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5

Anti-Victorianism and the modern home

For sanitarians, doctors and other late nineteenth-century health practitioners, hygiene and modernity were co-extensive with each other. Miasmatic theory, germ theory, vitalism, hydropathy, along with eugenics, the nature cure and phrenology: all provided a framework in which a hygienic regimen, whether founded in scientific advance or in a return to the simple purities of natural living, promised an evolving and avowedly modern route to health. The progressive possibilities of the hygienic present stood in contradistinction to the infelicities and errors of the unhygienic past, but were themselves only a staging post on the long march towards an ever-brighter future; and twin beds were annexed to a vision of this cleaner, healthier time to come. But if the progressive credentials of twin beds arose initially from the sanitarian commitment to clean houses and fresh air, what was it that sustained their association with modernity – that endlessly mobile, endlessly alluring if unsettling consciousness of the vertiginous distinctness of ‘now’ – in the new century, once hygiene ceased to be the chief criterion? How did their proximate-but-separate forms channel, shape, embody and assert a sense of the modern in the new century?

Twin beds came into focus in the first section of this book as technologies of hygiene. Now, they will be reframed as technologies of the modern. However, to claim twin beds as a site in which the forces of cultural modernity might be observed at work itself calls for some elaboration, for the ‘modern’ is one of the most multivalent concepts in the critical lexicon and one that might seem to have little to say about choices of bedroom furniture: for by some definitions the domestic has, as Rita Felski suggests, been seen as the antithesis of all that is modern. ‘The vocabulary of modernity’, she suggests, ‘is a vocabulary of anti-home’, celebrating instead states of ‘mobility, exile, boundary crossing’. ‘It speaks enthusiastically about movement out into the

world, but is silent about the return home. Its preferred location is the city street, the site of random encounters, unexpected events, multiplicity and difference. ... Home, by contrast, is the space of familiarity, dullness, stasis' (Felski 2000: 86). The home, by this account, is that against which modernity defines itself.

However, this repudiation of the domestic is more a feature of the cultural aesthetic and politics of modernism than of modernity itself. As the critics John Carey, Christopher Reed and Judy Giles (among others) have noted, the modernist and masculinist rhetoric of writers, artists and architects such as D. H. Lawrence, Wyndham Lewis and Le Corbusier was in some measure a reaction against, on the one hand, the innovations of democratization and mass culture, and, on the other, the perceived feminine associations of cultural movements such as Aestheticism, the Arts and Crafts movement and the 'domestic modernism' of the Bloomsbury group.¹ Modernism accommodated the repudiation as well as the celebration of that which was modern. It embraced the flux and anonymity of the urban, the rootless meanderings of the flâneur, the hard lines and anti-romantic aesthetic of the machine age, but it rejected the equally modern introduction of the pleasures of consumption to new mass markets, the rationalization and technologization of the home exemplified by the new suburbs, the time-space compression of the daily commute and the seaside holiday. Yet, as critics such as Alison Light, Alan O'Shea and Mica Nava have shown, this latter dimension of modernity is as important, as culturally, socially and politically influential and transformative, as rooted in the expansionist capitalist economics of colonialism and industrialization, as was the former.² The home was the object of modern scientific scrutiny, theorization and innovation, first in the sanitarian project of the late nineteenth century and then in attempts to render it a more efficient and rational workplace.³ It offered new possibilities for consumption, whether of interior décor, household appliances or new styles of furniture, thereby allowing for the production and exhibition of finely calibrated class distinctions and aspirations by its occupants.⁴ And it was the place where the modern marriage, increasingly understood as companionate and defined by its provision of sexual pleasure as much as by its generation of offspring, was to be staged. Twin beds were not just modern because of the historical moment of their inception, nor only because of their genesis in the progressivist context of scientific rationalism embodied in domestic sanitationism, but also because of their appearance in contexts and environments where the aesthetics and agendas of cultural modernity were established and exemplified.

