it noted, has been shown "to account for a little less than was hoped of it," which explained a continuing and even virulent strain of religious enthusiasm and superstition.²⁵ On the Left, *Reynolds Weekly Newspaper* mocked claims to national progress, commenting that while "the world has seen some changes in the Victorian Era," the labeling of these shifts as "improvements" or "progress" requires us to ask in what *direction* the nation was progressing: "To loftier ideals, a happier common life, a lessening of the strain after sordid things? No; the progress has not been in that direction; on the contrary it has been the reverse."²⁶

If these excerpts give us some sense of the public discourse at the moment of Victoria's death, others illustrate the difficulty of looking ahead to a new century or a new reign. On the Right, the *Saturday Review* expressed a palpable hesitation: "Whatever the twentieth century and the reign of King Edward VII may have in store," it editorialized, "we may be sure that it will not be quite like the Victorian age, will probably differ much from it."²⁷ Toward the political center, we find a similarly cautionary tone in the *Pall Mall Gazette*, which predicted possible disaster in the Boer War: "It is for us to make sure that New Year's Day, 1901, shall not find the Empire of England on the way to the same fate as those out of which it has been built up."²⁸ On the Left, the certainties of *Reynolds* again: "In our judgment, the first year of the new century will prove to have been the last year of good trade and we must look forward to a period of lean years and to decline in trade as compared with our two great rivals, America and Germany. Unhappily, instead of preparing for this, we have squandered an enormous sum in South Africa and, if we do not make peace, we shall squander much more."²⁹ Clearly, these statements are articulating real political differences, but what links them is a rhetoric of incipient panic, which predominates whether or not the journal is for the queen, the empire, or "progress."

Each of these statements contains what I take to be a decisive feature of twentieth-century anti-Victorianism: the idea that something termed (on the basis of variable determining factors) "the Victorian" has, for better or worse, now come to an end. One of the most telling responses to the end of Victoria's reign came from the *St. James Gazette*, which wrote on her death of how "[t]he period before her accession, when a King and not a

10 Queen reigned in the land, was a period of long past history, so remote as to seem to belong to a different epoch, a different civilization. . . . She figured in our imagination less as a Person than as an Institution—an Institution immovably fixed in the political and social Order of our age, related to the passing men and passing events of history, but not like them.³⁰ Here, the age of Victoria stretches back into the recesses of remembered time, while its ending provoked a kind of existential crisis for the nation, which now had to reimagine those institutions and social structures that had seemed so inextricably associated with the monarch herself.³¹ In reality, of course, those same structures were readily transformable, in part through a redefinition of the function of the state, which benefited from now being recognized as possessing a relative autonomy from the sovereign. At the same time, Edwardian and Georgian modernists set about the demystification of the figure of the queen, as illustrated by Virginia Woolf's use of the name "Mrs. Brown" for her emblem of stolid subjectivity: as John Madden's 1997 film of the same name reminds us, the epithet was used by *Punch* in particular to mock the widowed queen's relationship with her Scottish servant, John Brown.³²

While the Woolfs, Lytton Strachey, and the rest of the Bloomsbury Group are usually thought to have sparked a modernist anti-Victorianism, peaking in 1918 with the publication of Strachey's *Eminent Victorians*, I am suggesting that the groundwork had been prepared immediately on the queen's death—and indeed, in the "decadent" nineties. It is less my project here, though, to trace the roots of this discourse than it is to track its internal contradictions and limits, which led to its continual reassertion and restatement throughout the twentieth century. The Bloomsbury critique of the ruling ideology they inherited from the recent past can seem as vaguely incoherent as the "Group" itself, which renounced any collective identity beyond a loose agglomeration of friends; rejecting this fashioned self-image, Raymond Williams has usefully identified it as a recognizable "fraction of the existing English upper class . . . at once against its dominant ideas and values and still willingly, in all immediate ways, part of it." While it came to be connected, in sometimes quite tangential ways, with forces of liberalization and modernism, the Bloomsbury hallmark was, he concludes, its expression of "a new style," the keynote of which was an outward projection of the personal register of conscience. Crucially, the various positions they advocated did not need to cohere in any programmatic way, because (as Williams argues) their "individual integration has already taken place, at the level of the 'civilized individual,' the singular definition of all

the best people, secure in their autonomy but turning their free attention this way and that, as occasion requires."¹³³

