INTRODUCTION

Post-Victorian Woolf

On 22 September 1925 Woolf noted in her diary that she had been approached by her cousin Herbert Fisher to write a book 'for the Home University Series on Post Victorian' (*D* III. 42). Though she turned the offer down for reasons we shall return to – 'To think of being battened down in the hold of those University dons fairly makes my blood run cold' (*D* III. 43) – it is worth speculating on why she was thus approached, and on what she (or Fisher) would have understood by the term 'Post Victorian' (or 'Post-Victorian' as it is used in this present book) in 1925. Did Fisher see Woolf as a writer in the vanguard of a modern movement that had definitively moved on from the Victorian, the stress thereby falling on the sense of 'Post' to mean 'after'? Or did he (which is rather more unlikely) have a sense of Woolf's position as I investigate it in the following pages, that is, as a writer whose modern and innovatory practice coexists with a powerful nostalgia for various elements of Victorian culture and the desire to proclaim these in her work? In this sense, 'Post' has more of the value it carries in expressions like Post-Impressionism or post-modernism, a complex relationship of difference and debt that is the subject of this study.[1]

There are several occurrences of the term 'Post-Victorian' that predate the OED's first citing of it (in 1938), and already in 1918 Herbert Asquith is projecting a 'post-Victorian' era that will be unable to rival the achievements of the Victorian age.[2] This sense of rivalry between a period and its successor characterises *The Post Victorians*, an anonymous compilation of short biographies published in 1933 with an introduction by W. R. Inge, the Dean of St Paul's, who stoutly defends his right, as one born between 1850 and

1870, to be seen as a Victorian proper and thus as belonging to a 'finer' age than that of the present.[3] Several of the contributors to the volume, however, take the opposite view, crying up those whose careers, spanning the later nineteenth and earlier twentieth centuries, declare their rejection of Victorian 'rigidity' and intolerance.[4] Although in this oppositional sense 'Post-Victorian' is used synonymously in the volume with Edwardian, or Georgian, the occurrence of the term itself, in its differential self-definition, suggests the importance of the period being rejected, while the volume as a whole shows the consistent use of such period labels in a spirit of partisanship.

Woolf's Post-Victorianism is, as remarked, a much more complicated affair, comprising affiliation with and dissent from her Victorian past, which reciprocally and necessarily signifies affiliation with and dissent from her modern present. T. S. Eliot argued in his *Horizon* obituary notice that Woolf could be seen as maintaining 'the dignified and admirable tradition of Victorian upper middle-class culture' in her relationship with her readers, where 'the producer and the consumer of art were on an equal footing', a claim we return to in considering Woolf's aloofness from the increasing professionalisation and specialisation that she saw overtaking modern letters, and her alarm at modern forms of publicity.[5] Eliot's statement indicates how much Woolf clung to models of writing and reading she was brought up with, and how far a Woolfian piety towards these modified her embrace of modernism's proclamation of the 'new'. When in his enthusiasm for Joyce's *Ulysses* Eliot told her that it 'destroyed the whole of the 19th Century', Woolf resisted such a claim (*D* II. 203), and her frequently expressed admiration for the 'giants' of Victorian writing indicates how little, unlike some of her contemporaries, she was dismissive of the English nineteenth century. Elizabeth French Boyd has suggested that 'Bloomsbury' more generally 'was rebelling against the Victorian world, but it was also rooted in it and unable to escape wholly being the transmitters of its traditions and its legacies'.[6] The apologetic note here ('unable to escape wholly') is now somewhat obsolete as an increasing number of critics has recognised how deep and prolonged Woolf's attachment to aspects of the 'Victorian world' was, though it remains

under-acknowledged how far this distinguishes her even from other members of Bloomsbury itself, such as her husband, Leonard, whose outlook was informed by a much more forthright 'battle', in his own words, against 'what for short one may call Victorianism'.[7] We shall see more than once in this study how Woolf's own supposedly fundamental anti-Victorianism is sustained as a position by critics refusing to recognise key differences between her and 'Bloomsbury', and indeed how adopting the latter as an umbrella category often means in effect ceasing to talk about Woolf altogether as she becomes subsumed within the coterie term.

