

**“The Autobiography ... of a Neo-Victorian”:
Review of Philip Davis, *Why Victorian Literature Still Matters***

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**Philip Davis, *Why Victorian Literature Still Matters*
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Philip Davis describes his *Why Victorian Literature Still Matters*, as “the autobiography, if you like, of a neo-Victorian” (p. 2). Taking a decidedly personal approach to reading nineteenth-century texts, he argues that these works’ individual appeal and connection with present-day readers keep the Victorian alive as a vital force in our contemporary culture. Purposefully rejecting what he considers to be unnecessary academic jargon, Davis relies on close, highly informed readings of canonical and non-canonical works to make his point. With its thought-provoking readings and non-pretentious display of erudition, the book could serve well as a useful introduction to the literature of the Victorian period or as a source of stimulation for teachers and scholars in the field. However, it equally deserves an audience amongst those concerned with the neo-Victorian, as it is more about how we relate to Victorian literature *today*; indeed, the concluding chapter focuses mainly on the continuing presence of the Victorian in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Despite misgivings about the dangers of categorising, Davis begins by discussing what the ‘Victorian’ as period and genre means to him and why he feels it has enduring importance. Playing on the Victorians’ own concept of phrenology, he proposes the metaphor of a “Victorian bump, a place in the mind that makes the experience of Victorian literature always matter.... It is an in-between place, psychologically as well as historically in transition” (p. 7). This definition of the Victorian as focusing on the “in-between” and the transitional serves as the major basis for the remainder of the book. Furthermore, “realism ... is the great Victorian characteristic” (in

novels, poetry and essays) for Davis, though he acknowledges Victorian realism as a thorny concept, easy to challenge and difficult to define (pp. 7-8). Davis' main interest in realist literature lies in the way it relates "to ordinary life outside the world of writing ... to questions about the existence of an external reality ... even if inside its structures [one] will never quite know or see it" (p. 8). One might fault Davis for a disavowal of modernist and postmodernist objections to the illusory and potentially deceitful and dangerous nature of such realist representation but that would miss the point. His goal is to redirect readers to Victorian texts themselves to see how they function *as* texts and to find something meaningful in the act of reading them.

Indeed, Davis makes most of his points through close readings of a wide range of texts, arranged by thematic chapters. The first two chapters coalesce around paired concepts, which Davis terms "Morality and Toughness" and "Religious Faith". Chapter 1 looks at Victorian negotiations between fixed moral stances and shifting social obligations through a wide range of familiar and not-so-familiar works, including Elizabeth Gaskell's *Ruth* (1853), John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women* (1869) and *Autobiography* (1873), Elizabeth Sewell's *Journal of a Home Life* (1867) and George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* (1860). Chapter 2, on religion and faith, examines agnosticism in the overlooked works of George MacDonald, as well as George Eliot's translation of Feuerbach's *Essence of Christianity* (1854), William James *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) and several poems by Arthur Hugh Clough. Davis stresses the importance of close readings because, to truly understand the Victorians and not simply "[know] about them," one must "imaginatively [inhabit] in oneself as reader all that it means, personally, to exist in that often frightening transition between a world that seemed natural and one that had begun to go beyond such traditional bearings" (p. 21). The best way to do this, he demonstrates, is to pay close attention to the syntax of the author's writing and dialogues between characters, as they try to verbally establish middle grounds that will work in reality.

The next three chapters are structured around different forms of Victorian writing, with one chapter each devoted to fiction, poetry and essays; although none of these are mutually exclusive and all are tied together through Davis' notion of realism. Chapter 3, on the novel, begins with readings of several Charles Dickens novels, including *A Tale of Two*

Cities (1859), *Oliver Twist* (1838), *David Copperfield* (1850) and *Dombey and Son* (1848), as well as Margaret Oliphant's posthumously published *Autobiography* (1899) and Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871-2) and *The Mill on the Floss* (1860). From these readings, Davis extrapolates greater claims to the realist novel itself as a "territory in ... the unlivable space between words ... thinking not in terms of concepts but rather in respect to half-hidden stories, neglected people, and equivocal situations" (p. 58). Such novels are "experiments in what is too amorphous or contradictory for static reasoning, models of thinking out life in struggling practice" (p. 58) – perhaps analogous to present-day views of nineteenth-century history as too profuse and paradoxical to be definitively pigeonholed. Comparable to many neo-Victorian writers' creation of art from the base materials of the nineteenth century's underbelly, Victorian texts, according to Davis, contain "poetry... hidden within the ongoing, lower medium of the ostensibly mundane" (p. 59). In a statement that echoes George Levine's influential study of British realism, *The Realistic Imagination* (1983), Davis claims that "Victorian realists do not want to transcend the physical, they want to show the metaphysical arising even from within it" (p. 72). Whether such arguments correspond with nineteenth-century views of the period, or instead constitute more of a post-structuralist, neo-Victorian projection backwards in time, remains debatable, although Davis does address these concerns in his concluding chapter.