Twin beds were modern in their commitment to hygiene, health and rationality, but also in the ways they embodied that commitment: that is, their modernity was discernible in their refusal to reproduce the materials, the forms and styles and the associations of earlier beds. In the early twentieth

century, when twin beds had made considerable inroads into the marital bedrooms of the English middle classes, what this meant above all was that they clearly refused to be Victorian – despite their origins in the final third of the nineteenth century. Ironically, despite twin beds being products of a thoroughly Victorian faith in science and progress, the twentieth-century enthusiasm for this mode of sleeping was, at least in part, expressed as an explicitly anti-Victorian commitment to the modern.

The capacity of the epithet 'Victorian' to signify for the new century all that was to be rejected or ridiculed in the realm of domestic taste is well known. The Victorian house, the familiar story goes, was dark, cluttered, elaborately decorated and oppressive; its furnishings were both ugly and absurd.⁵ These were either heavy, ornately carved and richly upholstered, as stiff, ponderous and pompous as those who dwelt among them, or else they were sham, whimsical, gimcrack, ill-proportioned and fussy, full of stylistic tics, redundancies, flourishes and furbelows. The outcome of these failures in taste was such over-specialized furnishing redundancies as the whatnot, the davenport and the teapoy.⁶ In short, in the brave new world of the twentieth century, Victorian interior décor came to be seen as 'a hideous wriggling muddle of bastard styles', as John Betjeman caricatured it (1953: 247).⁷

Such judgemental characterizations were quick to take hold, and held sway for much of the ensuing century despite periodic Victorian revivals along the way.⁸ In 1901, for example, Charles Holme, editor of the influential journal of design reform *The Studio*, published a book self-consciously marking the importance for domestic design of the demise of the old century and the advent of the new. The nineteenth century, he suggests, was characterized by its 'numerous attempts to revive styles belonging to the past'. Now, however, 'that the new century should generate a style characteristically its own ... is the desire of all who have given close attention to the principles that govern truly artistic work' (Holme 1901a: 3). In domestic architecture, this would mean the wholesale sweeping away of the ersatz and the redundant in design: 'We shall accordingly be content no more with sham castles or sham abbeys; sham manor houses or sham cottages; no more with turrets and pinnacles, oriels, orders, pediments, traceries, canopies, Mediaeval glass, Classical statuary, Elizabethan timber-works, Jacobean plaster-work, rustic ingles and cottage nookeries; all dexterously imitated, but irritatingly unreal' (Prior 1901: 12). The old mongrel habit of ornament, clutter, whimsy, pastiche and revivalism was to be abandoned. The new century demanded a new authenticity of design and purity of line expressive of the present, rather than seeking to evoke tradition and value through adherence to 'sham' versions of the artefacts of earlier periods.⁹

It was not only the inauthenticity of Victorian design that offended but also the character of the domestic interiors thereby created. In 1929, the design

critic John Gloag published *Modern Home Furnishing*, a modestly priced book in the 'Macmillan's Sixpenny Self-Help Library' series. Here, alongside advice on styles and colours for the new small houses that had been built so plentifully after the First World War, he looks back on the contrasting styles of the previous century, observing that 'the manufacturers of the Victorian Age were obsessed with patterns and styles and the production of heavy stuff that looked rich and respectable', while at the end of the Victorian period, the so-called 'New Art' (Art Nouveau) was 'a riotous outburst of original design', 'a fantastic orgy of violent decoration' (Gloag 1929: 64, 65). A preponderance of pattern and heaviness, on the one hand, and a surfeit of self-consciously artistic, 'individual' and original decoration, on the other, demonstrate what is to be avoided in the modern home.

