Journeys in Ventriloquial Wonderland: Review of Helen Davies, *Gender and Ventriloquism in Victorian and Neo-Victorian Fiction: Passionate Puppets*

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The tropes of doubling, self-Othering influence, and 'speaking through' the Other have been clearly in evidence in neo-Victorian fiction from its mid-twentieth-century accelerated evolution in works such as Marghanita Laski's *The Victorian Chaise-longue* (1953), Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) and John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969). In Laski's novella, a modern-day narrator wakes in the dying body of a nineteenth-century fallen woman and invalid, as if finding her soul malevolently stolen and imprisoned in a dummy's carapace, her own voice and subjectivity rendered mute and helpless. In Rhys' prequel to Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), the female narrator, Antoinette Cosway, repeatedly seems to pre-empt the expressions of Brontë's fiery protagonist (who does not actually feature in the text), so that at times Antoinette seems little more than a ventriloquist's dummy mouthing another's future words. Still more significantly, an uncanny ventriloquial and doubling relationship arises between Antoinette and her new unnamed husband, clearly intended as a version of Edward Rochester, who projects his own disturbed state of mind and pathological jealousy onto his wife. He declares her mad, describes her as "silence itself", and at one point even calls her "Marionette" and "Marionetta" (Rhys 1993: 138, 127), attempting to render her a zombie-like puppet who only moves and responds to his controlling machinations. Meanwhile Fowles' novel plays self-consciously with the twentieth-century

author's role as god-like ventriloquist and puppet-master to his Victorian protagonist, Charles Smithson. Indeed, Fowles foregrounds this motif through his author-narrator's explicit metafictional disavowal of his own controlling function and his contrary assertion of the character's supposed free will, as well as the anachronistic 'voicing' of Sartrean existential *Angst* through Charles.

In *Gender and Ventriloquism in Victorian and Neo-Victorian Fiction: Passionate Puppets*, Helen Davies evocatively explores and expands these interconnected concerns of a unique, autonomous vs. imposed, externally controlled subjectivity, of projected voice vs. imposed voicelessness, and of self vs. Other – or, perhaps more accurately, *self-as-Other* – via close readings of select nineteenth-century texts and neo-Victorian novels that employ "the ventriloquial metaphor" (p. 17). The relationship between ventriloquist and dummy, Davies argues, allows twentieth- and twenty-first-century writers to self-consciously reflect on questions of insidious historical influence as regards literary aesthetic practice, liminally positioned between repetition/copying and transformation/re-signification: "It is the ventriloquial condition of language use – the sense of not 'owning' our words, of always already speaking in echoes – that can help us to contemplate neo-Victorian 're-voicings' of the nineteenth century" (p. 34). Concurrently, ventriloquism serves to conceptualise postmodern subjectivity as precariously unstable and contingently performative, situated between past deterministic and new self-chosen narratives of becoming, or as Davies puts it, "at times the 'script' that neo-Victorianism repeats is one of its own invention" (p. 34). Nonetheless Davies' introduction adopts a somewhat essentialist (albeit appealing) genealogical analogy,[1] comparing the neo-Victorian conversation with the nineteenth century to a biological parent-child relation, with our "back-chat" (p. 1) contesting parental influence and control as we adopt the role of the Victorians' rebellious offspring.

Crucially, however, Davies makes clear that the resulting conflicted discourse is by no means a one-directional given: just as the Victorians oppressively shadow, inflect, and infiltrate our consciousness and art, we tyrannically impose our present-day subjectivity onto real and imagined historical subjects, at times overriding and silencing the past's 'authentic' voices. Yet neo-Victorian ventriloquism, she contends, cannot simply be dismissed as an "ethically suspect" practice or "an artistic failing" (p. 5).

Instead Davies positions the Victorians and modern-day writers/readers as simultaneously and *interchangeably* playing/occupying the roles of powerful ventriloquists and disempowered dummies. Neo-Victorianism becomes a mutually invigorating, though often precarious, symbiotic and pluralistic exchange of voice(s) and subjective agency. Indeed, Davies clearly asserts her intention to challenge what she takes to be the restrictive "ventriloquist/dummy power dichotomy" and deconstruct a seemingly "intractable dualism" that pervades common critical applications of "the ventriloquial metaphor, resonating with concerns about passive possession and active possession of 'voice'" (p. 20).

