Projecting Neo-Victorianism: Review of Nadine Boehm-Schnitker and Susanne Gruss, *Neo-Victorian Literature and Culture: Immersions and Revisitations*

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Over the past two decades, neo-Victorian studies have developed a range of theoretical frameworks and critical positions with which to understand the nature of contemporary engagements with the Victorians, and have begun to 'canonise' particular fictional texts as most illustrative of, or crucial to, the field. While the term 'neo-Victorian' appears to have found favour – rather than 'retro-Victorian' or 'post-Victorian', for example – the temporal, aesthetic, geographic and generic boundaries of the field are less clear. As a relatively new field that draws multiply upon Victorian studies, contemporary and historical fiction studies, as well as upon insights gained from postcolonialism, memory studies and trauma studies, it seems important to reflect critically upon its definitions and boundaries, as well as upon the assumptions that might begin to shape its formation. It is this work in which *Neo-Victorian Literature and Culture* participates.

In their introduction to the volume, Nadine Boehm-Schnitker and Susanne Gruss refer a number of times to the 'neo-Victorian project' (pp. 4, 5, 7, 9, 10, 11), a term they appear to use interchangeably with 'neo-Victorianism' to encompass neo-Victorian creative texts *and* academic critiques of them. Deployed also by Marie-Luise Kohlke in the first essay of the volume (pp. 22, 26), this is an intriguing term to use in place of a neo-

Victorian 'field', or neo-Victorian 'studies'. It implies deliberate strategising, careful planning and the pursuit of defined goals, and raises a set of questions about whose project this is, whose needs it serves, what constitutes it, and what its aims might be. Does the 'project' belong to the myriad writers and creative artists whose work explores, reworks and recreates the Victorian period today? Is this the way they themselves conceptualise their creative output? Or is it the academic discussion, with its definitions, boundary-setting and canon formation that functions as a 'project'? The term asserts a sense of coherence and cohesion that may, for now, stand in place of firmer boundaries and more rigid and agreed definitions of what neo-Victorianism is, thus, rhetorically at least, reining-in more capacious understandings of what constitutes the field lest it become too amorphous in its inclusivity. Yet it also seems to connect with the more imperialistic strains of neo-Victorianism, with its designs on the nineteenth-century past as mirror, foil or origin of the present. While the editors do not explain their choice of this term or explore its implications, the questions it provokes, about intentionality, function and purpose, are, in a sense, those that structure the collection.

Beginning with the premise that the neo-Victorian is "no longer readily containable" (p. 1), Boehm-Schnitker and Gruss' introduction explains the genesis of the collection as a response to the need to "evaluate the methods and approaches that have already come to characterise the neo-Victorian project" (p. 2). The authors call for "the application of the same self-reflexivity that critics have attested to the texts under scrutiny to the current academic processes of canonization" (p. 4). Thus, their title, 'Fashioning the neo-Victorian', has a dual meaning:

> on the one hand it refers to the shaping of the neo-Victorian, thus building on the broad range of work established so far; on the other, it alludes to the fact that neo-Victorianism has already become something of a fashion both in academic institutions and on the market. (p. 4)

The subtitle of the collection points to an emphasis on strategies of immersion and repetition, as opposed to a continued privileging of self-reflexive modes in definitions of the neo-Victorian. The editors argue that the emphasis on self-reflexivity unnecessarily limits the scope of the neo-Victorian at an early stage of the field, and, importantly, to my mind,

suggest that this approach "forestalls the analysis of immersive practices of reception and consumption, which may turn out to be equally defining features of the neo-Victorian project" (p. 7). Rather than define neo-Victorianism according to its narrative or aesthetic strategies, then, they suggest it should be defined with reference to its duality, that is, "by its particular way of revisiting the nineteenth-century past in order to (co)articulate today's concerns" (p. 5). The essays in the collection are thus largely shaped by the oft-noted idea that the neo-Victorian uses the past to speak to the present, and each offers a framework for thinking about the nature of the relationship to the past which neo-Victorianism constructs, picking up on some of the key ideas that shape the field today: nostalgia; complicitous critique; repetition; doubling and mirroring. The introduction thus marks out the existing critical terrain and the collection's intended intervention within it with clarity and finesse.

