Norms and Transgressions in Victorian and Edwardian Times

A conference organised at the University of Rheims, France, 18th – 19th January 2013

The Victorian and Edwardian era is generally conceived as being a highly normative and conformist period. This conference aims to explore how these very codes and norms, far from stifling individual voices, generated a proliferation of acts of resistance, dissident cultures and counter-discourses. It purposes to discuss the various ways in which imposed norms and strictures were eschewed, played with, subverted, resisted and/or transgressed.

The question of norms and transgressions in the Victorian and Edwardian era applies very much to the social and political spheres. Contributions from the fields of history, historiography, and sociology as well as social and political science would be welcome. The issue is also undoubtedly relevant to the field of literature, from the representation of transgressive characters or acts, to the games with generic codes and norms and the strategies employed by authors to resist, subvert or transgress the editorial pressures imposed by Victorian and Edwardian publishing houses. The dialectical relationship between norms and transgressions could also lead to fruitful analyses in the realm of the visual arts as well as of cinema. For instance, it would be interesting to study the question of adaptation and to analyse how the nineteenth century, its norms and transgressions, are represented on the silver screen. Contributions dealing with contemporary rewritings of “canonical” Victorian texts, as well as with “Neo-Victorian” literature and its approach to Victorian norms and transgressions, would also be welcome.

Beyond the famed etiquette and social rules (explicit and implicit), norms applied to all areas, from the private to the public spheres. This unavoidably led to transgressions of established codes but of also of received ideas that were often backed up by the ruling elite. Robert Peel’s repeal of the Corn Laws, for instance, was perceived as a betrayal of the landed interest and even of the Conservatives, leading both to his resignation and to the temporary demise of his party. Meanwhile, jarring voices denounced the inequalities behind the great industrial and commercial success epitomized by the Great Exhibition. The set class hierarchy was timidly yet increasingly transgressed, notably with individual stories of dramatic upward or downward social mobility. Papers may deal with these transgressions and many more, and also with the accompanying backlash – if any – that affected their perpetrators.

We would also welcome contributions dealing with gender and sexuality, discussions about the transgression of gender roles and the redefinition of masculinity and femininity (from the “Angel in the House” to the “New Woman”) or about the emerging discourses on homosexuality and “sexual dissidence”. Referencing Stephen Marcus’s 1966 essay The Other Victorians, Michel Foucault, in “We, ‘Other Victorians’”, the first section of the first volume of his History of Sexuality (The Will to Knowledge, 1976), casts doubt as to what he calls the “repressive hypothesis”. He sarcastically questions the idea that repressiveness is the adequate paradigm to think of sexuality, both in Victorian times and in the 20th century, and he demonstrates that in fact the 19th century witnessed a multiplication of discourses about sexuality.

Submissions for papers including an abstract (200 to 300 words) and a short biographical note should be sent by to Catherine Heyrendt (catherine.heyrendt@univ-reims.fr) and Xavier Giudicelli (xavier.giudicelli@univ-reims.fr) by 5th September 2012.

Organised with the French Society for Victorian and Edwardian Studies (SFEVE) and the Interdisciplinary Center for Research on Language and Thought (CIRLEP).