Extending this analysis, we might say that for Bloomsbury "the Victorian" also denoted a style, ironically one with its roots in the very areas of culture and domestic life that Matthew Sweet and the *Economist* saw as continuing far into the twentieth century. Such assessments are almost by definition subjective and inconclusive, which helps explain the evident note of disappointment that recurs throughout the early decades of the twentieth century each time commentators such as Woolf, Strachey, Robert Graves, and George Dangerfield recognized that society as a whole had not been fundamentally transformed by a new monarch on the throne, or by postimpressionism, or even by World War I. In this sense, the realization that others did not feel especially "modern" was what could sustain the fractional status of the Bloomsbury vanguard, while also undermining its efforts at a social analysis that always took the Group's own immediate experience as its starting point.

Chapter 1 of *The Victorians in the Rearview Mirror* uses a close reading of the writings of the Woolfs, Clive Bell, and Strachey to suggest that there is little concrete agreement even among the Bloomsbury friends about what actually constituted the sins of the Victorian period; indeed, I argue that *Eminent Victorians* expresses instead the radical unknowability of the previous century, which for Strachey represented an age defined by contradiction. As a result of that instability, as I argue in chapter 2, Bloomsbury anti-Victorianism rapidly gave way to a more positive view of the past that was articulated at the fringes of modernism (and of Bloomsbury itself) by figures such as E. M. Forster and Evelyn Waugh. And yet, the force of earlier critiques conditioned the form and extent of their nostalgia, which never quite manages to articulate a full-fledged endorsement of the Victorians. Instead, texts such as *Howards End* (1910) and *Brideshead Revisited* (1945) situate themselves at an important fault line of modernism, managing at once to argue a necessarily backward vision in the face of an increasingly abhorrent modernity—one that, incidentally, bore many of the characteristics previously attributed to the nineteenth century—as well as the impossibility of an unproblematic nostalgia. In that sense, I see these texts as inheriting from Strachey a view of the past that is internally divided and thus open to a deconstructive close reading that looks to accentuate the conflicted nature of modernist attitudes toward the nineteenth century.

One symptom of that conflict, as I have suggested, is the effort to reduce the Victorian to a style—and one whose primary appeal lay as much

12 in terms of dress and design as in a set of ideological or ethical beliefs. As I highlight at the end of chapter 2, such a move worries a commentator like Roger Fry, whose 1919 essay on "The Ottoman and the Whatnot" mocks the revivalist fashion from within the terms set by Bloomsbury. What it manages to achieve, for him, is the reduction of the nineteenth century to a set of aesthetic objects and, at the same time, the denial of aesthetic value itself, since he can only view a fondness for Victoriana as produced out of an associated set of "historical images they conjure up" that are just as inevitably false. What matters, he concludes with an air of resignation, is that such images "exist for us, and for most people, far more vividly and poignantly than any possible aesthetic feeling."³⁴ But this reading seems conditioned by the prior assumption that an ottoman can furnish no pleasures other than through its association with a (sufficiently distanced) way of living. What it crucially misses is the spirit of irony that underpins the revival of Victoriana among the social and artistic elites, including a circle of undergraduates at Oxford centered around Waugh. In part, then, this development reflects an outflanking maneuver by a new generation of avant-gardists who sought to displace Bloomsbury by reversing its hatred of the past. As Robert Graves and Alan Hodge describe it in their 1940 memoir *The Long Week-End*, the "neo-Victorianism" of the twenties sought to revive forms of nineteenth-century dress in particular (including bowler hats, stockings, printed chiffon, and cameo jewelry) and yet married it with "the neo" of modern materials, such as chrome and Bakelite.³⁵