After the introduction, the collection opens with a thought-provoking essay by Marie-Luise Kohlke, which assesses the field so far and suggests possible avenues for future research. In opposition to scholars who limit the 'neo-Victorian' to work that demonstrates intense and overt self-reflexivity, Kohlke's essay, like the introduction, argues for a capacious definition, suggesting that in addition to the idea of critical hindsight or self-reflexivity, the term should encompass what are elsewhere in the volume called "atmospheric" (Shuttleworth, p. 182) or "immersive" (Boehm-Schnitker and Gruss, p. 3) texts; 'neo-Victorianism' should include those texts that are a "fantasy" – of what the Victorian age was and what we want it to be – in order to fully comprehend "the range and diversity" of neo-Victorian creative output (p. 25). The neo-Victorian can thus also include "what we *want* to imagine the period to have been like for diverse reasons, including affirmations of national identity, the struggle for symbolic restorative justice and indulgence in escapist exoticism" (p. 21). Kohlke draws upon Linda Hutcheon's notion of adaptation to redefine the neo-Victorian in the same terms, as referring to those texts whose originality resides in their creative conjunction with (an)other text(s) and the pleasures of which emerge "from repetition with variation, from the comfort of ritual combined with the piquancy of surprise" (Hutcheon 2006: 4, qtd. in Kohlke, p. 25). Defining neo-Victorian fiction as adaptation, then, as others have also done (see Sanders 2006; Whelehan 2012), foregrounds affective audience responses in potentially productive ways. Interestingly, Kohlke extends Hutcheon's

notion of adaptation to capture something specific about the neo-Victorian. Whereas Hutcheon argues that in order for an adaptation to function *as an adaptation* it must be recognised as such, with readers familiar with the source text (Hutcheon 2006: 21), Kohlke argues that neo-Victorian fiction functions as adaptation to the extent that it recycles and reworks generalisations, stereotypes and preconceptions of the 'Victorian' (p. 25). Thus, it is not necessary for a reader/viewer to recognise a specific source text, since 'the Victorian' itself – as a series of circulating images, preconceived ideas and assumptions – functions as the adapted text. This view is also implicit elsewhere in the collection of essays, such as in Rosa Karl's claim that "[t]he Victorian which is imagined for our consumption is already a significant part of our personal narratives", and moreover one which "has been circulating in our discourses for a considerable time, while it has been and is being remade (consciously or unconsciously) by every new implementation" (p. 48).

The editors have worked well to encourage the authors published here to converse with each other. In one of the very interesting oppositions set up within the volume itself, Kohlke opposes Sally Shuttleworth's argument, later in the volume, that the "atmospheric" quality of neo-Victorian fiction "undermines our attempts to understand, historically" (p. 190), and suggests instead that the neo-Victorian "*catalyse*[*s*] rather than curtail[s] crucial debates about cultural memory and forgetting, *facilitating* a self-conscious encounter with history' (p. 26, original emphasis), and many of the essays in this collection appear to share this view. In arguing for a capacious definition at this point, Kohlke's concern is that the neo-Victorian project is too new to be too severely limited in ways that might prevent the important shape of the field becoming visible. She worries there is undue focus on writers who write multiply in the neo-Victorian tradition – like Peter Ackroyd, A.S. Byatt and Sarah Waters – at the expense authors like Martin Cruz Smith, who have written only one neo-Victorian text. She identifies several interesting and provocative examples of single neo-Victorian novels that have not yet been widely critiqued. And she points out, too, that examples of *Victorian* popular culture are routinely studied (and adapted by neo-Victorianism), while there appears to be some reticence about studying *contemporary* popular forms, including genre fiction, which makes neo-Victorian studies, at least potentially complicit "with a reinstatement of the literary vs. popular/mass market distinction" (p. 30). She suggests that contemporary serialised genre fiction, like crime and

mystery stories, or romance novels, can be "viewed as a counterpart to nineteenth-century serialization", with both playing to market interests (p. 34), and that further work needs to be done on the way contemporary publishing and advertising processes mirror – or double – those of the nineteenth century (p. 35).

Her essay thus ruminates on the problems of canon formation, with a distinctive self-consciousness about the way scholars shape the canon of texts. Since this is an important moment of canon-formation, she argues the term 'neo-Victorian' should

> encompass virtually all historical fiction related to the nineteenth century, irrespective of authors' or characters' nationalities, the plots' geographical settings, the language of composition or, indeed, the extent of the narratives' self-consciousness, postmodernism, adaptivity or otherwise. (p. 27)

Such an approach can acknowledge, she proposes, "correspondences" among diverse fiction, while remaining sensitive to temporal, geographical and national difference (p. 27). Indeed, she identifies "the comparative significance of historical fiction within different national literatures and cultural imaginaries" as a "promising vein" of future research (pp. 27-28) and notes that the nineteenth century is not as potent an historical site for foundational national narratives for Germany as it is in the UK, the US and elsewhere (pp. 28-29). In so doing, Kohlke's piece sets up some of the central concerns of the essays that follow.