'With hindsight', as Jane Wheare has remarked, 'we can see that [Woolf] has as much in common with her Victorian predecessors as with modernist writers.'[8] Hermione Lee's biography of Woolf returns frequently to a similar assessment:

> Virginia Woolf was 'modern'. But she was also a late Victorian. The Victorian family past filled her fiction, shaped her political analyses of society and underlay the behaviour of her social group. And it was a powerful ingredient, of course, in her definition of her self.[9]

Lee indeed uses the term 'Post-Victorian' a few times in her biography to summarise Woolf's complex relation to her familial past, unlike other critics who on occasion use the term merely in the rather inert sense, noted above, of 'no longer Victorian'. If this present book attempts to reclaim the Woolfian retrospect in more positive terms than is often accorded it, resisting thereby what has been called the 'Great Victorian Myth', or belief that Victorian domestic life was exclusively one of 'thwarted motherhood, tyrannical husbands and fathers, and spiritual frustration in dark, rambling houses', I have no desire to run to the opposite extreme and convert Woolf into a simple neo-Victorian, so to speak.[10] Thus the reactionary figure found in the pages of Quentin Bell's biography – 'She belonged, inescapably, to the Victorian world of Empire, Class and Privilege' is not only a simplification in itself,[11] but has encouraged the extreme reaction, of which Jane Marcus has been the principal spokesperson, of producing an entirely progressive, democratic and even 'socialist' Woolf that turns this very formulation of Bell's precisely on its

head.[12] Marcus's insistence on Woolf's 'passionate hatred for the Victorian patriarchal family' and on her 'utopian vision of social equality for women and working-class men' suggests antithetical positions in Woolf's work between a past to be fled and a future to be embraced, whereas the obsessive Woolfian retrospect, even when it considers the patriarchal family, is much more uncertain than this (the term 'utopian', as I shall argue, is also practically the last that should be applied to her).[13] And although we can hope that such extreme readings of Woolf now belong to an outmoded polemic, there are plenty of current responses to her still upholding, if more indirectly, an essentially conservative or radical Woolf which precisely obscures what I represent as her Post-Victorian position.[14]

This position is more than a Victorianism that 'combines fascination with critique', in Victoria Rosner's words, if that fascination is merely seen as something Woolf was in helpless throes to, and would repudiate if she could.[15] It can also be misrepresented as part of a traditionalism that, in Jane de Gay's welcome and persuasive emphasis on a 'less sweepingly radical' and more retrospectively orientated Woolf, committed her to the 'prizing of past literature over contemporary writing' or the simple 'denigration of writings by her contemporaries'.[16] If the former comment ignores Woolf's constructive and purposeful retrieval of the past, which I consider in the following pages, the latter tells only half the story of how contemporary writing, while indeed disturbing and upsetting Woolf, also excited and enthralled her. If Woolf at times looked back at the Victorian era with 'passionate hatred' in Marcus's phrase, we also frequently find an attitude of admiration, which indicates not a desire to 'return' to the past, but the recognition of an inheritance that can be serviceable to modernity in various ways. This is perhaps nowhere better summarised than in Woolf's 1928 obituary on Lady Strachey, who, mother, wife and member of the upper middle class, was also 'the type of the Victorian woman at her finest – many-sided, vigorous, adventurous, advanced':

> Last summer, though too weak to walk any more, she sat on her balcony and showered down upon the faces that she could not see a vast maternal

benediction. It was as if the Victorian age in its ripeness, its width, with all its memories and achievements behind it were bestowing its blessing. And we should be blind indeed if we did not wave back to her a salute full of homage and affection. (*E* IV. 573, 576)

