BOOK REVIEW

Victorian Photography, Literature, and the Invention of Modern Memory: Already the Past, by Jennifer Green-Lewis (London: Bloomsbury, 2017). 200 pp. Paperback £27.99.

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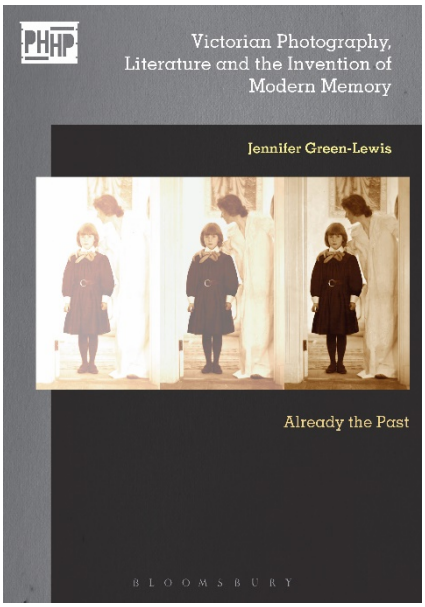

Jennifer Green-Lewis has written an ambitious book that simultaneously wrestles with how literature responded to photography's emergence and with how acts of cultural remembering are elicited and facilitated by photography. It is with this latter point that she departs from her earlier *Framing the Victorians: Photography and the Culture of Realism* (1996), which not only suggested that photography offers a direct route to understanding the Victorians, but also argued that the Victorians invested in both realism and photography as tools for seeing.[1] In her new book, Green-Lewis again identifies photography as an invaluable tool for the Victorians, but this time for looking at the past: for remembrance. She focuses on how the Victorians were already aware of the way in which the past and the present intersect in the photograph.

Despite the heavy echoes of Roland Barthes's *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (1981) throughout this book, Green-Lewis's prefatory chapter attempts to move away from Barthes's fascination with the nostalgic power of photography. Noting that Barthes described the photograph as a gesticulation to 'look', Green-Lewis adds that the photograph also asks the viewer to 'look' and to see time passing. Nonetheless, this book relies heavily on what Barthes would term 'metalanguage', as it comes to rely heavily on the idea that different meanings 'adhere' to the photograph itself.[2] In fact, Green-Lewis proposes that the physical photograph and its meaning can operate independently from one another. The section titled 'Afterlight', which is both a postscript (it was written only when the rest of the book was completed) and a preface, exposes this tension between physical object and metaphorical meaning by exploring how modern

[1] Jennifer Green-Lewis, *Framing the Victorians: Photography and the Culture of Realism* (London: Cornell University Press, 1996), p. 24.

[2] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (London: Vintage, 1993), p. 6.

photography apps mimic the way in which physical photographs age: images can be digitally scuffed or discoloured in an attempt to make a modern photograph appear 'vintage'. In an era where the digital archive is at odds with the material archive, this certainly creates an intriguing context for the book. While the issue of photography's materiality becomes a problem for Green-Lewis elsewhere, here she lays out the primary tension that arises from this interplay of past and present in the photograph. Firstly, she proposes that 'what we see today is a continued migration of photographic form in response to market forces and technological developments […] set in motion by the Victorians' and that, secondly, this 'shifting of photographic forms is a response to something older than the nineteenth century that will likely outlast the twenty-first: the ongoing human desire for narration' (p. xvi). In other words, the tension between past and present that we see in contemporary photographs has distinctly Victorian origins.

Unfortunately, while Green-Lewis proposes the narrative powers of photography, the narrative of her own book appears fractured, especially where literary analysis and photographic history intersect. As a result, the two parts of the text – 'Part One: The Photograph in Time' and 'Part Two: The Photograph As Time' – read as two separate arguments. A troublesome rift exists between the analysis of photographs and writing *about* photography (part one), and the close reading of the 'photographic aesthetic' in literature (part two). This makes it difficult to ascertain whether this book is meant to primarily appeal to photography historians, literary scholars, or both. Where the concept of narrative might bridge the gap between these two sections, Green-Lewis instead introduces the idea of memory. She proposes that photography both participated in and offered antidote to a crisis of memory that arose as the Victorians came to better understand geological time, and which intensified following the mass deaths in the First World War.

