Re-Imagined Memory:
Review of Kate Mitchell, *History and Cultural Memory in Neo-Victorian Fiction: Victorian Afterimages*

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Kate Mitchell, *History and Cultural Memory in Neo-Victorian Fiction: Victorian Afterimages*
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Kate Mitchell's monograph inverts the traditional hierarchy of history and memory, with the latter viewed as contributive and subservient to historiography, acting as fallible memory's corrective policeman. Instead, Mitchell resituates memory as *constitutive*. Not merely mediated through but *shaping* historical discourse – as well as other commemorative forms and private-turned-public records/writing, such as diaries, photographs and literature – memory determines what of the past becomes 'History' as we know it. By implication, modes of remembering (and indeed, of selective forgetting) produce the historical imaginary from which 'History' is gleaned, rather than vice versa. Hence, "an unflagging desire for historical knowledge, the act of remembrance, […] is privileged over historical knowledge itself" (p. 36), with the past held continuously open to further re-shaping by future acts of memory. In Mitchell's terms, fiction provides an especially fertile space to manifest the complex transformations of ephemeral personal and collective memory into enduring cultural memory, but also one where imagined acts of memory can highlight and 'backfill' elisions in our knowledge of the past, so that, in effect, *what might have been* becomes part of the collective *sensus communis* of what was.

Mitchell focuses mainly on contemporary works that have already become or are well on their way to becoming neo-Victorian 'classics', themselves increasingly enshrined in cultural memory via canon formation, academic research, and university conferences and curricula. Certainly Graham Swift's *Waterland* (1983), A.S. Byatt's *Possession: A Romance*

(1990), and Sarah Waters' *Affinity* (1999) and *Fingersmith* (2003) fall into this category, and each author is accorded a dedicated chapter, supplemented by a final chapter on two lesser known writers, which covers Gail Jones' *Sixty Lights* (2004) and Helen Humphreys' *Afterimage* (2001). This does mean that, in part, Mitchell's work serves a consolidating rather than ground-breaking function vis-à-vis neo-Victorian criticism, albeit an important one executed persuasively and with finesse, inviting us to pause and reflect on where neo-Victorian Studies has come from and where it is tending. Yet her introduction and overview chapters 1 and 2 do more than provide a comprehensive theoretical frame for her textual discussions, evincing a prospective as much as retrospective engagement with neo-Victorianism. Accordingly, to borrow from one of her own chapter titles, *History and Cultural Memory in Neo-Victorian Fiction* offers its readers "A Fertile Excess" alongside its occasionally more conventional fare.

Mitchell begins her study by tracing the "inva[sion] by Victoriana" (Liz Jensen, qtd. p. 1), which has reconfigured the original pejorative connotations of the term into ones of positive fascination and eager commoditisation, not least in the realm of literary production: "These novels grapple with the issue of how to package the Victorian past for the tastes and demands of contemporary readers, how to make 'retro' accessible and, for that matter, commercially successful" (p. 3). Such avid consumerism, the author argues, mistakenly arouses common suspicions of "playing nineteenth-century dress-ups", which overlook how neo-Victorian fictions "critically engage the past" by re-focusing from the postmodern problematisation of any and all historical knowledge onto the importance of continuing to strive for such (albeit contested) knowledge and new means to facilitate it: "They are more concerned with the ways in which fiction *can* lay claim to the past, provisionally and partially, rather than the ways that it cannot" (p. 3, original emphasis). Mitchell goes on to specifically link the resurgence of historical fiction with "the emergence of memory discourse" in the latter part of the last century, and the concomitant rise of interest in "non-academic forms of history" (p. 4). To the latter might be added the growth, since the 1960s and 1970s, of anti-hierarchical 'social history' and 'people's history', also termed 'history from below', which broadened the field of historical enquiry to include such phenomena as oral narrative, folklore and tall tales, and domestic artifacts/art, for instance samplers and patchwork quilts, hence already focusing on what Mitchell later refers to as