It is the blindness of a self-regarding, self-sufficient modernity that Woolf accosts here, plus the refusal to pay homage to the Victorian at its 'finest' – significantly embodied in a 'maternal' figure in a gendered recognition we shall return to. But such blindness continues in much writing on Woolf herself with regard to her Post-Victorian positioning, confirmed as it seems by much better known and notorious (for my purposes) statements like 'on or about December 1910 human character changed' (*E* III. 421), a declaration that it is frequently argued puts Woolf at the forefront of the modernist 'call for rupture'.[17] Taken in isolation even from positions in the same essay ('Mrs Brown is eternal, Mrs Brown is human nature, Mrs Brown changes only on the surface', p. 430), such a proclamation (often linked to the occurrence of the first Post-Impressionist exhibition in the same year) announces, it would seem, Woolf's unreserved embrace of the new. Thus we find it blazoned at the head of the opening paragraph of Pedersen's and Mandler's *After the Victorians* as the starting-point for the modern disowning of the recent past which their volume seeks to challenge.[18]

Indeed, it is difficult to find any of the recent spate of re-evaluations of the Victorian period, occasioned by our arrival at the new century and the centenary of the Queen's death in 1901, that does not take Woolf (generally hanging onto the coat-tails of Lytton Strachey) as bête noire in the attempt, as Matthew Sweet puts it, to 'liberate the Victorians' from modern prejudices.[19] Scholarship that holds no such pro-Victorian brief has likewise been unable to resist the lure of Woolf's 'December 1910' as definitive watershed, from the cultural history of Peter Stansky to specialised Woolfian studies like that by Ann Banfield, concerned, respectively, to ignore the pervasive Woolfian insistence on historical continuity or wishing to define what *is* modern in Woolf through merging her work unreservedly with Roger Fry's Post-Impressionism.[20] While Banfield explores in meticulous detail the antecedents of Fry's aesthetics

and Woolf's response to Fry in a tradition of (Cambridge) philosophical realism that encompasses Woolf's own father, she argues that this intellectual affiliation yet involves a radical break with the past in the social sphere. Thus in the space of two pages (pp. 14–15) she brings together what have become practically the three clichés of Woolfian criticism in its positing her identification with modernity: the December 1910 comment, the words on the 'Georgian cook' from the same essay ('a creature of sunshine and fresh air' compared with the Victorian cook who 'lived like a leviathan in the lower depths', *E* III. 422) and the 'revelation' of the light and air of 46 Gordon Square after the 'rich red gloom' of 22 Hyde Park Gate, described in Woolf's 'Old Bloomsbury' memoir (*MOB*, p. 184). Although Banfield doesn't go quite as far as claiming the second of these instances as key evidence for Woolf's democratic or Labourite affiliation, as some critics have done, she uses such statements as foundational support for a general Woolfian positioning where 'sunshine and fresh air are also a new ethos, one which substitutes free exchange for the "prison" – "the cage" – of the old social relations' (p. 15).

While no-one would deny the importance of these 'moments' in Woolf and what they might signify, the cost of uprooting them from the matrix of Woolf's pervasive preoccupation with the relationship between Victorian and modern culture and its sense of loss and gain, of desire and rejection, is that such well-worn 'landmarks' offer false certainties, aid misrecognition and obscure the ambivalence, including that about social class issues, that is precisely the keynote of Woolf's writing. My study brings alongside such 'landmarks' many other comments by Woolf that have been under-represented in the criticism and even at times, one is tempted to say, suppressed, instanced by that on Lady Strachey above, which we rarely find quoted. This comment is also of importance in showing how willing Woolf always was to use the term 'Victorian' as a designation with no misgivings that such labels might be reductive in encompassing broad and very varied historical periods; she is here happy moreover to personify the period in one individual. In short, Woolf needed the idea of the Victorian, and with it that of the modern, to structure her