Gloag's opinions on the infelicities of Victorian style remained largely unchanged through subsequent decades. In 1961, and by now an eminent historian of furniture and design, he published *Victorian Comfort: A Social History of Design 1830–1900*, a book which combines his encyclopaedic knowledge of the field with a tone that at times comes close to a sneer. Indeed, Gloag himself acknowledges that 'this study of Victorian comfort is *not* impartial'. His thesis is that the Victorians' 'love of comfort debilitated the critical faculties', resulting in a civilization that 'combined high moral standards with deplorable taste' ([1961] 1973: xvi, xv, 30). Given his modernist design allegiances (he was a member of the influential MARS group in the 1930s), Gloag's dislike of Victorian style is to be expected, but what is more striking is the endurance of this practice of 'othering' Victorianism through to the 1960s.¹⁰ In matters of domestic style, the Victorian showed remarkable staying power in its capacity to stand for all that had to be rejected in order to confer supremacy on modernity. The modern was predicated on its difference from what had been repudiated. To be modern in the first half of the twentieth century was not only to refuse to be Victorian, but to find Victoriana abject.

Disavowals of Victorianism did not wait for the demise of either the eponymous monarch or the century over which she had presided. The Arts and Crafts style, the basis of English notions of modernity in domestic design in the early twentieth century, was a late Victorian reaction against Victorian methods and standards of mass production as well as of the designs of these products. Similarly, art nouveau – the 'New Art' dismissed by Gloag – was a late Victorian rejection of earlier Victorian style.¹¹ As Herbert Asquith remarked as early as 1918, the Victorian age 'had ended at least a decade before 1901', the year of Victoria's death (Taylor 2004a: 3). However elastic and compendious the notion of 'the Victorian' may have been, it was also recognized as a potent and evocative shorthand gloss signifying much more than the length of a reign.

Twentieth-century accounts suggest that the rejection of Victorian style was not only an assertion that it was passé, redundant or anathema to a new age, but also implied recognition of the profoundly formative power of that which was being sloughed off. Victorian décor was not only judged ugly and absurd, but its ugliness and absurdity was responsible for having constricted and distorted those who dwelt with it. Virginia Woolf's frequently cited declamation that 'in or about December, 1910, human character changed' ([1924] 1980: 1.320) is arguably less interesting as a register of the impact of Britain's first post-Impressionist exhibition (the occasion of her remark) than for the way that it is premised on the idea that who we are – our 'human character' – is in part a cultural phenomenon. Woolf does not just suggest that the exhibition changed people's modes of perception, but that it transformed their subjectivities as well as their sensibilities. 'Human character' and the sense of self, Woolf's remark suggests, are constituted by style and aesthetics as much as by family, education, gender, history or psychology – and thus by Victorian interiors as much as by the Edwardian or 'modern' ones that succeeded them.¹²

The work of Lytton Strachey, Woolf's friend and fellow member of the Bloomsbury group, not only shares her assumption about the power of aesthetics in the formation of subjectivities but focuses it more particularly on the singular importance of domestic style in this process. Strachey's best-known work, *Eminent Victorians* (1918), had been a waspish and iconoclastic exercise in cutting the Victorians down to size, and in 1922 he took that project closer to home in an essay he read to the Bloomsbury group's Memoir Club.¹³ 'Lancaster Gate' – the essay's title refers to the street in Bayswater in which Strachey grew up – combines an account of the shaping power of the domestic environment (in both its material and its recollected forms) in processes of subject formation with an Oedipal shudder at the style and atmosphere of the family home. It proceeds by in turn evoking, analysing and deploring what made this 'grim machine' (Strachey 1971: 27) of a house, as he called it, so eminently Victorian.¹⁴