"other, non-textual modes of memory and retrieval" that she will consider (p. 7). Arguably, such mediums of social history are also already imbued with the two dimensions Mitchell attributes to neo-Victorian fictions produced from the 1980s onwards: firstly, an affective dimension differentiating them from more would-be 'objective', historiographical discourse; and secondly, an increased focus on the contexts of reception and thence reader participation in reconstructions of the past. Both of these characteristics merge in Mitchell's proposition that neo-Victorian texts "are haunted not by the desire for history, or the past itself", but rather "by the desire for the act of historical recollection, the process of remembering" (p. 8) – an innovative reading of the genre's prevalent trope of spectrality, returned to several times throughout the work.

Chapter 1 develops the monograph's main argument: that neo-Victorian novels should be read as "memory-texts", that is, as performative, "actively shap[ing]" acts of cultural memory (pp. 4, 32), instead of mere fictions or alternative/competing kinds of historiographical narrative. Hence, what is at stake is not so much the authenticity or otherwise of the represented nineteenth century, but the ways that – and the purposes for which – the period is *being remembered* by writers, readers and, indeed, the characters themselves: "why does the text invoke[…] this aspect of the past, in this way and in this form, now? How does it function as a technology of cultural memory, shaping our historical consciousness?" (p. 13)

The aptly titled Chapter 2 explores "Contemporary Victorian(ism)s", highlighting a gradual shift from denigrating views of the Victorians as our absolute others to perceived correspondences between their period and our own, inviting admiration, emulation, and even envy. Increasingly, Mitchell argues, historiography re-focused from an interest in high culture to those features of Victorian society "previously invisible or excluded: women, the working and criminal classes and non-Europeans" (p. 45). Yet if these groups suffered from the lack of representation in early twentieth-century historical discourse and, of course, from a lack of political self-representation in their own day, they were most definitely a very visible presence in nineteenth-century fiction and public discourse (of psychology, medicine, sanitation, social reform, and investigative journalism), if more often as their objects rather than subjects – providing an analogy to Foucault's notion of the 'repressive hypothesis' and its precipitation of sexual discourse that Mitchell discusses at length (see pp. 46-47). Hence,

neo-Victorian fiction may constitute a response as much to a change *in the kinds of* historical texts and sources employed for historiographic enquiry, as to a belated discovery of previously untold or unacknowledged histories per se. Mitchell's concise overview, in Chapter 6, of the history of photography and its cultural reception suggests as much, when she notes how "historians' discovery of old photographs seems also to have corresponded to the emergence of memory in historical discourse in the last decades of the twentieth century" (p. 148). Fittingly, the various neo-Victorian novels referenced by Mitchell, as prominently employing the photographic trope, all herald from the mid 1990s to the middle of the current decade, underlining the proposed interpenetration of historical and fictional discourses in cultural memory-work.

Mitchell continues her overview of the socio-cultural contexts of neo-Victorianism by focusing on the strategic uses of memory, aimed at producing particular outcomes, a tendency that actually runs counter to the open-ended textual politics she considers typical of neo-Victorian literature. In particular, Mitchell focuses on how Margaret Thatcher invoked and commoditised 'Victorian values' to promote ultra-traditional versions of the nuclear family founded on the heterosexual imperative, in order to legitimise her campaigns for "a return to *laissez faire* economics" and self-reliance, at the same time that cultural historians were complicating such inane versions of Victorian domestic bliss and familial/economic discipline (p. 48). While Mitchell makes clear how readily the nineteenth-century past can be co-opted for dubious political rhetoric and stratagems, with 'Victorian values' serving as a quasi short-hand for claims of "speaking with the language of morality in contemporary culture" (p. 52), this section would have benefited from a clearer linking back of the turn to ethics to neo-Victorian writers' literary agendas.