sense of history, even though at the same time a scepticism about the use of such periodisation runs counter to this through her work, a complication that intensifies the 'Post-Victorian' as an increasing site of conflict for her. The debate over periodisation is investigated towards the end of this book, but before this we consider in a series of chapters her repeated worries that the qualities embodied in Lady Strachey and other Victorians of adventure, energy, non-specialisation (or 'width') and 'ripeness' are lacking in a cautious, narrow and in many ways debilitated modernity which in its iconoclasm, scepticism, self-importance and desire for immediate gratifications threatens to throw over the claims of the past. At the same time, there are many ways in which 'we' moderns (as she states in discussing Hemingway) 'steal a march upon the Victorians', as in our lack of prudery (*E* IV. 451). This book explores these ambiguities in Woolf's Post-Victorian stance primarily through a reading of her fiction, but it also attends to her essays, letters and diaries, considering overt statements about past–present relations alongside a detailed examination of textual structure, imagery and diction. I should make plain that this is not a study of the Victorian literary influence on Woolf, along the lines of Perry Meisel's work on Woolf and Pater or Alison Booth's on Woolf and George Eliot;[21] rather I offer an analysis of the comparison and evaluation of the Victorian and the modern that Woolf constantly undertakes in her work, as she considers the place of sentiment, romance and individualism in the modern world, together with questions relating to science, politics, social duties, gender, fashion, sexual relations and the practice of reading. It may come as a surprise how often Woolf's commentary on the 'contemporary', for all its frequent exhilaration and sense of emancipation, is accompanied by anxiety, insecurity and a sense of regret that feeds off the nostalgia informing her Victorian retrospect.

As a foretaste of the discussion, one might take what is her earliest explicit assessment of the Victorian–modern distinction in a 1916 review of a study of Samuel Butler, where Butler himself is seen as promoting the situation whereby 'today we are less ambitious, less apt to be solemn and sentimental, and display without shame a keener appetite for happiness' compared with the Victorians (*E* II. 37). If this

sounds like the note of modern emancipation, Woolf's writing as it later situates itself in the post-War world offers a series of contradictions to this statement with regard to the issue of sentimentality in particular.[22] Her constant worries about the 'sentimentality' of her own writing – 'I dont feel sure what the stock criticism [of *To the Lighthouse*] will be. Sentimental? Victorian?' (*D* III. 107) – are partly occasioned by the recognition of how vulnerable her retrospective susceptibilities might make her to such a charge, especially when these come up against characteristic modern efficiencies in fields ranging from love-making (as with the behaviour of Alan and Phoebe in chapter 6 of *A Room of One's Own*) to literary criticism. Thus in reviewing *Scrutinies*, 'a collection of critical essays by various writers' in 1931, she asks herself in 'turning over the honest . . . and unsentimental pages', 'where is love? . . . where is the sound of the sea and the red of the rose; where is music, imagery, and a voice speaking from the heart?' (*CDB*, pp. 114, 117). Her reference to Wyndham Lewis's charge of sentimentality against her (*D* IV. 308) indicates, as Leslie Hankins has suggested, how deeply affected Woolf was by the masculinist 'interdiction against sentimentality' in modern culture, and how she thereby 'found herself in a vulnerable position in the emotional minefield of modernist aesthetics'.[23] Often in celebrating such things as love, roses and 'a voice speaking from the heart', the Woolfian retrospect specifically invokes Tennyson, and the poet of *In Memoriam* in particular, himself asserting the rights of the 'heart' to an audience busy with ideas of public and scientific progress.[24] And her keenest vision of Victorian (marital) romance in the final pages of Part I of *To the Lighthouse* also gives us the fullest evocation in her writing of 'happiness' – supposedly a modern 'appetite' – in the emotion of Mrs Ramsay, which 'nothing on earth can equal' (*TL*, p. 136).

