Slumming Fantasies:
Review of Marina Julia Neary's *Wynfield's Kingdom*

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Marina J. Neary, *Wynfield's Kingdom*
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First novels can be rather strange concoctions, their authors often striving for a distinctly original voice, while self-consciously seeking to place themselves within a literary context with established cultural cachet and, of course, marketability. Hence some first novels may seem 'over-written', too eager to signal their immediate 'belonging' to the club and establish their credentials in their chosen field. The neo-Victorian novel, like all genre fiction, faces the added difficulty of balancing reader expectations for familiar tropes with those for novelty and surprise. Even when desirable, predictability requires careful management so as to avoid reader exhaustion. Where neo-Victorian 'genricity' is concerned, so many motifs and related plotlines – the fallen woman who makes good, persecuted orphans, lost manuscripts, switched identities, defrauded heirs/heiresses – have been recycled *ad infinitum*, to the point where it needs something quite different to hold a critical reader's attention. Moreover the neo-Victorian first novel runs another risk, specific to this genre – the temptation to emulate the 'loose baggy monster' of voluminous nineteenth-century fiction, as if to prove the writer's determination to get it right first time in unmissable 'high Victorian' style.

The strength of Marina J. Neary's *Wynfield's Kingdom* (2009) lies in combining what the reader *wants* to find in a neo-Victorian novel with unforeseen twists and turns that confound reader expectations. The novel refuses to take itself too seriously, half-mocking authorial interventions ensuring that the reader likewise avoids that particular pitfall. On the other hand, Neary does not manage to fully elide all of the risks outlined above, the epic format being a case in point: though not the standard Victorian triple-decker, her *Eight*-Parter, plus conclusion, individual sections ranging from three to seventeen chapters and amounting to 448 pages between them

(albeit in fairly large print), clearly aims for the appellation 'Dickensian'. This ambition is underlined by the novel's highly idiosyncratic and sometimes grotesque characters and situations with evident deliberate echoes of Victorian classics like *Oliver Twist* (1838), *Wuthering Heights* (1847), and *Great Expectations* (1860-61), as well as the works of Victor Hugo. The latter writer's influence is self-consciously signalled by his appearance as a supporting character (see, e.g., Hugo's description of the protagonist's "Hernani moment", p. 408).

The novel charts the rise and fall and resurrection of the titular Wynfield, an abused orphaned child-thief (though in reality, the lost heir to an aristocratic title and fortune) and "hooligan-hero" (p. 101), together with the fortunes of the ferocious wild child Diana, discovered by Wynfield as a dying infant in a deserted house in the midst of a snow storm and, through his further intervention, saved from a grisly fate of vivisection to eventually become his lover. The children are adopted by the unlikely figure of the misanthropist Dr Thomas Grant, disgraced physician turned Bermondsey innkeeper, a somewhat unlikely bumbling Fagin, unknowingly harbouring criminals and aiding subversives. More specifically, the Fagin figure is played by Neil Harding, who runs St. Gabriel's school, an orphanage for gifted children, which serves as cover for their exploitation and abuse: "[t]he strong ones he would sell to factory owners" to be worked to death in the space of "anywhere from six months to three years", while "[t]he weak and the ill" would be sold for medical and scientific experimentation, and "[t]he swift ones" he kept for himself, breaking their spirits via techniques used by circus "animal tamers" – "prolonged isolation in the dark", "'intense persuasion' and opium" – to become the brain-washed compliant "elite of Neil's factory of criminals" (p. 45). Yet Harding is also a quasi Magwitch, whom Wynfield re-encounters in prison towards the end of the text. Harding proclaims himself "The one who made you what you are!" (p. 368) and reveals the secret of Wynfield's birth and how Lord Hungerton paid Harding five hundred pounds to teach his son the criminal's trade in an ironic subversion of the boy's great expectations.

At this point a curious class-based determinist strain that runs throughout the novel comes to the fore, which I cannot fully account for in light of the author's and her protagonist's clear republican sympathies. (Two other historical novels by Neary focus on the early twentieth-century Irish Independence movement.) As Harding explains, "all my toils were in vain.