To my mind, a productive avenue for future research is attempting to understand what readers *do* with neo-Victorian novels, probing further their role in the processes of cultural memory. Three essays in the collection take some steps toward considering the reader, by examining texts that in some way dramatise this process. Rosa Karl analyses Jasper Fforde's *The Eyre Affair* (2001) as a way of thinking through the relationship of neo-Victorianism to literary tourism and heritage culture, with a specific focus on the way reception is conceptualised. In particular, she compares the assumptions made about readers of historical fiction to those made about tourists as "unreflecting consumer[s] of prefabricated pseudo-events" (p. 41). She notes the anxiety that attaches to the participatory element of

heritage tourism, and suggests it extends to the idea of affective and immersive reading practices. However, she identifies a relaxation of this negative stereotyping more recently through the expansion of fanculture, which revels in the writing of prequels, sequels and parallelquels, and in reenactment – 'live' and virtual – of favourite plots and characters (p. 42), promulgated and enhanced by convergence culture. Karl argues that "the desire for authenticity in the neo-Victorian is also a desire to claim a (hotly contested) legitimate share in the cultural capital, to re-plot and to participate in the Victorian" (p. 47). Like Kohlke, she advocates an expansive view of what constitutes the 'neo-Victorian', arguing for both a "longish nineteenth century" – the distinction between Austen or the Romantics, for example, and the Victorian, is significantly blurred, she suggests (p. 38) – and for a positive view of nostalgia, so that we might understand "the *attractions* of the neo-Victorian or phenomena like re-plotting, immersion and participation" (p. 47). She draws upon Susan Stewart's seminal work *On Longing* (1984) to suggest the active role nostalgia plays in identity work, "which attempts to possess a revised version of history/or literature via a narration that transforms it into personal experience" (p. 47). Thus the processes by which the past is transformed and made available for consumption are crucial for meeting the demands of the present.

Also examining the affectionate recollection that characterises so much of neo-Victorianism, Anne Enderwitz and Doris Feldman examine the BBC miniseries *Cranford* (2007) as "an example of the multifaceted relationship between the neo-Victorian and nostalgia" (p. 51), which seeks to understand contemporary fascination with Victorian material culture. They point out that this is an adaptation of a Victorian text that "itself performs a nostalgic longing for a pre-Victorian past" and an "ironic fascination with a pre-Victorian 'thing culture'" (pp. 51, 53). Importantly, though, they suggest that Gaskell's novel "prevents unrestricted immersion into such an idealised perspective through its complex narrative structure, which distances the reader from the nostalgia presented on the diegetic level" (p. 51). This appears to suggest that the authors are suspicious of nostalgia as a lens through which to view the past, but they go on to argue for a positive reading of nostalgia, rather than opposing it to serious critique of the past. The authors argue that the series stages historical change, dramatising discourses of modernity and tradition and, by so doing, both depicts nostalgia and demonstrates the way it functions (pp. 56-57). Their

article, then, examines how nostalgia functions as "an affective mode of memory which constitutes a cultural force in its own right" (p. 52), and argues that to a large extent nostalgia is responsible for viewing pleasure. Indeed, they suggest that the particular way in which nostalgia is fueled by the desire for an absence made present may actually constitute the fascination of the neo-Victorian per se (p. 61). This idea of absence made present connects in very interesting ways to essays later in the volume, like those by Eckart Voigts and Rosario Arias, which examine the way neo-Victorianism 'presentifies' the Victorian past.

Lena Steveker begins from the assumption that the Victorians "have a place in the cultural imaginary that makes the experience of what is believed to be Victorian always matter" (p. 67). Noting the prevalence of texts that reimagine the lives of Victorian figures, in biography and in biofiction, she links this to the impact of biography more generally in the last two decades. Interestingly, though, she remarks a similar fascination with biography in the Victorian age itself, noting similar claims about the genre's ubiquity among contemporary and Victorian critics (p. 68). She argues that the most recent fictional biographies eschew the experimental writing of biographic metafiction, which "radically problematise[d] the epistemological, ontological and methodological processes on which biographical accounts are based" and deploys, instead, "the conventions of neo-realism" (pp. 69-70). She reads Richard Flanagan's *Wanting* (2008), which depicts Charles Dickens in part of its narrative, and Adam Fould's *The Quickening Maze* (2009), as characteristic of this neo-realism, and of a more general trend toward depicting moments of crisis in the biographical subject's life: Tennyson is 'depressed' (70), and Dickens 'repressed' (73) in these stories. Her analysis of *The Quickening Maze* finds that the limitations of the biographical project are embedded in the narrative itself, as we watch various characters revise their initial impressions of Tennyson, so that stereotype gives way to more intimate knowledge (p. 72). Fould thus installs the reader's nostalgic clichéd expectations about Tennyson, only to subvert them:

> Juxtaposing different images of the poet, *The Quickening Maze* not only exposes the perception of Tennyson as a poetic genius as an over-simplified cultural cliché, but also tells an alternative biographical story which offers its readers

> an 'unofficial' Tennyson persona, as it were, presented from the inside of his (fictionalised) feelings. (p. 73)