The final section of Chapter 2 provides a concise consideration of the rise of the heritage industry, recalling the Victorians' penchant for revivalism, and of nineteenth-century visual and communication technologies, which Mitchell suggests produced radical cultural change commensurate with that being experienced in our own time. While the former fosters a sense of generalised 'tradition', often at the expense of an appreciation of the specificity and diversity of historical experiences (p. 53), for Mitchell, the phenomenon seems to provide further proof of her thesis by highlighting our culture's *desire* for communion with the past, even in

the trivial forms of nostalgia, depthlessness, and superficial style and spectacle. Today's penchant for constant visual stimulation is linked to the advent of photography, identified as a recurrent theme in neo-Victorian fiction employed to critique processes of commoditisation, mass production, capitalist consumerism, and image culture then and now (see pp. 56-57), while the Victorians' "vast developments in their own communication structure" is said to parallel the worldwide web and other computer-based information systems (p. 58). Mitchell, however, also warns of the dangers of taking such parallelism too far, causing "[t]he diverse and multi-layered identity bestowed upon the Victorian era" to dissolve into outright "conflation of the period with our own", with the result of "flatten[ing]" our culture in turn, homogenising it and rendering it "static" (p. 59). Hence, to better understand our relationship with the nineteenth century, Mitchell sensibly advocates finding a balance between "simple alteritism or continuism, each of which is predicated upon a stable identity for both the Victorians and ourselves" (p. 60), when these are actually always contingent and subject to mnemonic revision. The sheer variety and proliferation of neo-Victorian 'takes' on the nineteenth century, combined with their diverse evocations of intersections between then and now, help us attain the necessary balance for successful historical enquiry and remembrance.

Chapters 3 to 6 provide illustrative case studies for Mitchell's foregone arguments via dense but accessible readings of neo-Victorian novels as memory-texts. The third on *Waterland* and the fourth on *Possession* constitute a natural pairing, both charting the romance dimension of neo-Victorian fiction, which Mitchell reads as "indicative of *a desire for history* that persists, even flourishes, despite its absence" in our supposedly de-historicised and fallen postmodern present; in fact, "paradoxically, the very void of history generates its surfeit" (p. 63, emphasis added). Both texts, Mitchell proposes, explore how the historical urge to come to 'know' the fullness of 'reality' – to counter a perceived emptiness of significance in modern existence, no longer seen as teleological or progressive for either individuals or societies – is predicated on that same desire's impossibility of fulfilment. For as opposed to the desire to possess realist 'facts', meaningless in so far as they reveal no legitimating overarching pattern beyond (or outside of) their narrative configuration, the desire for meaning-making stories always resists closure. It continuously generates narrative tangents, diversions, counter-narratives, and new desires for more and other

stories altogether. Story-telling, of course, is intimately linked to interrogative memory – to questions of 'Why?' and 'What happened then?' – in effect "recasting […] history as desire" (p. 64) or, more specifically, the desire to create and read meaning-*full* stories.

In *Waterland*, the history teacher Tom Crick engages in a continuous imaginative re-reading of the past, so that "the meaning of history" is not "*discover*[*ed*]" or revealed, but performatively "*produce*[*d*]" for Swift's reader (p. 67, original emphasis). Faced with the "glimpse of meaninglessness" through his own precarious situation as soon-to-be-unemployed and the loss of faith recorded in his Victorian ancestor's dairy, Tom resorts to ever more strenuous attempts at meaning-making to stave of the void (see p. 78). Desire reconstitutes itself under erasure. More problematically, Mitchell traces this desire through Swift's figuration of men's desire for women, who are associated with irrationality, non-linear temporality, and unknowability in the text. Like history, female characters are "written and rewritten by and as male desire" (p. 88). While persuasive, Mitchell's reading might have problematised the essentialist terms of Swift's trope – women represent the a-historical "'other' of rational, realist history" and are "part of natural history" (p. 89) – as well as Swift's implicit re-affirmation of history as a male dominated enterprise, an assumption often contested by writers of feminist and queer neo-Victorian fiction. Think of Angela Carter's marvellous Fevvers, who subsumes the journalist Jack Walser's project – to set the record straight and expose her as a fraud – into her own convoluted story, co-opting him as its scribe in *Nights at the Circus* (1984), or Mrs Sucksby's secret twisting female plot that ultimately frames, manipulates, and over-writes the con artist Gentleman Rivers' devious conspiracy in *Fingersmith*, out-doing male would-be meaning-making with her own 'herstory' of maternal desire. In both cases, historical teleology – that is, both the narrative's final cause and purposive design – stem from *women*'s active and productive desires, inverting Swift's paradigm.