In this sense the ventriloquial pairing is closely akin to the reciprocally enabling/disabling mediumistic relationship that Davies introduces as a further analogy (via the work of Tatiana Kontou, see pp. 124-125). The spiritualist medium is empowered (and liberated from gender constraints) by becoming a conduit channelling the voices of distant/dead Others, who temporarily seem to assume power over her voice/body to make themselves heard. As Davies stresses, "the displacement of voice" involved in the ventriloquial performance has never been "limited to objects (in other words, a literal dummy), but can also be enacted upon people", so that "it is a *subject* fulfilling the role of the 'dummy'" (p. 21, original emphasis). The potential for agency is thus never negated entirely – and may even be asserted through its own denial (see p. 125). Rather, the power of the ventriloquial voice is constantly renegotiated in a poly-vocal field, as it cannot be positively ascribed to any one specific point of origin.

Like the ventriloquial metaphor, the mediumistic analogy underlines the inherently performative, even theatrical nature of neo-Victorian texts, which constitute self-conscious spectacles rather than simply naïve masquerades in historical costumes and settings. Unsurprisingly, Davies resorts to Judith Butler's theorisation of gender as a continuous but also potentially disruptive performance, since gender is also the keynote of her monograph. Not least, she notes how notions of the dummy's ventriloquised state tend to be conceived in terms of "passivity and penetrability" typically "manifest[ing] as a feminized condition" (p. 22) in contrast to the implicitly "masculine potency and penetrative ability" (p. 37) of the ventriloquist. However, she also stresses the ventriloquist's exhibitionistic resort to a dummy to make himself heard and his corresponding *lack* of a powerful, independent voice in its own right, reading this as an indication of

emasculating inadequacy or dependency (see pp. 57 and 88). Hence ventriloquism as a quasi performance of voice in drag "exposes the mechanisms of gender formation" – and gender struggle – while simultaneously risking cooption into "a recapitulation" of the compulsory "heteronormative construction of gender" (p. 26). Accordingly, most of the first chapter is given over to a detailed evaluation of Butler's gender theories and their usefulness – as well as limitations – as tools for neo-Victorian analysis. Deftly drawing out differentials between Butlerean concepts of 'performativity' and 'performance', this chapter should be advised reading for all would-be critics and students of neo-Victorianism to counteract a frequent tendency to employ Butler in far too facile, reductive, and selective a fashion so as to support scholars' preferred emancipatory readings of neo-Victorian sexual/textual politics. Davies' complication of sometime stereotyped neo-Victorian arguments about gender-as-performance strikes me as one of this study's crucial contributions to the field. Having said that, it does not seem entirely justified to assert that "the 'script' about Victorian ventriloquism was articulated by men writing in the nineteenth century and is being ventriloquized by women writing in the neo-Victorian genre" (p. 34), when only male-authored nineteenth-century texts and almost exclusively female-authored neo-Victorian texts are considered for the purposes of the argument.[2]

Chapter Two contextualises the Victorian preoccupation with ventriloquism by considering a variety of texts spanning the long nineteenth-century: Charles Brockdon's *Wieland, Or the Transformation* (1798), Henry Cockton's *The Life and Adventures of Valentine Vox* (1840), Henry James *The Bostonians* (1886) and George Du Maurier's *Trilby* (1894). This provides useful groundwork for Davies' discussion of neo-Victorian re-workings of the siren and Svengali figures in the next chapter, which concentrates on iconic neo-Victorian works, such as Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus* (1984), and Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* (1996), as well as Janice Galloway's lesser known *Clara* (2002). Davies identifies neo-Victorian authors' refusal to punish women characters who "appropriate the 'ventriloquist' role", which in Victorian male-authored texts "remains the privilege of heteronormative masculinity" (p. 41), as one of the main innovations in contemporary appropriations of the ventriloquism trope. From being ultimately "deemed unnecessary" (p. 69), women's voices are used to beguile, manipulate, and coerce male figures in a series of complex