Steveker advances a very interesting reading of the figure of Dickens in *Wanting*, claiming that the novel presents Dickens in terms of contradiction – he is both family man and neglectful husband – and as fundamentally riven, between the external public Dickens and the internal self-doubting and despairing Dickens (p. 73). The former is guided by reason, the latter by longing for passion (p. 74). A number of writers and critics have attempted to round out the popular image of Dickens with acknowledgement of his less flattering private life, but Steveker astutely observes that the novel "merely substitutes one clichéd image for another, for Flanagan's Dickens represents the stereotypical sexually repressed Victorian prude living in an age of stifling morality, hypocritical sexuality and crippling emotional inhibition" (p. 74). She then argues that the novel is similarly stereotypical in its treatment of the binary opposition of civilised and savage. In depicting Dickens's own racism, she claims, the novel "fails to sufficiently deconstruct the racist cliché voiced by Flanagan's protagonist" (p. 75). This aspect of the argument is, to my mind, less successful, perhaps in part stemming from Steveker's assumption that Dickens is the protagonist of the novel, which is something that needs to be argued for more persuasively in a novel that triangulates Dickens, Lord and Lady Franklin and Mathinna. Indeed, this essay points to a need to be highly alert to varying geographical contexts even if we are to extend the neo-Victorian geographically. Steveker quotes a passage in which the Franklins' adopted Aboriginal 'daughter' begins by dancing an English quadrille, but then switches to a traditional Aboriginal dance, arguing that

> [d]escribing Mathinna as finding freedom and her 'true' identity during a powerfully emotional dance in which she imitates an animal, this passage clearly presents he Aboriginal girl as the exotic Other of colonial discourse, thus uncritically perpetuating the racist ideology of Victorian imperialism. (p. 75)

However, this needs to be more carefully argued for, with attention to the geographical specificity of the *corroborree* dance. Does the novel really represent this is as uncivilised or 'savage' – which words or conjunction of

images suggests this? – or is this Steveker's own assumption about the dance? One might equally argue that the depiction of the traditional dance from within Mathinna's interiority marks an attempt to subvert racist ideologies. In a similar vein, the essay makes a very interesting point about the way these novels not only assert the value of attempting to "tell somebody's life" (p. 76), however fragmented the account may be, but further resist postmodernism by "resurrecting the idea of the author (p. 76), for which she argues well in relation to the novels. However, she also turns to the paratext of Flanagan's novel, citing the author's claim that *Wanting* is not a history, and should not be read as a history, but rather, the "true subject" of the work is "a meditation on desire" (Flanagan 2008: 255-6, qtd p. 77). Steveker reads this as Flanagan "[t]elling the reader how to read his book" and "fashion[ing] himself as a figure of privileged textual authority" (p. 77), and in some sense this is true. However, surely this authorial note cannot be read without attending to the context of Australia's 'other' history wars – the public and ferocious debate in which historians excoriated Australia's novelists for their dealings with the historical archive – which were current at the time of Flanagan writing, and against which he is preemptively defending himself. Understanding this context does not *negate* Steveker's claims about Flanagan's attempt to exert control over the meanings attributed to his text. However, it does suggest more nuanced ways to read Flanagan's authorial note, as more than a simple reversion to the author "positioning himself as supreme ruler" (p. 77) and could potentially open out further avenues to pursue in relation to neo-Victorian biofiction. It also demonstrates the potential pitfalls of embracing a global neo-Victorianism, and the need to attend carefully to geographical and cultural specificity: the neo-Victorian functions differently, and in peculiarly charged ways, in locations other than Britain.

Eckart Voigts also focuses on biofiction, examining Simon Mawer's *Mendel's Dwarf* (1998) and John Darnton's *The Darwin Conspiracy* (2005), and asserts the link between the two Victorian scientists, even though it is Darwin whose work plays the larger role in the cultural imagination and who, for neo-Victorianism, represents Victorian science. Voigts quite pertinently identifies neo-Victorianism as to a large extent dismissive of a broader scientific context, arguing that instead it imagines Victorian science "as a persisting performance of the polarities of character and *Weltanschauung*" (p. 80), or worldview. Suggesting that "scientific