Aristocratic blood spoke too loudly in you. You were born to give orders. In time you'd overthrow me" (p. 369). Similarly, Wynfield later recalls Grant's amazement at "how long it took my wounds to heal. He believed that a commoner's flesh healed faster than that of an aristocrat. He was right after all" (p. 401). These sentiments seem too genuinely held on the characters' parts to be dismissed as entirely ironic, though to some extent they may be intended to (self-)implicate author and readers for our fascination with the fabulous trappings of wealth and privilege of Victorian high society as much as "the dirty axel to the golden carriage" (p. 423). There is more at work here than denouncing past inequalities and participating in the neo-Victorian's ethical project of recovering the lost voices of history's outcasts and socially marginalised.[1] Indeed, apart from the feral Diana (both Wynfield's tragic Cathy and a more rage-filled vengeful Heathcliffian figure than the hero himself), Neary's most fascinating characters are all upper class, masquerading as occasional visitors or temporary residents of Bermondsey, like the Attorney Edmund Barrymore, who poses as 'Captain Kip', a retired traveller and owner of a tackle shop aboard a decommissioned schooner, though far too liberal with his hospitality, money, and gifts to convincingly pass as a slum dweller.

For the most part, *Wynfield's Kingdom* is confined to the docklands and slum environs of Southwark borough surrounding Grant's inn, *The Golden Anchor*, from which the multi-talented Wynfield gradually diversifies from his work as a longshoreman into petty theft, street entertaining, gun-running, politics, hobnobbing with the upper crust, and even a stint at playwriting and professional theatrics. Yet the novel actually opens with Grant's respectable past as an aristocrat's live-in medical retainer and his professional fall, resulting in his descent into the slums. This character's downward arc, then, describes the slumming fantasy in which Neary invites her readers to indulge, and in which a variety of upper class characters (including Hugo) literally and liberally engage in the course of the novel. Like nineteenth-century sensation novelists, Neary capitalises on readers' desires to be appalled, both by individual propensities for (and pleasure in) wrong-doing and the horrific living conditions of London's poor.

This fantasy is further underlined by the inscrutable Grant's cynical observer's detachment, as he simultaneously adopts an insider and outsider position, and by the absence of any clear explanation for his self-abasement.

It seems much more likely that a dishonoured physician, even one whose medical license had been revoked, would depart for abroad, where he might assume a new identity and continue to practice medicine. (Indeed, this is exactly what the good doctor does at the close of the novel, as he prepares to decamp for the Crimean battlefields.) Rather, Grant settles into a loutish slum existence, apart from maintaining a regular bathing routine and commencing a "gem" of a Gothic journal which, in symbolic revenge on his one-time upper class patron, "chronicle[s] the most excruciating deaths of the English aristocracy" in "gruesome detail", though "sadly" the manuscript does not survive (p. 19).[2]

By definition, slumming, whether undertaken in actual fact or via an imaginative literary excursion, is self-indulgent, more driven by curiosity and voyeurism than edutainment or philanthropic interest, and unsurprisingly Neary's depiction of the Bermondsey community has carnivalesque overtones of revelling in degradation, though the novel never negates the ever present threats of vicious violence, exploitation and penury. Yet more than an arena for the survival of the fittest, the space of social marginalisation provides a theatre for continuous self-reinvention and (implicitly postmodern) performances of multiple contingent identities. (It is no coincidence that Wynfield has acting ambitions.) At times, though, Neary seems to get carried away, trying to juggle too many storylines and characters, with some of them, like Wynfield's Irish companions, never fully realised and falling through the net, sacrificed to a slightly overwrought Dickensian effect of depicting Victorian slum life in all its weird, wonderful, and depraved diversity as a salutary 'bonfire of the vanities'. At other times, Neary's dramatist's hand is too apparent: often characters' interior lives resemble staged soliloquies more than living streams of consciousness, while much of the dialogue rings like actors' speeches (see, e.g. Wynfield and Grant's "minor war of wits", pp. 110-113), producing slightly flattened rather than fully rounded individuals with whom the reader could more readily identify.

Like its protagonist, *Wynfield's Kingdom* engages in repeated shape-shifting, so that for some time I was left unsure what Neary wanted her novel to be: subaltern study of the Victorian underdog, tragic love story, neo-Victorian Gothic, or re-imagined social realist text? (Indeed, the novel would have benefited from tighter copyediting, and the text overall could have been significantly condensed without compromising on quality.)

Eventually, however, I realised that I was applying the wrong measuring stick; I was actually reading a postmodern romance, a picaresque quest for identity and meaning, which implicitly justified both the emblematic characters and improbable coincidences of the text. At this point, after having set the novel aside for a while, I suddenly wanted to go on reading after all to discover the characters' fates – and found myself generously rewarded with a marvellous set piece, as Wynfield (now Lord Hungerton) stages his greatest performance during his "maiden speech" (p. 423) in the House of Lords. Emulating both Guy Fawkes and Fenian terrorists, he threatens to blow up Parliament as a joke, concocted by Victor Hugo. Here Neary's dramatic writing comes fully into its own, with the evident (doubled) stage-management of the scene contributing rather then detracting from its outrageous fun, though British readers will likely not be enamoured of Wynfield's notion that a literal conflagration of the country's aristocracy should bring about "a miniature America right here" (p. 421). However Wynfield's rout of the drunken lordships, sponging in the Houses of Parliament, has an unexpected delicious resonance when read alongside the present-day MPs expenses scandal "inside the biggest tavern on earth – the Westminster Palace", presided over by "the most glamorous criminal gang – the English nobility!" (p. 425; for 'nobility' read 'politicians').