and shifting power doublings rather than simple role inversions. Perhaps most significantly, however, women are no longer necessarily Othered by an external or male power, as Davies contends in the case of Carter's heroine: "Fevvers is her own Svengali; she ventriloquizes her self" (p. 72). Davies employs this crucial insight to contest the extent to which neo-Victorian characters can be taken to stand, in any straightforward fashion, for historically silenced subjects, since the retrospectively granted 'voice', presumed to convey/symbolise their recuperated historical agency and subjectivity, "is always already artificial" (p. 72). Atwood's seemingly amnesiac, convicted murderess Grace Marks, for example, deliberates which kind of voice to employ on Dr Simon Jordan in order to influence his ventriloquial 'script' of her life-story in his attempted elicitation of her true guilt or otherwise (see p. 79). The intended dummy analysand, whose traumatised psyche must be voiced through the doctor's intervention, simultaneously becomes "a female ventriloquist who can put her words in the mouth of her auditor" (p. 80). As in the case of Clara Schumann's father Wieck in Galloway's novel, who seeks to 'author' his daughter's diary, neo-Victorian women writers repeatedly represent "a vision of ventriloquial masculinity in crisis" (p. 91), rather than the crisis of identity being confined to the female 'dummy'. Ventriloquism as a strategy, Davies makes clear, always risks backfiring on the controller.

Chapter Four turns back to nineteenth-century literature, focusing on Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (serialised 1890, publ. in book form 1891) and *De Profundis* (written 1897, publ. 1905 in excised form, 1962 in full). The close reading of Wilde's classic novel is particularly well done, adding depth to prior critical interpretations of the mentor-student relationship between Lord Henry Wotton and Dorian, but also identifying further uncanny or 'queer' doublings between Dorian and Basil Hallward as well as the protagonist and Sibyl Vane. Davies effectively utilises these shifting relations of mastery and instrumentalisation to further deconstruct the notion of an integral "connection between 'voice' and self" (p. 97) and stress "the perpetual instability of the respective roles of ventriloquist/dummy, master/puppet" (p. 111). *Both* subject positions are driven by desires – hence the monograph's subtitle of 'Passionate Puppets' derived from *De Profundis* (see p. 111) – the outcomes of which remain ultimately unpredictable. Although Davies never makes this point explicitly, her analysis intimates that ventriloquism, both literal and metaphorical, may

actually be better understood as a desiring quest for (self-)Otherness rather than for autonomous, empowered, and unique subjecthood.

Chapter Five completes the study's alternating nineteenth-century and neo-Victorian structure by turning to Sarah Waters' *Tipping the Velvet* (1998) and *Affinity* (1999), both of which have already achieved iconic status in the field of Neo-Victorian Studies. Of particular note here is Davies' adroit elicitation of intertextual Wildean echoes in Waters' first novel. Also commendable is her insightful exploration of the extent to which Waters' refocusing on "the queer female ventriloquist" (p. 136) – via the various actual and would-be lesbian 'puppet-mistresses' of *Affinity* – fails to wholly circumvent heteronormative gender scripts.

The sixth and final chapter, entitled 'Talking to Ourselves? Ventriloquial Criticism and Readership in Neo-Victorian Fiction', remains with the neo-Victorian canon, interrogating readers' and critics' investment in the ventriloquial exchange via new close readings of A. S. Byatt's *Possession: A Romance* (1990) and Waters' *Fingersmith* (2002). Davies does also (too) briefly treat Kathe Koja's excellent but as yet critically neglected *Under the Poppy* (2010); however, she inadvertently 'normalises' the text's queer homosexual (as opposed to lesbian) energies by reading these back into a paradigm of hegemonic masculinity.[3] This chapter also gestures towards a further potential application of the ventriloquial metaphor in passing, namely to adaptation studies (see pp. 142 and 162), which might have been further developed. Rethinking adaptation as a form of intertextual ventriloquism or speaking through earlier texts/textual Others could well prove a fruitful avenue for future critical investigations. Thereafter, her monograph concludes with an 'Afterword' on two novels by Wesley Stace, which briefly develops the ventriloquial trope beyond the Victorian setting, underlining the trope's relevance beyond strictly neo-Victorian literature.