Chapters 4 and 5 build on Davis' discussion of Victorian realism through readings of poetry – including Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Sonnets from the Portuguese* (1845-6), Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *The House of Life* (1870-81) and Alfred, Lord Tennyson's *In Memoriam* (1849) – and non-fictional prose such as John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty* (1859), John Ruskin's *The Stones of Venice* (1851-3) and Cardinal Newman's *Apologia Pro Via Sua* (1864). The story told through this multitude of texts is, according to Davis, "the story of the nineteenth-century reformation of human thinking ... the shift from ever-fixed categories ... to change and chance and flux over unimaginably long periods of time" (p. 85). This constitutes an apt description of the neo-Victorian also, with its palimpsestic over-laying of former attitudes and ideologies with modern-day perspectives, and its opposing poles of elegiac nostalgia and invective cultural critique.

Such ways in which the Victorian persistently haunts the twentieth and twenty-first centuries become the subject of the final chapter of Davis' "neo-Victorian autobiography." The opening sentence of this chapter, in which he describes Victorians as "consciously immersed in history, without a clear sense of where its changes were leading them" (p. 138) could easily describe one key attribute that persists in the present day. Indeed, just as Victorian historical narratives were actually "a way of writing about themselves" (p. 138), neo-Victorian writers imaginatively recreate a past through art and scholarship to understand something of their own situation. As Davis argues, the Victorian historical imagination involved "not just looking with hindsight" but "imagining, as a past could not, the future it turned out to have made for itself, unbeknownst, in [the] present" (p. 140). Similarly, we too are at the mercies of our imaginations in reconstructing the past and connecting it to our present, breaking time "into 'periods' only through need of explanatory convenience" (p. 140). Although not explicitly acknowledged by Davis, this ability to imagine a real, material self, existing in a specific, historical time and space, may well be one of the most persistent Victorian legacies.

Curiously, Davis insists that "the Victorian bump" is most definitely *not* to be found in self-consciously neo-Victorian works such as John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) or A.S. Byatt's *Possession* (1990) (p. 147). Instead, he locates this essential "bump" within "certain moments of personal experience", in which one becomes aware of existing in a "primary reality," paradoxically brought about by sudden "shifts of realization" such as the loss of a loved one (p. 147). This "Victorian" belief in a "primary reality" that can be depicted through language has provoked some of the period's most serious challenges by modernist and postmodernist critics. Yet realist epistemology continues to persist despite its opponents' doubts to its veracity. In fact, realist epistemology seems to invite such critique against itself; as Davis says, "Realism has always made itself deliberately vulnerable to those self-interrogations, those self-doubts, which also are its own investigative tools" (p. 155). However, Davis cautions that he does not believe "everything that has happened in modernism or postmodernism is either to be erased or made into a Victorian inheritance" (p. 157). Rather, he finds in the tradition of Victorian realism, a useful place ("*the* default position") from which to begin an understanding of modern human existence (p. 159). In spite of undeniable problems with

the realist tradition, it remains one of the most important of Victorian inheritances – although Davis does make a hasty generalisation in assuming that the self-consciously neo-Victorian, metafictional works which he dismisses cannot still contain such “Victorian” moments.

For, in fact, Davis opens his own *Why Victorian Literature Still Matters* by self-consciously associating it (and his own self) with the neo-Victorian. In spite of his reluctance to use such categories as ‘Victorian’, his book attempts to isolate traits that are uniquely so – part of the “Victorian bump” that exists in the human mind. Perhaps it is in this paradox that he is the most neo-Victorian, turning to a definable, historical past for answers, while simultaneously revealing the arbitrary nature of all cultural constructions. While his readings of Victorian literature must inevitably be refracted through a contemporary lens, Davis does echo the Victorian faith that language can point to some sort of “primary reality” that existed and continues to exist beyond language. In this, he seems decidedly separate from the tenets of post-structuralism. His work certainly revalues the Victorian for a contemporary understanding, but it seems inaccurate to accuse him of *merely* doing so from a postmodern perspective. This revaluation of Victorian literature for a new cultural climate allows twenty-first century readers to appreciate the period’s literature, while still recognising the legitimate and important criticisms made against it. Such neo-Victorian revaluation – in a manner parallel to the Victorians’ practice – also provides a way of understanding and coping with the present through an imaginative reconstruction of the past.