biofiction" can be seen as a subgenre of neo-Victorian fiction, that is, as "fictionalisations of biological science and scientific biographies" (p. 81), Voights argues that Darwin's and Mendel's stories are used to address contemporary concerns about evolutionary and biological theory. He suggests that *The Darwin Conspiracy* is one of a number of recent fictions to revise the heroic view of Darwin, "veering towards a critical view of Darwin as representative of the colonising and masculinist scientific attitude of high Victorianism" (p. 89). In contrast, *Mendel's Dwarf* is more favourably presented, because of the scientist's marginalisation: "in [the novel] he never comes to embody institutionalised science and its subsequent eugenicist follies and vices" (p. 89). Voights appears to favour self-reflexivity in neo-Victorianism, claiming of the two novels he analyses here, that "to the extent that they are metabiographical fiction, these novels also reflect on what they are doing, pinning the traumas of evolutionary theory and bioethics on Darwin" (p. 82) and determines, too, that scientific biofiction is "far less nostalgic than other branches of neo-Victorianism" (p. 82). As opposed to earlier essays that embrace the genre's nostalgia, this latter claim implies criticism of nostalgia as an historical mode. Voigts redeploys his own, very evocative, term "performative hermeneutics" to understand the nature of scientific biofiction's relation to the Victorian past (p. 81). This term captures the idea that neo-Victorian fiction "*actualises* the Victorian past, turning it into presence rather than just *reading* or *re-reading* it" (p. 81, original emphasis). It's not surprising, perhaps, that in the attempt to describe the process by which neo-Victorianism makes an absent past present, Voight's turns to the vocabulary of haunting:

> What emerges is a blurry, fuzzy text, composed of both pastness and presentness – and in the case of Victorian bio-fiction also composed of fact and fiction. This epistemological conundrum – how to tell the past from the present and the fact from the fiction – has haunted criticism of neo-Victorian bio-fiction. (p. 81)

Here, not only do the Victorian history and literature haunt contemporary culture, but *neo*-Victorian biofiction haunts the literary criticism that seeks to define and explicate it.

In an argument that resonates with Voights' concept of performative hermeneutics, in so far as it emphasises presence, Rosario Arias uses the

theoretical framework of the trace to analyse Victorian presence in recent fiction and as a tool with which to interrogate neo-Victorian studies. She defines the trace for her purposes by drawing on Jacques Derrida, Paul Ricoeur and Emmanuel Levinas, as well as on the psychoanalytic perspectives of Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok. She suggests that the trace is hybrid in nature, partaking of "both absence and presence, past and present," and thus blurs the "temporal and spatial boundaries between the Victorian and the contemporary age", emphasising "presence and preservation" (p. 111). Her notion of the trace builds upon and extends the spectre as a figure for thinking through haunting, indeterminacy and temporal disjunction, by adding to this the idea of a "more material relationship with the past", noting that Derrida specifically equates the two (p. 112). Arias' argument suggests that the concept of the trace links explicitly, too, to neo-Victorianism as cultural memory, when she draws on Abraham's conception of "the trace-as-memorial", a "register of presence", and Ricoeur's specific linking of the trace to memory and history (p. 113). The important idea is that in this view, the trace is linked to life more than death, presence more than absence. "[T]he tracing of the Victorian traces, results in a persistent yet continuous movement between the present and the Victorian past" and is thus more "passage" than "mark" (p. 113). Or, as Arias notes, the trace is akin to the notion of revisitation that the editors raise in their introduction and, one might add, to Voigts' composite of pastness and presentness.

Arias' and Voigts' essays, together with that by Susanne Gruss, all revisit and expand upon the existing emphasis on haunting as a framework for analysing neo-Victorianism (Kaplan 2007; Mitchell 2008; Arias and Pulham 2010). Like Arias, Gruss uses the psychoanalytical work of Abraham and Torok in order to expand the vocabulary with which we can speak of the neo-Victorian as a kind of haunting. She suggests that combining haunting and trauma – so far two largely separate foci of neo-Victorian studies – enables us to understand our fascination with the figure of the Victorian writer, and fosters analysis of neo-Victorian fiction as well as the relationship between neo-Victorian literature and contemporary readers (pp. 123-124). Taking John Harwood's *The Ghost Writer* (2004) and *The Asylum* 2013), together with Diane Setterfield's *The Thirteenth Tale* (2006), as examples, she observes that in each, investigating the lives of dead authors is enmeshed in, and informs, the narrator's own quest for

identity (p. 124). She argues that by "forc[ing] their narrators to literally dig up their families' traumas", these texts "demonstrate how neo-Victorianism deals with trauma in the form of the phantom" (p. 124). Here, the phantom

> is a 'gap' in the unconscious of a subject which derives from the secret of a parent or parent figure that is not, in contrast to the Freudian concept of melancholia as unsuccessful mourning, related to a traumatic experience of the subject him- or herself. (p. 125)

Thus the phantom closely resembles concepts emerging from memory studies, like Marianne Hirsch's understanding of 'postmemory', and Laurie Vickroy's term 'transference', which seek to understand the intergenerational communication of trauma among Holocaust survivors and their children (pp. 125-126). In Abraham and Torok, the idea of the 'crypt' evokes the secret space within the subject in which resides an inexpressible secret (p. 126), and is thus very similar to the concept of trauma, as it is conceived of in trauma studies, as that which can neither be spoken nor forgotten, a haunting presence (p. 126): "It is precisely the aspect of unspeakability that links the phantom to many definitions of trauma" (p. 126). Rather than remain unspeakable, however, the phantom can be decoded. Gruss suggests that *The Ghost Writer* and *The Thirteenth Tale*