From this point on, I would argue, "the Victorian" serves as a continuous reference point of twentieth-century discourse, whether it is seen primarily in terms of politics or fashion.³⁶ Chapter 3 examines a later stage in this history from the 1980s, with the phenomenon of "heritage cinema" in Britain at the time of Thatcherism's political ascendancy. Whereas this cycle of visual adaptations (most famously, the films of Ismail Merchant and James Ivory, and the literary productions broadcast on public television's *Masterpiece Theatre*) has typically been seen by critics as a cultural by-product of Thatcher's promotion of "Victorian values," I argue that we need to look elsewhere to understand the connection to the nineteenth century. Their source material is only selectively drawn from the period, with major clusters in the Regency (most notably, the novels of Jane Austen) and at the *fin de siècle*. That latter group of texts, including works by Thomas Hardy, Joseph Conrad, Henry James, and Merchant-Ivory's beloved E. M. Forster, exemplifies a literary impressionism that paradoxically seems particularly ill-suited to visual translation, given their stress on narrative unreliability and perspective.

This insight leads me to consider that what makes heritage cinema seem “Victorian” is its visual style, which emphasizes a concrete material reality through its overriding concern for the authenticity of period details (such as costume, props, and settings). In this sense, I argue along with Jennifer Green-Lewis that we habitually think of the Victorians in retrospect as championing an unequivocally mimetic visual aesthetic, “humorless realists about to be shattered by modernism and the cubist war.”³⁷ In challenging such an assumption, I trace out an alternative trajectory, beginning with Victorian art-photographers like Oscar Gustave Rejlander, who conducted early experiments with combination printing and montage, and extending through antirealist tendencies in early cinema associated especially with Georges Méliès and Sergei Eisenstein. Those influences, I suggest, can be seen in a group of metacinematic heritage films, including *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* (Karel Reisz, 1981), *Bram Stoker’s Dracula* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1992), and *The Governess* (Sandra Goldbacher, 1997), that seek to place past and present in dialogue through a sustained investigation of the suppressed ideological history of visual techniques. Each film argues that there is no necessary connection between cinematic realism and either the process of literary adaptation or the Victorian period, and instead stages a far-reaching debate about the integrity of cultural texts as they are translated across artistic genres and forms.³⁸

Beginning with chapter 3, I shift from the more neutral tone of the deconstructionist, who is content to highlight the internal tensions within modernism’s relationship to the past, to a more assertive one that also seeks to restore and revalue aspects of that past that have been consciously occluded in late-twentieth-century public discourse about the Victorians: an experimental visual culture, a commitment to a welfare safety net provided by the state, and a “Dickensian” novel form that stresses the structural interdependence of diverse social groups and classes. In doing so, I hope to resist succumbing to the approach I discussed earlier that holds up repressed or anticipatory elements as the true essence of the period. What marks these elements, as I discuss them in the final three chapters of this book, is the conflicted and contradictory nature of each: art photography, for instance, is initially undertaken and justified as a superior form of mimetic realism; state welfare provision accepts many of the assumptions behind private and philanthropic approaches, especially concerning the moral responsibilities of the individual; and what I term a “neo-Dickensian” literary realism in postwar fiction emerges alongside a simultaneous experimentation with modernist stream-of-consciousness narration.

14 In chapter 4, I address what is perhaps the least acknowledged (or most suppressed) inheritance of the Victorian period, its progressive conception of the responsibilities of the state. Assessing the ideal balance between the central state and the liberal subject is, I argue in the early chapters of *The Victorians in the Rearview Mirror*, one of the key fault lines within the Bloomsbury Group, for whom the Victorians come to represent both a systematic organization of public life (one that presses upon the private individual) and—often at the same time—the principle of laissez-faire. Thus, when E. M. Forster called for a combination of the “new economy” and the “old morality,”³⁹ he saw the recent past as representing a valuable repository of the latter, needing only to be supplemented by a planned economic system that could centralize the provision and distribution of goods and services; yet this is precisely the kind of thinking to which the Woolfs objected, as a residue of a discredited Victorianism that privileged collective social obligations at the expense of the needs of the individual.