The Stracheys' house at 69 Lancaster Gate – a 'portentous place' – is introduced with these words: 'Its physical size was no doubt the most obviously remarkable thing about it; but it was not mere size, it was size gone wrong, size pathological; it was a house afflicted with elephantiasis' (ibid.: 18). Its distorted proportions joined with its extravagant decorative style to trouble and overwhelm the senses. The front door opened on to a dark passage 'with its ochre walls and its tessellated floor of magenta and indigo tiles' (ibid.). Upstairs, one entered the drawing room through 'a gigantic door, with its flowing portière of pale green silk' (ibid.: 20). Once inside, in the presence of a shadowy amalgam of décor, furnishings and the 'countless groups of persons' who inhabited the 'foggy distances' of the ill-lit room, one was confronted,

asserts Strachey, with 'the riddle of the Victorian Age' (ibid.). This room, 'the holy of holies', 'the seat of its [the house's] soul', was 'the concentrated product of an epoch' (ibid.). The house and the enigmatic essence of 'the Victorian' are one, materialized in an eclectic decorative mode which culminated in what Strachey calls 'the citadel of the great room' (ibid.: 21). This was the more distant of the room's two mantelpieces, its extraordinary form embodying the epoch. The mantelpiece was a 'bulk of painted wood with its pilasters and corniches, its jars and niches, its marble and its multi-coloured tiles', combining, in a dizzying profusion of stylistic references and 'with an effect of emasculated richness, the inspiration of William Morris, reminiscences of the Renaissance, and a bizarre idiosyncrasy of its own' (ibid.). The drawing room, in Strachey's own assessment, was a composite of Victorian ugliness, redundancy and absurdity.

Strachey's analysis of the room, however, went beyond such judgements, for its capacity always to surprise him suggested that it somehow eluded his intellectual or conscious apprehension:

Familiar, incredibly familiar as it was to me, who had spent my whole life in it, there was never a time when I was not, in the recesses of my consciousness, a little surprised by it. It was like one of those faces at which one can look for ever without growing accustomed to. Up to my last hour in it, I always felt that the drawing-room was strange. (ibid.)

The unfamiliarity of the familiar, the unhomeliness of the home, recalls Freud's uncanny (1919), in which the familiarity of the everyday environment is momentarily experienced as strange and unsettling, and the inanimate momentarily manifests qualities and an affective force more commonly ascribed to sentient beings. So the drawing room is, Strachey writes, like a face – which, in the estimation of his contemporary, the sociologist and diagnostician of the modern Georg Simmel, is 'the symbol of everything that an individual has brought with him or her as the prerequisite of their life. In it is deposited that which has dropped from his past to the bottom of his life and has become permanent features in the individual' (Simmel [1907] 1997: 112–13).¹⁵ The face, Simmel suggests, condenses its bearer's history. It is deeply familiar and endlessly communicative but also cryptic, irreducibly strange, an index of the ultimate unknowability of the person of whom it is perhaps synecdoche, perhaps metonym. In Strachey's analogy of room and face, environment and inhabitant, past and present, body and psyche co-exist in a queasy continuum of mutual influence.

This sense of a two-directional flow between the domestic and the psyche forms the foundation of Strachey's thesis, articulated at the outset of his essay:

The influence of houses on their inhabitants might well be the subject of a scientific investigation. Those curious contraptions of stones or bricks, with all their peculiar adjuncts, trimmings, and furniture, their specific, immutable shapes, their intense and inspissated atmosphere, in which our lives are entangled as completely as our souls in our bodies – what powers do they not wield over us, what subtle and pervasive effects upon the whole substance of our existence may not be theirs? (Strachey 1971: 16)

'The influence of houses on their inhabitants' had already, of course, been the subject of detailed scientific investigation in the work of Sir John Simon, Benjamin Ward Richardson, George Wilson and other domestic sanitarians. But while Richardson saw only disease and malaise generated in a house's 'insipissated' – thickened or condensed – atmosphere, Strachey saw it as generating the inhabitants' very selves. Their lives were not only 'entangled' in the fabric of the house and its furnishings but subjected to them: 'What powers do they not wield over us...?', he asks. Those powers, borne by the inspissated air, are still subtle and pervasive, but no longer feared as disease-laden. Instead, they are wondered at, perhaps lamented, but certainly scrutinized and analysed, as psychologically potent. Moreover, it is this conscious conviction of the shaping powers of the domestic interior, Strachey asserts, that separates the modern house-dweller from the Victorian. 'Our fathers', he suggests, 'would have laughed at such a speculation; ... the notion that the proportions of a bedroom, for instance, might be significant would have appeared absurd to them' (ibid.: 16). The nonchalant 'for instance' here belies just how significant for Strachey the composition of a bedroom would turn out to be.