> allegoris[e] the impact of neo-Victorian literature on the contemporary market: like neo-Victorian literature in general, these texts are haunted by the nineteenth-century past; their protagonists' immersion into Victorian texts and (auto)biography is never an innocent pleasure, as it reveals hidden traumas that always also implicate the readers. (p. 133)

Readers must revaluate their own position in relation to the Victorian and the neo-Victorian. Thus, argues Gruss, these texts challenge the idea that literature can be "recuperative", righting past wrongs, since in Harwood's novels, literature does not have these redemptive power (p. 134). This might also be thought to disrupt or discredit the superior reading position identified by Boehm-Schnitker in her essay. Ultimately, Gruss argues, some neo-Victorian fictions might

> be read as cautionary tales against the pleasurable immersion into the nineteenth century […]. Rather than uncritically assuming the universal potential of literature to 'heal' the wounds of the past, these novels point to a prevalence of traumatic memory that cannot (and should not) be overwritten by (at best) pseudo-consoling narratives. (p. 134)

Her essay thus offers an interesting counterpoint to the idea that neo-Victorian fiction offers a "redemptive past" (Shiller 1997), which has shaped many examples of criticism.

While Susanne Gruss' essay explores the limits of neo-Victorianism's capacity to recuperate traumatic pasts, Nadine Boehm-Schnitker critiques the repetition compulsion of neo-Victorianism insofar as it attempts to use the Victorian as a mirror, or double, for the contemporary, calling for greater self-reflexivity about our stereotyping of the past, or, more specifically, that "there is a blind spot in self-reflexivity – 'our' own position or point of view" (p. 106). She examines the repetition embodied in Will Self's *Dorian: An Imitation* (2002) and Colm Tóibín's *The Master* (2004), as novels that "repeat canonical Victorian authors and thus perform a 'doubling' with a difference" (p. 94), in order to explore the compulsion to read the Victorian as a double for the present: "What kinds of identities can the look into the Victorian mirror corroborate?" (p. 95). Focusing on these gay historical fictions, she sounds a cautionary note, suggesting that there is a sense of superiority (more or less) implicit in neo-Victorian re-imaginings of the past, so that "neo-Victorianism may fall into the trap of constructing a position of historical superiority from which the previously repressed can finally be represented, the silenced spoken and wrongs set right" (p. 95). She argues that these novels address precisely this flaw, "lay[ing] bare exactly that position that is occluded in processes of stereotyping" (p. 106). *Dorian*, she argues, does not adopt the superior subject position by revealing past injustices, but instead scrutinises the positions we adopt in relation to the past. It is "less a critical engagement with the nineteenth century than a cultural critique of contemporary markets" (p. 101); it uses the nineteenth century as a (distorted) mirror for the present. She uses Homi Bhabha's notion of stereotyping very effectively, to capture the risks in the ways the Victorian is made to mirror the contemporary, so that "we *almost* see

ourselves, but not quite" (p. 94), arguing that it is this which produces the sense of the uncanny in the neo-Victorian repetition or doubling. "With Bhabha", she suggests,

> it becomes possible not only to question whether neo-Victorian cultural products are predominantly immersive or self-reflexive and thus to ascertain their political drift, but also to shed light on their function for subject formations and the degree to which they cater to the contemporary vogue of identity politics. (p. 94)

Here, in contrast to her introduction to the volume, she appears to reproduce the notion that the politics of neo-Victorian novels are inherently tied to their aesthetic choices, so that more immersive texts are implicitly considered more conservative.

The explicit use of the past to speak to concerns of the present is explored by Jessica Cox's essay, which suggests that the prevalence of traumatised women in Victorian fiction is revisited in neo-Victorian fiction, with a difference: there is a persistent focus in neo-Victorian fiction on sexual trauma. She examines a series of adaptations of *The Woman in White* (1859-60), investigating their treatment of sexual abuse as a narrative that remains veiled in Victorian literature and culture, and which finds only partial representation in these neo-Victorian texts today. Cox remains uncomfortable with the "prevailing cultural fascination with sexual trauma" today (p. 138), which speaks sexual trauma endlessly across a range of cultural arenas (p. 139). She rightly points out that Collins's novel ends with an insistence on silence in relation to past traumas – at least silence on Laura's part; Hartright and others speak voluminously about it – and that this refusal to consider the past marks a point of distinction from the neo-Victorian project, "which is frequently concerned with revisiting, acknowledging and working through the traumas of the past" (p. 143). Cox notes that while the neo-Victorian texts allude to sexual trauma, and thus speak what the Victorian novel cannot, they pull back from overt representation:

> in resisting fully articulating the sexual abuses which occur, these neo-Victorian narratives at once continue the process of obscuring such abuses so evident in Victorian Literature and

> culture, while refusing to fully participate in the culture of salacious and unnecessary detail which permeates other narratives of our time. (p. 149)

These texts, then, seem to both participate in and resist what has become known, via Kohlke, as the neo-Victorian "sexsation" (Kohlke 2008), making the Victorians a libidinal fantasy of the present, a site on which to displace our own desires.

