Invisible Writing and the Victorian Novel: Readings in Language and Ideology, by Patricia Ingham. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000.

Patricia Ingham's intriguing title – *Invisible Writing* – perhaps promises more than it delivers. The writing in question turns out to be, not the occult or invisible inscriptions that one can imagine surrounding the texts of the Victorian novel, but the novels themselves, whose "invisible" meanings are revealed to the analytical eye instructed by the discipline of linguistics. Briefly, previous criticism has concentrated on *lexis*, on the meanings of "signs" understood in the synchronic axis; Ingham's own criticism understands, by contrast, that language works hierarchically, via syntactic patterns, so is better placed to speak to the syntagmatic patterning of texts. Several features of texts which have heretofore been overlooked – have been "unnoticed or hidden" and are hence invisible – can therefore now be brought to light and made the basis of linguistically grounded interpretation. Accordingly, six canonical Victorian novels are interpreted with the benefit of this analytical rigour, in which particular grammatical features are taken as starting-points for discussion: "questions" in *Vanity Fair*; "tense" in *The Mill on the Floss* and *Daniel Deronda*; "deixis" in *Bleak House*; and "negatives" in *Tess of the d'Urbevilles* and *Little Dorrit*.

The book stands or falls, therefore, on the strength of the readings that it offers of these six novels. These are always intelligent and incisive; but whether the promise of linguistically based rigour is actually sustained is open to argument. Perhaps this uncertainty is inevitable, and for at least two reasons. The first is simply that the linguistic feature highlighted as characteristic of each of these novels cannot be the *key* features of *whole* texts – whatever the uncertainties at the heart of *Vanity Fair*, the whole novel is not made up solely of questions – and therefore however illuminating the emphasis on these features may be, they cannot be more than suggestive starting-points. The second reason is still more fundamental, and it is a question that haunts the very project of stylistics: simply, the attempt to move from linguistic features to ideology can never be finally buttoned down in a way that demonstrates the reliance of ideology on the presence or absence of this or that formulation. Hence the characteristic structure of the chapters of the book. Each starts with a brief outline of the grammatical feature that is to be discussed. These are clearly set out, in a welcomingly non-technical way. Then the chapter moves into more familiar interpretative criticism, drawing more or less fully (usually less fully) on the feature in question. So a discussion of "past and present" in *The Mill on the Floss* begins by pointing to the curious linguistic fact that statements in the present tense have wider scope and generality than statements in the past tense. This is used to illuminate the discursive distance between the "omne-narrator" and the characters – to approach again, that is to say, the familiar question of the role of the narrative voice in Eliot's novel and its relation to the fictional world it narrates. This is illuminating. But actually what Ingham wishes to do is to argue passionately with the doctrine of self-abnegation which she sees the novel as foisting upon Maggie – especially upon Maggie as a girl and then a young woman. However you resolve the ethical and

gender-political questions here – and they seem to me to be more complicated than Ingham allows – you simply cannot prove that Eliot is mistaken by pointing to a "sleight of hand in the manipulation of tense."

Similar accounts could be given of the other chapters in the book. Thus the chapter on *Vanity Fair* starts with a discussion on the nature of questions, and with the assertion that questions are the most striking stylistic feature of the novel. It then proceeds to an excellent discussion of the ambivalence of the text, concluding that it displays "a model of society as an economic machine which is represented simultaneously as impoverished in human terms and irresistibly attractive." Both ends of this particular stick are irreproachable – it's just that there's no necessary connection between them. And so on with deixis in *Bleak House* (surely there can't be *more* deixis in this novel than in any other?), negatives in *Tess* and *Little Dorrit* and tense again in *Daniel Deronda.* The discussions are uniformly cogent, and indeed would be excellent material to put in front of the "'A' level students, undergraduates and their teachers" for whom, the blurb informs us, the book is intended. It's just that there's less analytical coherence binding the chapters together than their author believes.