This move away from narrative towards history is inherently problematic and Green-Lewis's book routinely conflates memory with time. While the introduction diligently outlines the nineteenth-century advancements that acted as time-saving technologies (p. 11), it is not clear exactly how such technologies impacted memory or gave rise to the memory crisis. The first indication of the role photography might play in this crisis is Green-Lewis's reference to Oliver Wendell Holmes. Green-Lewis asserts that Holmes claimed photography invented the 'mirror with a memory' (p. 11). This claim is itself riddled with complications: using the words of an American polymath suggests that photography is one very specific thing globally, at the same time so many of the textual and photographic examples in this book are self-consciously British. For example, the Calotype process was invented by William Henry Fox Talbot and its use was restricted due to Talbot's patent, whereas the daguerreotype process was made publicly available. Moreover, Holmes made his assertion specifically in relation to the stereograph, which is a very different technology to the typical photograph. If Green-Lewis accepts that photography is not singular but multiple, then the classification of all photography as mirrors of memory seems like a broad stroke. Likewise, if there was a 'crisis of memory in the nineteenth century, a

heightened fear of forgetting, stimulated both by the mental demands of a new concept of human history and by the emergence on to the plate of the mind of too many things to remember' (p. 25), it is unclear how multiple photographic processes operate similarly in the mechanism of memory-making. Indeed, Green-Lewis later claims that '[p]hotographs, it seemed, were products and producers of history and memory' (p. 37), but also that, 'with the proliferation of all kinds of photographic images throughout the nineteenth century, whatever lines might once have been drawn between memory and history became increasingly blurred' (p. 37). Photographs, it seems, are connected to history- and memory-making, but not in any singular way.

What appears to be one of the biggest complications in establishing the connections between photography, memory, and history is the material status of the photograph. In Chapter Three, 'Having Been: Photography and the Texture of Time', Green-Lewis analyses the physicality of the photograph. Her analysis is the strongest and most compelling in her examination of Talbot's photographs of geologists (p. 80) and of Louis Daguerre's fossils (p. 82), which begins to hint at how photography captures the past and its physical textures. In this chapter, it is clear that the physical status of Victorian photographs is essential and ties in with Green-Lewis's much earlier assertion that

> Our engagement with any given photograph has as much to do with its material circumstances (paper, pewter, framed, screen-shotted) and the circumstances of our possession of it (how it is netted into our lives; bought, made, inherited, found) as with its original content (p. 32).

In the case of Victorian photographs, where access, even to paper images, was typically denied by expertise and expense, the people who captured and owned photographs was limited by class and social status. This makes Green-Lewis's proposition, that photographs played a universal role in cultural memory making, difficult to endorse. By focusing on the physical photograph, Green-Lewis moves away from the metaphorical power of the image. This is in spite of the fact that Green-Lewis proposes that literature was most clearly impacted by photography as a metaphor.

We see this dichotomy most clearly in Green-Lewis's analysis of Virginia Woolf, on which the majority of this book rests. Chapter Two, 'Already the Past', opens with a moving moment from Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927), in which Mrs Ramsay seems to be looking forwards and backwards at the same time. This is the first time Green-Lewis uses Woolf's phrase 'already the past' as a way of describing photography's nostalgic power. However, it is not until the final pages of Green-Lewis's chapter that it becomes clear exactly how this phrase is being used. Not only is Woolf not typically described as Victorian (though she has certain affections for the Victorians),[3] but this extract is not explicitly about

[3] See Kate Flint, 'Virginia Woolf and Victorian Aesthetics', in *The Edinburgh Companion to Virginia Woolf and the Arts,* ed. Maggie Humm (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), pp. 19-34.

photography. Rather, it is evocative of what Green-Lewis is suggesting photography does: 'Mrs. Ramsay's backward glance is as functionally close to photography as anything in Woolf' (p. 40). This suggestion subverts Maggie Humm's assertion that Woolf's writing, in general, had a 'photographic affect'.[4] It also undermines the reading of the material aspects of the photograph upon which the first portion of the Green-Lewis's book relies: photography is now a metaphor. While the analysis of scenes from *To the Lighthouse* demonstrates the implicit simultaneity of looking both forwards and backwards that photography performs, as well as signalling photography's early nostalgic power, by demonstrating that the meaning of photography is metaphorical as well as physical, Green-Lewis is tacitly accepting what she sets out in her introduction: that a 'stable, unified photography has never existed' (pp. 5-6).

So, if photography is multiple – it both contributes to and is a product of memory and history – the argument Green-Lewis is proposing here in some way mimics photography itself: it is multiplicitous. Green-Lewis herself begins to perform the same nostalgia she seeks to unpack.

Bibliography

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[4] Maggie Humm, *Snapshots of Bloomsbury: The Private Lives of Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell* (London: Tate Publishing, 2006), p. 30.