The overwhelming impact of the invisible atmospheric powers of Lancaster Gate, 'the subtle unperceived weight of the circumambient air', Strachey wrote, was to restrict and oppress him:

An incubus sat upon my spirit, like a cat upon a sleeping child. ... Submerged by the drawing-room, I inevitably believed that the drawing-room was the world. Or rather, I neither believed nor disbelieved; it *was* the world, so far as I was concerned. Only, all the time, I did dimly notice that there was something wrong with the world – that it was an unpleasant shape. (ibid.: 27; original emphasis)

The atmosphere of the house submerges and impregnates him, threatens his being by presenting its own close contours as if it were a world in itself. Earlier, he had described the house as 'the framework, almost the very essence – so it seemed – of our being' (ibid.: 26). The house – its architecture, gloom, disposition, furnishing and decoration – is the crucible in which the

epoch is condensed and its subjects forged. Yet Strachey suggests too that the house contained the seeds of its own dissolution, the material flaw in its own hegemonic fabric. Although the drawing room was to him the world, he notes that he always dimly perceived that world as having 'an unpleasant shape'. His aesthetic sense, his artistic judgement, escapes full determination by the powers of the domestic, but in its recognition and rejection of this unpleasant shape he also reveals how that sense is itself dependent on, because formed by, that which it rejects. The sense of discernment and contradistinction owes its being to that from which it distinguishes itself.

This aesthetic refusal is the first sign of the failure of Lancaster Gate fully to subsume Strachey, but it is not the only one. It is matched by a drive altogether less decorous, unrulier and more powerful than the aesthetic. Furthermore, the event that finally released 'some magic spring within' him, enabling his spirit to leap into a 'freedom and beatitude' (ibid.: 27) unimaginable within the drawing room, was itself both domestic and undomesticated. Coming home late one summer night – so late, indeed, that it was already early morning – Strachey recounts how he climbed staircase after staircase to reach his bedroom at the very top of the house:

I opened the door and went in, and immediately saw that the second bed – there was invariably a second bed in every bedroom – was occupied. I looked closer: it was Duncan; As I was getting into bed I saw that all the clothes had rolled off Duncan – that he was lying, almost naked, in vague pyjamas – his body – the slim body of a youth of nineteen – exposed to the view. I was very happy. (ibid.: 28)¹⁶

It is sexual desire which releases the magic spring and frees his spirit, undoing the malign spell cast by Lancaster Gate. But it is also the specific configuration of the house – the inevitable second bed, empty and available – that allows this beatific vision of homoerotic loveliness, clad only in 'vague pyjamas', to be spread before his eyes as he enters his room. Lancaster Gate is Strachey's Victorian oppressor but it is also his liberator, delivering, despite itself, the promise of unimagined freedoms.

Strachey's account suggests that both his aesthetic and his sexual sense are generated by the architectural character and domestic appurtenances of the family home. Without the hideous drawing room, without the second bed in his bedroom, these would not have developed as they did. Both senses, though, are also dissident. They turn, in related acts of Oedipal refusal, against the father's house. Strachey's account of his aesthetic repudiation of the house precipitates his narrative of an event which constitutes its sexual repudiation, and together these comprise a psychic disaffiliation. But these repudiations also testify to, and indeed rely on, the generative power of the

'curious contraption' (ibid.: 16) – material, social and affective – that is the family home to form the indwelling selves. Strachey's account suggests that our psychic interiors are fundamentally also domestic interiors.