And indeed, the same might be said of the book as a whole. A postscript defends the book from the charge of randomness in its choice of topics by claiming that all are related to the project of exposing the seeming naturalness of the workings of ideology by a "sharp" attention to the linguistic manoeuvres which sustain it. Would that it were so! I fear that the hold which ideology has upon us is too profound to be dislodged by attention to its linguistic structures, however sharp. Actually what Ingham wishes to do is to argue with these canonical works of Victorian literature. If only she can prove that Eliot or Hardy are guilty of self-contradiction, or that Dickens exposes contradictions in his presentation of gender, then the claims that these novels make upon us might appear less peremptory. At the level of individual readings of novels, Ingham is indeed sharp, and she produces careful and logically argued interpretations; but these readings remain argumentative refutations of aspects of nineteenth-century ideology, and leave untouched the profounder ways in which novels might be thought either to sustain or subvert ideology.

In a wider context, the book is an episode in the continuing argument that the twentieth century has conducted with the nineteenth – an argument that we can presume will continue into the twenty-first, though with decreasing urgency as time continues. Although each chapter is a discussion of a particular novel, the historical situation which produced them and to which they are addressed necessarily figure in the book also, usually as that Victorian world which is characterised by a homogeneously oppressive world-view. It is not for nothing that at the centre of Ingham's arguments with these novels should be the question of gender, and the failures of these novelists adequately to contradict Victorian notions of femininity. Oddly, the novels themselves can be made up of competing discourses (Bakhtin is intermittently invoked) but the world from which they are drawn is the very opposite of heteroglossic: monologic and non-contradictory. I am not sure that this is much of an advance on Bloomsbury – indeed, it repeats exactly the same tropes that

Bloomsbury set in motion, in which we can look back upon our benighted Victorian forebears from the heights of our superior enlightenment. From this perspective the Victorians did indeed write "invisible" writing, its invisibility stemming not only from the ignorance of subsequent critics, but from the very failure of the Victorians to understand themselves. Our own blindness remains resolutely occulted to this manner of criticism, and the writings of the past cannot be adduced to expose our own acts of inattention. We're the heat, and they're the lemon juice. Perhaps this whole problematic can now be escaped only by abandoning the word "Victorian" and the overloaded cultural assumptions that are inextricable from it.

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Henry James: A Certain Illusion, by Denis Flannery. Nineteenth Century Series. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001.

Henry James enjoyed Anthony Trollope's novels on the whole; but one thing annoyed him – Trollope's "suicidal satisfaction in reminding the reader that the story he was telling was only, after all, make believe." James applauded Trollope's "solidity of specification," but his nods and winks at the reader were for James acts of bad faith. Yet no one was more conscious than James of the art of novel-writing, of how illusions are created, and in his own novels he was as much a self-aware modernist as he was a realist. Denis Flannery's book concerns itself with James's examination of the ways in which illusions are produced – and how they are used and abused by the novels' characters. If illusions can be deceptions and self-deceptions they are also aesthetic performances and works of art. Illusion, as Flannery says, "combines both the sense of a perceptual error and an almost excessive representational success."

Flannery's book touches only briefly James's own critical and prefatory writings which are, it might be pointed out, often concerned with how his own or other writers' fictional "illusions" are fashioned. He focuses rather on the ways in which the idea of illusion is dealt with in a group of James's novels and stories. There is a judicious balance between the "big" works – *The Portrait of a Lady, The Wings of the Dove, The Golden Bowl* – and the less-celebrated: *The Bostonians, The Tragic Muse* and *The Princess Casamassima.* "The Aspern Papers" and "The Figure in the Carpet," as well as the rarely discussed "Velvet Glove," are among the short stories dealt with.

In his introductory chapter Flannery reassures us that our habit (mine, certainly) of sometimes discussing James's characters as though they had lives outside the pages of the novel is compatible with the novelist's illusionistic enterprise. We should recognise the aspiration to make us respond to a text as a "visual, historical and corporeal phenomenon" and not be inhibited by the forbidding theories of the 1980s. Flannery identifies this as one of three aspects of novelistic illusion. But he also sees allied to this function a second aspect, "an almost bodily and invasive danger," imperilling the reader through its insistence on credulity. Thirdly, illusion is a phenomenon in itself, "whose reality presents both a representational problem and a