Overall, Davies might be accused of focusing a little too much on canonical neo-Victorian texts, rather than seeking to provide wider coverage of this rich and diverse field. Yet one of the strengths of her monograph also lies in finding genuinely new things to say about these already much discussed texts[4] – and about earlier textual criticism thereon. Indeed, Davies adeptly highlights how "ventriloquial imagery and the tension between speech and silence" (p. 69) shadow theorisations of neo-Victorianism's un-silencing of history's marginalised voices, although generally (and

unreflectively) ventriloquism as such "is left to speak for itself" (p. 6). Hence *Gender and Ventriloquism in Victorian and Neo-Victorian Fiction* encourages a more self-conscious approach to critical preconceptions and methodologies in this field of study which, due to its comparatively recent development and its conviction of its own 'cutting edge' postmodernity, has hitherto been somewhat lacking. Davies invites us to reconsider our own investments in the neo-Victorian project and the extent to which what we *want* 'the Victorian' past to be and mean might inevitably skew the historical reality of what it actually was. Inevitably, we run the risk of creating a fantasy that once again occludes the period's recuperated 'voices', which may finally be no more than ventriloquised projections of our own desires.

There are, however, a few points on which Davies' monograph displays comparable blind spots to those which it so ably critiques. At times, the author's insightful arguments positively beg for further underpinning with reference to psychoanalytical, philosophical, and/or literary theories of the double, *Doppelgänger*, second self or non-self. Of the substantial body of work on these interrelated concepts, only Karl Miller's *Doubles: Studies in Literary History* (1985) is cited, while seminal texts, such as Otto Rank's *The Double: A Psychoanalytical Study* (1914, first publ. 1925) and Masao Miyoshi's *The Divided Self: A Perspective on the Literature of the Victorians* (1969), as well as more recent criticism go wholly unmentioned.[5]

Similarly, although Davies never discusses 'spectrality' as such (in spite of the trope's prominence in neo-Victorian criticism), she repeatedly imputes a ghostly quality to the dummy's voice that actually issues from elsewhere than the self. This gives her discussion a distinctly Gothic turn, and many of her chosen texts clearly fall within the Gothic genre. Roger Luckhurst's work on Gothic literature's engagement with medical, pseudo-medical, and popular discourses on "trance-states" would have been particularly useful in this respect (Luckhurst 2000: 148).[6] As Hilary Grimes points out, by the 1880s and 1890s, when Gothic novels such as *Trilby* appeared, a conceptual blurring had taken place between (supposedly beneficial healing) mesmerism and (potentially inimical self-usurping) hypnotism (see Grimes 2011: 66). The latter is closely aligned with the exercise of ventriloquial control and instrumentalisation as explored by Davies, of particular relevance to her comments on the figure of Jeremiah/Jerome DuPont in *Alias Grace* (see pp. 83-84). Julian Wolfrey's

discussion of Victorian Gothic's "sense of the alterity of subjectivity" (Wolfreys 2000: xviii) also seems highly pertinent to the literary thematisation of ventriloquism. Analogous to Victorian Gothic, neo-Victorian writing, in a sense, opens itself up to self-Othering inhabitation or possession by the past. As probably the best known example of Victorian fiction about the double and self-as-Other prior to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886) also deserved a mention.[7]