Admittedly, there are other occasional discordant notes, such as the odd anachronism, apparently used unintentionally, as when circa 1830, roughly coinciding with the first cholera outbreak in Victorian Britain, Grant reflects on his inn's antiquated plumbing: "God only knew what kind of diseases those pipes harbored" (p. 13). (Only about the time of Dr John Snow's death in 1858 was the prevailing miasmic theory finally displaced by that of polluted water as the cause of disease and contagion.) Besides the intertextual allusions, the self-consciousness often associated with neo-Victorian novels tends to be restricted to authorial mini history lessons, helpfully provided for those readers unfamiliar with nineteenth-century socio-historical contexts, but somewhat irritating for those who are better informed, as when Neary expounds at length on "[t]he addictive properties of opiates [..] not publicized in those days" (p. 18; see also p. 105). What is interesting about this issue in terms of the neo-Victorian genre as a whole, however, is how it highlights tensions between different kinds of reader and different audience expectations, which will likely only increase in future, as

general first-hand familiarity with Victorian texts and contexts progressively declines.

Such weaknesses can be forgiven in a first novel, especially as they are best attributed to the author's over-enthusiasm rather than poor writing skills, for her abilities are more than amply demonstrated by numerous contrary instances of vibrant, humorous, and highly skilled composition that directly engages the reader. (See also Neary's short story contribution to this issue of *Neo-Victorian Studies*.) A wonderfully pointed example, evidently informed by twenty-first century consciousness, is the following sardonic assessment of Victorian moral hypocrisy:

> There were a few men in Bermondsey who aspired to respectability and imitated the rituals of the middle class. They would shop in thrift stores for old suits once worn by bankers and lawyers. They would acquire broken watches for pennies and wear them for decoration. They would go to a brothel on a Saturday night and then go to church on the following Sunday morning. It was no easy task to combine a merry life with a spotless reputation. Whoever succeeded at this, earned the eternal admiration of his friends. After all, it takes finesse and resourcefulness to lead a double life. Hypocrisy is a talent in its own right, a sign of high breeding. (p. 135)

Once or twice, the reader also encounters a more self-reflective ironic use of true neo-Victorian metafictionality, as when Grant accuses Wynfield of self-promotion in terms that seem to comment as much on Neary's own writing practice, neo-Victorian fiction's popularity and its readers' all too eager consumption of slumming fantasies:

> In this progressively commercial society, where nothing is sacred, you can sell anything, from madness to ugliness. You take your hapless semi-criminal childhood, wrap it in heroic sorrow, tie the whole package with a rope, the same rope that's used for hanging outlaws, and then peddle it to the impressionable masses as something truly original. (p. 143)

Arguably, Neary here ingeniously disavows her novel's own claim to originality, underlining the neo-Victorian's pleasures of repetition with variation. No doubt many readers will wish to see what new and sensational re-combinations Neary can devise for familiar motifs, intertextual allusions, and postmodern romance in her sequel *Wynfield's War* (2010).

Notes

[1] In fairness, Wynfield does not completely jettison his republican leanings upon coming into his inheritance. Avoiding an untimely death when the 'Duchess', his rich republican admirer and illegitimate daughter of King William IV, has another man hung in his stead, Wynfield comes round overhearing her plans for "the good of England!" (that is, he is to be dispatched to Crimea to dispose of Lord Cardigan) and for her own "amusement" with the refugee from the law – "That is just as scared! I *am* England". This leads Wynfield to momentarily "believe that British imperialism has spread even into the afterlife. […] He had so hoped to enjoy a republican regime after his death. Was that his eternal punishment, to serve the crown?" (p. 399, original emphasis)

[2] This is typical of Neary's use of red herrings, whetting readers' appetites for a storyline that never materialises or is brutally cut short, as in the case of Diana's sudden death (unexpected in spite of the *Wuthering Heights* and possibly also *Jane Eyre* allusions) or Dr. Grant's sudden romance with one of his maids, who almost immediately dies in the fire set by Wynfield's lover, maddened by his presumed death.