In its sense of both the losses and gains that characterise modernity, Woolf's work frequently attempts to communicate with, retrieve and proclaim a heritage that should not override what has succeeded it but will act as a resource for the present day in the problems it faces, as well as help allay its excesses, if possible through a dovetailing, or partnership, between the best qualities of the old and the new. The

search is for 'a . . . helpful relationship between the generations', to adapt a phrase she used in a review of 1919 while criticising a book of heavily biased pro-Victorian memoirs, returned to below, that impeded such a relationship (*E* III. 64). My study begins with Woolf's novel of the same year, *Night and Day*, as an act of 'reclamation' in the face of the vigorous pro- and anti-Victorian debate unleashed at the end of the First World War, before it examines in two subsequent chapters the strategies of 'synchronicity' and 'integration', which represent more complex methods of reclamation in the face of a modernity that is by now pressing its (justifiable) claims far more strongly. These various modes of retrieval inform the writing of the 1920s, and climax in *To the Lighthouse*, a kind of Woolfian consummation, which then opens the way for a more critical, though by no means dismissive, understanding of the Victorian legacy in the writing of the 1930s. In this decade Woolf develops a markedly conflicted and openly ambivalent, though no less obsessive, retrospect, leading to an 'incoherence' that leaves former devices of retrieval under great strain, as discussed in my two final chapters. The sequence of Woolf's responses is traced using the key texts announced in my chapter headings, but works like *The Voyage Out*, *Jacob's Room*, *Orlando* and *Flush* also receive attention in what follows.

Throughout her life, Woolf remained deeply attentive to the era into which she had been born, for good and ill, and this study uses the term 'Post-Victorian' as a new way to approach the blend of conservatism and radicalism that informed her outlook. Her characteristic search for continuity and conciliation results in many narratives in which the present is 'backed' by the past, as she put it in *A Sketch of the Past* (*MOB*, p. 98); I also consider how Woolf responded to the two world wars as the major interruptions and threat to these ideas of continuity and historical 'backing'. A recurrent concern is to show how both Woolf's welcome and her resistance to the new era is regularly couched in images of light, as already seen in the comments on the sunshiny Georgian cook and the interior of Gordon Square quoted above. It is a fact, however, that the new climate of light is by no means wholly synonymous with

enlightenment, just as the shadows left behind have a much more extensive significance than that of simple oppression. Whatever the complexity of Woolf's relation with the Victorian period, it remained a major presence to her throughout her writing career, the inseparable 'shadow' of a modernity inevitably seen in relation to it; a starting-point that can only be returned to in a trajectory for which the term 'Post-Victorian' seems the apt designation, and in this sense more appropriate for her and arguably more serviceable to us than the customary term 'modernist'.

And here there seems a clear distinction with other modernist writers to be emphasised. Thus in Eliot and Pound modernism found spokesmen who advanced the new by frequently proclaiming their disdain for the Victorians, even if it has long been accepted that such a dismissal conceals important literary debts, such as Pound's to Browning, or Eliot's to Tennyson or Arnold.[25] The 'tradition' both poets formulated found little to approve in the English nineteenth century, for Pound 'a rather blurry, messy sort of a period, a rather sentimentalistic, mannerish sort of a period', while the writing and art of other periods, notably the Middle Ages, offered 'that precision which I miss in the Victorians'.[26] Eliot too will frequently contrast the 'bright, hard precision' of earlier writing (in this case Marvell), with a Victorian 'mistiness' and 'vagueness', or complain of the 'ruminations' of Tennyson and Browning, or lambast Swinburne for the cloudy 'hallucination of meaning' his poetry provides.[27] Such literary judgements are aspects of a wider cultural disapproval: 'cheerfulness, optimism, and hopefulness . . . these words stood for a great deal of what one hated in the nineteenth century'.[28] Woolf's retrospect, though just as concerned to posit a 'tradition' and a sense of literary continuity within which modern writing takes its place, shows marked differences, to begin with in the extent of its geographical and historical range. If *The Common Reader* volume of 1925 embodies such a tradition, it does not go back as far as 'the rock drawing of the Magdalenian draughtsmen' or attempt to encompass 'the mind of Europe' in the (over-reaching) way that characterises Eliot's practice or Pound's.[29] In particular it shows no desire to celebrate the Dantean Middle Ages, as so many of her contemporaries