My final quibble relates to Davies' non-consideration of biofiction, although admittedly this might have been difficult to accommodate within the constraints of the monograph's structure and length. Yet it is noticeable (and perhaps not coincidental) that several of the texts Davies chooses to discuss are works of outright biofiction – *Alias Grace* and *Clara* – or implicit biofiction – *Possession: A Romance*.[8] Fictional life-writing blatantly relies on the ventriloquial projection of the narrative voice into historical subjects and, especially in the case of biofiction in the first person (that is, strictly speaking, 'autobiofiction'), on the assumption/usurpation of the Other's subject position, who is 'spoken' under the guise of 'speaking for' her/himself. Existing theorisations of biofiction, such as Ina Schabert's *In Quest of the Other Person: Fiction as Biography* (1990) and Lucia Boldrini's *Autobiographies of Others: Historical Subjects and Literary Fiction* (2012), repeatedly highlight the resulting (inter-)subjective hybridity, grounded in an "essential displacement" (Boldrini 2012: 1) and "reaching out into otherness" (Schabert 1990: 217), which is also central to the literal and/or aesthetic practice of ventriloquism that Davies describes. (Indeed the notion of 'hybridity', increasingly being related to neo-Victorian fiction, for instance in the recent work of Christian Gutleben, opens up further useful avenues for exploring the ventriloquial metaphor.) Yet if Davies' study might have benefitted from consideration of biofiction, theoretical work on fictional life-writing will no doubt benefit equally from future engagement with Davies' theorisation of the aesthetics and textual/sexual politics of ventriloquism.

Her eminently readable and often refreshing monograph persuasively argues for our recognition and cognisance of "the slipperiness of ventriloquial power relations" (p. 166). Davies advocates for a much more self-conscious approach to the ventriloquial metaphor, its ideological implications and equivocal subversiveness, inviting further critical work on

the trope's employment across the full neo-Victorian spectrum, not just earlier, lesser known or male-authored novels, but also neo-Victorian drama, poetry, and film. Future critical 'voicings' on this subject will have to 'talk back', 'speak through', and contend with *Gender and Ventriloquism in Victorian and Neo-Victorian Fiction* as a theoretical touchstone.

Notes

1. Davies, however, restricts the genealogical approach to the Victorians and us, rather than also applying it to the relation between earlier and later neo-Victorian writers. For instance Laski's and Fowles' novels are not mentioned at all, while Rhys' text is only accorded a passing reference, with the earliest neo-Victorian novel discussed being Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus* (1984). This tends to give the impression that the ventriloquial trope emerged as a predominant concern much later than it actually did in neo-Victorian literature.
2. Davies only discusses two novels by Wesley Stace in her 'Afterword', one of them the part neo-Victorian *Misfortune* (2005), and briefly mentions David Lodge's *Master, Master* (2004) and Colm Tóibín's *The Master* (2004) in an endnote.
3. Based almost exclusively on the novel's opening scene, I do not find Davies' reading of this complex novel particularly convincing; not least, a single scene can hardly be made to stand for the text as a whole.
4. Davies' queer reading of the consummation scene involving *Possession*'s twentieth-century protagonists constitutes one such example (see p. 156).
5. Further works of evident relevance include Carl Francis Keppler's *The Literature of the Second Self* (1972), Paul Coates' *The Double and the Other: Identity as Ideology in Post-Romantic Fiction* (1988), Gordon E. Slethaug's *The Play of the Double in Postmodern American Fiction* (1993), Kitti Carriker's *Created in Our Image: The Miniature Body of the Doll as Subject and Object* (1998), and Andrew Hock Soon Ng's edited collection *The Poetics of Shadows: The Double in Literature and Philosophy* (2008).
6. Also see Luckhurst's *The Invention of Telepathy: 1870-1901* (2002), which more fully explores these issues. Telepathy, the non-physical/non-sensory transmission of thought, has evident parallels with the seemingly immaterial transmission of the voice.
7. Although perhaps not covered by Davies because it lacks an overt ventriloquial agent, the novella is pertinent in so far as Jekyll could be said to

become Hyde's 'dummy', his voice and agency increasingly ceding control to his double as the story progresses.

8. *Possession*, of course, appropriates elements of the lives of Robert Browning, and Alfred, Lord Tennyson and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Emily Dickinson, and Christina Rossetti for its Victorian poets' respective life-stories, as Davies herself points out (see p. 144 and p. 190, fn. 3).

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