For Strachey it was Lancaster Gate's drawing room that was the 'holy of holies', but other commentators found the seat of a house's soul to lie elsewhere. For the popular historian Esmé Wingfield-Stratford, who was 'something of an acknowledged expert on the Victorian period' (Taylor 2004b: 81) and published three histories of it in the 1930s, it was the marital bedroom that was awarded that title.¹⁷ In the first of the three, *The Victorian Tragedy* (1930), a book which shares Strachey's distaste for the Victorians without the benefit of his acerbic wit, Wingfield-Stratford suggests that the marital bedroom had been 'the Holy of Holies in the vast temple of middle-class domesticity' (1930: 139). What was sanctified there was not the conjugal relation, he argues, but reproduction: 'To be fruitful and multiply, in spite of the teachings of Mr. Malthus, was a sacred duty. That was what the marriage union was originally for, and that, too, what the Holy of Holies, the marriage chamber, was for' (ibid.: 142). The material concomitant of this reverence for reproduction, Wingfield-Stratford suggests, is the double bed. Citing George Bernard Shaw's description of marriage as 'combining the maximum of temptation with the maximum of opportunity', he continues: 'The double bed, *otherwise so obviously inconvenient*, is a silent witness to its [Shaw's aphorism's] truth. By the strange inversion of propriety that reigned behind closed doors, any suggestion of substituting two beds for one would have been regarded as not very nice. There are old-fashioned people, even to-day, who have not wholly cast off this prejudice' (ibid.; my emphasis). For Wingfield-Stratford, the double bed was a highly ideological choice of household furniture, bearing the weight of his sense of the Victorian investment in marriage, procreation and respectability. In the Victorian age, he suggests, twin beds were seen to lack propriety, perhaps because they interrupted the symbolic unity of the fecund couple. Discernible here too, however, is a glimpse of the reputation of twin beds at the time of writing. Only 'old-fashioned people' would now, in 1930, think of such beds as 'not very nice' for married people; they have acquired the patina of modernity, of a norm. More striking, however, is Wingfield-Stratford's parenthetical comment on the double bed. Its symbolic clout aside, he suggests, it is 'otherwise so obviously inconvenient'. Its inconvenience (for whom? In what way?) is unexplained: it is so obvious, so self-evident and commonsensical, that explanation is redundant. His words suggest not only a popular evaluation of outmoded Victorian domestic and familial mores from the vantage point of 1930, but also lay bare the foundation of his verdict: the taken-for-granted sense that the double bed belongs to a bygone era and the casual assumption that twin beds are now the modern choice.¹⁸

If the immense Victorian parental double bed was seen in the 1930s to represent Victorian values, twin beds were, formally, a way to cast them off.¹⁹ Even those who disapproved of the new century's turn to twin beds, such as their arch-critic Marie Stopes, recognized them as a riposte to the politics and economy of the double. 'The Victorian double bed from which there was no retreat created problems people thought to solve by the twin bedstead, but in turn the twin bedstead creates graver problems which go unrecognised', she wrote (1935: 58). For Stopes, twin beds might be modern, but they are a sign of just how badly modernity has gone wrong. Not only that, she suggests, but the problems they create 'go unrecognized': they have become sufficiently commonplace and uncontentious that their insidious and deleterious effects go unnoticed.

By the 1930s, this mode of marital co-sleeping had clearly taken hold. Twin beds had by then enough currency to figure unelaborated in Wingfield-Stratford's account and to draw Marie Stopes's fire – there is, after all, no call to protest at something that has no cultural presence or purchase. By what means had these paired objects ceased to be items only of earnest sanitarian or medical recommendation and become, for better or worse, the sleeping arrangement of choice for many English married couples? How did they transform from being objects valued for their hygienic properties to become popular bedroom furnishing choices valued for their style and comfort? How did their form signal their modernity and their anti-Victorianism? And when a couple chose to sleep in twin beds, how did this choice announce them as committed to a thoroughly modern marriage?