In a similar way, Christy Rieger examines the way sensationalist treatment of diseased bodies in Michel Faber's *The Crimson Petal and the White* (2002) and Sheri Holman's *The Dress Lodger* (1999) mirrors *and* interrogates contemporary fascination with the abject body, manifested in the popularity of medical shows, where medical instruction veers into prurient voyeurism, and also in current fears about patient privacy and autonomy as medical records are increasingly centralised and digitised and, in extreme cases, operations might be filmed and wind up on the internet. These neo-Victorian novels, she argues, use "the decentralisation of medical authority and indecent display of abject bodies" in the Victorian period (p. 158). They write the diseased body as the erotic body, but they also "seek to make twenty-first century readers recognise their complicity with both a sensation-seeking public and a medical field that exploits the suffering body of its patients" (p. 154). Rieger acknowledges the titillation of these novels, which eroticise the abject body. However, she proposes that rather than close down discussion, we should nonetheless consider "how these texts imagine illness as a site of voyeurism and spectacle in timely ways for contemporary readers" (p. 154). Indeed, Rieger's essay offers an interesting, fresh reading of Holman's novel in particular and, intriguingly, argues that "both novels celebrate a post-Foucauldian space of feminine privacy" and reinsert agency into Victorian sentimental discourse, disrupting existing power relations (p. 155). Thus, both Reiger and Cox acknowledge the limitations, and indeed, compromises, of a neo-Victorianism that remains implicated in a voyeuristic impulse it wishes to critique, but argue persuasively for the possibility of using this position to catalyse contemporary debate.

Elizabeth Ho's article revisits material from her book *Neo-Victorianism and the Memory of Empire* (2011), extracting and slightly reframing its concluding chapter, which argues that neo-Victorianism must

stop revisiting the imperial games of the past and embrace the globalism that characterises the twenty-first century. To this end she identifies a sub-genre she calls the "neo-Victorian-at-sea", characterised by a concern "with journeys, rather than the founding acts of settler colonialism themselves" (p. 166). Her argument remains an interesting one in that it attempts to move beyond the framework of national literatures by asking us to rethink the notions of centre and periphery thought to structure much postcolonial fiction. Responding to the "transnational turn" in memory studies, Ho argues for "a global memory of 'the Victorian' that is attuned to the conditions and experience of transnationality" (p. 166). Turning to the trope of the sea, she argues, "can rejuvenate the field's archive and generic capabilities as the Victorian can now also be read as maritime empire and a memory of empire that is also shared between Britain, Africa, Asia and the Americas" (p. 167). She suggests that novels like *English Passengers* (2000) and *Sea of Poppies* (2008) posit "an unbounded globality that might unravel neo-Victorian studies by extending it to its limits" (p. 168). These novels leave behind a neo-Victorian focus on England, its houses and its things, and sever the link between the 'Victorian' and land by offering instead "a memory of the voyage, a series of encounters with other cultures and peoples without the tyranny of origin" (p. 168). She argues, as her book does, that the uncertainty about what constitutes empire in these novels enables reflection on neo-imperialism in the present, offering an image of the globalised deterritorialised nature of empire (177).

As though in response to Ho's acknowledgment that this expansion might "unravel" neo-Victorianism, and in contrast to many of the contributors, Sally Shuttleworth's essay 'From Retro-to Neo-Victorianism and Beyond', argues for a less inclusive definition of the neo-Victorian, and for firmer boundaries around the field. She revisits her seminal essay, 'Natural History: The Retro-Victorian Novel' (1998), noting that she had originally proposed the term 'retro-Victorian' in response to Fredric Jameson's category of ahistorical pastiche, suggesting instead that the retro-Victorian is "knowing, self-conscious, ironic" in order to "interrogate the relations of past and present" (p. 180). However, while novels of the 1990s interrogated "our relations to a Victorian past in order to find a greater sense of fixity, depth or moral purpose", she argues that "the fiction of the Blair years and the economic bubble of that era is generally less angst-ridden" (p.182) and that this seems to produce a reversion to something that sounds like Jameson's category of pastiche. Hence, "Victorian England sometimes