Thatcherism’s proposed welfare reforms, by contrast, were rooted in a version of the Victorian period that stressed a minimalist state and maximum freedom for the individual and private enterprise. And yet, by the end of the nineteenth century, there seems to have been a growing consensus that only a centralized state could redress the large-scale problems that were the inevitable consequences of an unstable business cycle, most notably mass unemployment. This is the implication of the descriptive studies undertaken by Charles Booth and other late-nineteenth-century sociologists, and it finds its expression in the policy recommendations of the Minority Report of the Royal Commission on the Poor Laws and the actions of the New Liberal government that came to power in the first decade of the twentieth century. At a more theoretical level, Matthew Arnold’s *Culture and Anarchy* (1869) made a parallel case for state education by arguing that only a standardized curriculum would avert the problems that follow from leaving schooling in the hands of particular professions, classes, or churches—a system that stresses sectional identities at the expense of any sense of a greater national good and as such merely reproduces existing political interests and antagonisms. On such evidence, I argue that the Victorians provide a better basis for defending than attacking the foundation of the modern welfare state, which has come under considerable pressure from neoconservatives in Britain and the United States.

Thatcherism’s debate about the relative responsibilities of the individual and the state finds a fascinating corollary in a simultaneous division inside contemporary fiction, which moves in one direction to develop high

modernism's experiments with first-person narration and in the other back to an earlier model of Dickensian realism. At a time when Thatcher herself proclaimed that there was "no such thing as society,"⁴⁰ I argue through a reading of novels by John Irving, Peter Carey, and Sarah Waters that the latter tendency works instead to assert networks of intersubjective connection and dependence, whereas the first-person narratives of novelists such as Irving Welsh and James Kelman suggest a homologous retreat into the (typically damaged) subjectivity of a private consciousness. Irving's *The Cider House Rules* (1985), Carey's *Jack Maggs* (1997), and Waters's *Fingersmith* (2002) all significantly revise and extend the fictional template they inherit from novels like *Oliver Twist* and *Great Expectations*, however: all three, for instance, improvise upon Dickens's orphan stories to comment upon contemporary political debates about public welfare and abortion rights while incorporating a more explicit discussion of sexual identities and practices than the Victorian novelist could. *Jack Maggs* goes furthest, perhaps, in pursuing a revisionary agenda, seeking to rewrite *Great Expectations* from the perspective of the convict Maggs (a modified version of Magwitch), who comes finally to affirm an Australian identity at the expense of a cherished fantasy of Englishness that cannot be sustained once he returns to the imperial metropolis. In this way, as well as in Waters's depiction of the "other Victorian" world of pornography, the prototype of the Dickensian novel is lauded for its effort at representing an expansive and interdependent social world, yet also criticized for placing explicit limits on that world by enforcing the boundaries of national identity and cultural respectability.

In a closing epilogue, "Postcolonial Victorians," I use *Jack Maggs* as a starting point for considering more fully the spatial dimensions of the Victorians' legacy, mindful that their influence was felt throughout the vast expanse of the British empire. Just as it would be absurd to assume that such influence disappeared overnight in Britain itself, whether in 1901 or 1914 or any other date we might select, so we need to understand the precise forms and areas of life in which it has lingered in places like India, Africa, Australia, and the Caribbean. In exploring a number of site-specific examples of a colonial inheritance, I finally consider the possibility that has been implicit at least in much of this book: that "the Victorian" need not be set in opposition to "the modern" and may even be a signifier of modernity in some instances. It is only the persistence of a particular version of modernism, in its earliest revolt against its forebears, that prevents us from recognizing this.

Ultimately, the Victorian inheritance is always a conflicted one that it makes little sense to wholeheartedly endorse or reject. To the extent that

- 16 people across the globe are still struggling to sort through its influence, marking and celebrating continuities as well as diversions from a supposed "Victorian" blueprint of domestic order and political power, this suggests how little separation we actually have from the nineteenth century. The iconic warning we see when driving, that "objects in the mirror are closer than they appear," thus nicely expresses a feeling we may have about a period that no longer seems as distant as we might like to think, but instead forms the horizon for many of our most pressing debates. In this book I will discuss a series of such moments, when a recognition of a surprising (and perhaps frightening) proximity to the past occurred—at very different times and in different places—to a variety of twentieth-century people.