becomes an atmospheric spatial category, rather than a temporal period which predates and defines our own" (p. 182). She attributes this in part to the gradual disappearance of physical traces of the Victorian city, which has bred "a celebratory nostalgia for an imagined world" (p. 182). Thus, she examines Andrea Barrett's story, 'The Behaviour of Hawkweeds' (1996), as showing "the power of oral and familial transmission of memories, and their translation into culturally defining narratives" (p. 186) reflective, perhaps, of the shift of the Victorians from communicative to cultural memory in our collective imagination. Similarly, Audrey Niffeneger's *Her Fearful Symmetry* (2009) addresses "how we retell and negotiate our relations to the past, both immediate and historical. Controlling distance, in this case, is wonderfully disrupted by unruly Victorian narratives" (p. 186). The fearful symmetry of Niffeneger's title, she argues, refers not only to the symmetry of twinned characters, but to "relations between past and present, this life and after life" (p. 187) and in this way can also metaphorise neo-Victorianism's relationship to the Victorian past. Thus, when Shuttleworth claims that in the novel "[s]ymmetry becomes a form of control, a way of imposing meaning in the face of death and loss, but it also, as the [protagonist] twins know to their cost, acts as a form of imprisonment" (p. 188), this resonates with a neo-Victorian project that attempts to read itself in the distorted Victorian mirror. Thus, in opposition to Kohlke's expansive definition of the neo-Victorian, argued for in this volume and elsewhere (see Kohlke 2008), Shuttleworth proposes a narrower definition, more aligned to Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn's self-reflexive interrogative stance (see Heilmann and Lllewellyn 2010). For Shuttleworth, to be neo-Victorian, a text must demonstrate "that sense of [self-conscious] questioning, awareness of its own placement in time", which made the neo-Victorian distinct from earlier forms of the historical novel (p. 190). Otherwise, she suggests, texts can only be "atmospheric" and "actively undermine our attempts to understand, historically, the culture of the nineteenth century, and its relations to our own" (p. 190).

Cora Kaplan's 'Coda' examines the contemporary fascination with Dickens and Darwin, in the lead up to their anniversaries. She takes issue with the romanticisation of these authors, and ultimately with the way that neo-Victorianism specifically, and literary criticism more generally, might place too much ethical weight on novels and their novelists. As her seminal work *Victoriana* (2007) does, the Coda begins with a trip, this time abortive,

past the Dickens museum, ending up instead at the newly named 'Charles Darwin House', using this rebranding of the home of the Biochemical Society, the British Ecological Society and the Society for Experimental Biology as a means to ruminate upon the value attached to Darwin, and Dickens, in popular culture. She notes that the acts by which these public figures are celebrated also has a hagiographical effect, making them appear human, personable – "ethical, empathetic and culturally benevolent" (p. 195) – and, especially for Dickens, glossing the less palatable aspects of his life, such as his treatment of his wife. Interestingly, she observes that in the evocations of Darwin and Dickens in scholarship as well as fiction and other cultural products of the last decades, the scientist is transformed into a writer and the writer into a social scientist, "so that each can represent a figure in which the scientific and creative imagination are successfully joined and merged" (p. 195). Acting as a coda, Kaplan's piece draws in the primary organising ideas raised by the volume, noting that repetition – including the psychoanalytical idea of unresolved relationship to trauma – and evolution are two major tools for analysing the neo-Victorian. While she explores the centrality of Darwinian ideas to neo-Victorian fiction and criticism, she questions the value of thinking of evolution in relation to representations of the Victorians over time, pointing out that "that historical change should not be seen as an organic process, even a mediated one, but as an active social, political and cultural force" (p. 194), reminding us that neo-Victorianism shapes historical change as much as, or more than, it reflects or represents it.

Over all, then, the collection identifies and interrogates some of the features that have characterised neo-Victorianism to date: an assessment of nostalgia; the use of haunting and repetition to figure our relationship to the past; adaptation; and the use of the past as a mirror or double for the present. Given the capacious definition of neo-Victorianism argued for in the introduction and first essay, it would, perhaps, have been effective to include an essay or two on non-literary examples of the neo-Victorian. The collection does not, after all, examine genre fiction, steampunk, graphic novels, or video games, tattooing practices and fashion, all of which make up the way the Victorians are re-fashioned for us today. There is a tendency, perhaps, to argue theoretically for a commodious definition of what constitutes the neo-Victorian but, in the attempt to assess the existing field, reproduce existing foci. Nonetheless, the essays in *Neo-Victorian Literature and Culture* offer insight into the history of the field, extend its theoretical

perspectives, and identify concerns and work still to be done. Indeed, what makes the collection distinctive is the range of theoretical frameworks and critical positions brought to bear, so that while individual essays remain focused on specific texts and frameworks, the essays also function together as an attempt to assess existing paradigms and to theorise the neo-Victorian in fresh ways. To use the goldmining conceit established by Kohlke's contribution to the volume, there are rich veins to mine in this collection.

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