The following chapter on *Possession* continues the theme of desire, but shifts the focus further still from the primary meaning-making of authoring and producing stories/texts (though still represented in the figures of Byatt's fictional Victorian poets Ash and LaMotte) to the secondary meaning-making of readers'/critics' interpretations and consumption. Hence the desire for history becomes, at least in part, commoditised or, in Mitchell's terms, "[t]he past becomes a possession" (p. 94), not least in

terms of national as well as ancestral heritage. Simultaneously, individuals' personal (and sometimes pecuniary) investments in the past's material and textual traces are predicated on a "visceral" as much as "cerebral" responsiveness that expands the pursuit to historical knowledge beyond the rational, intellectual, and scientific to encompass the sensual, emotional, and intuitive, introducing an uncanny dimension: the "ideal reader" of the past, Mitchell maintains, is one "willing not only to possess the text, but also to be possessed by it" (p. 94). The ideal reader does not covet the past distilled into lifeless relics or artefacts conveying ownership of one's own or another's appropriated cultural heritage, but wants a living, always fluid past, which can be resurrected in any number of protean forms, like desire itself. The novel acts both as "a memory-bank" of 'high' culture (quoting Lena Stevecker) and as a "mnemonic space" (p. 104), allowing that culture's past productions to be vividly remembered and celebrated anew. Yet what goes significantly unsaid in Mitchell's resonant critique of commoditised cultural memory – and indeed in Byatt's also – is Britain's own problematic history of cultural imperialism and ethically questionable appropriations of other peoples' heritage, from the Rosetta Stone and the rest of the extensive Egyptian holdings in the British Museum (of which only a fraction are even displayed) to the Elgin Marbles and the Koh-i-Noor diamond. Neo-Victorian fiction like Byatt's novel could also be viewed as celebrating the vibrant riches of Britain's cultural past, while eliding the costs of such riches to other nations and cultures impoverished thereby.

In the subsequent chapter on Sarah Waters' work, Mitchell extends the creative possibilities of remembrance to include imagined as well as textual pasts. In the absence of a documented lesbian genealogy, cultural memory is fictionally enlarged to encompass female homosexuality, engendering the missing nineteenth-century precedent via "the mnemonic power of literature" (p. 117). Waters quite literally imagines the missing memory-link for cultural recollection/transmission into existence, creating a textual archive of lesbian life both within literary and (in *Fingersmith*) pornographic discourse. "By a fictional sleight of hand, it makes something imagined *seem* like something remembered" (p. 121, original emphasis). Concerned not with interrogating specific representations of history but an historical *non*-representation, Waters' novels rely on "effacing" rather than accentuating their "difference from [their] Victorian antecedent[s]" (p. 118), as they seek to insinuate themselves unobtrusively amongst them. Yet there

are other means than metafictional self-consciousness to break the fictional illusion, and some qualification seemed called for with regards to Waters' overt depiction of sexuality (at least in *Fingersmith*) and her linguistic plays with the ideologically weighted terms 'gay' and 'queer', which periodically disturb her novels' fake verisimilitude. The un-discussed *Tipping the Velvet* (1998), where these breaches are most flagrant, might have been more difficult to fit within the constraints of the author's argument.

More convincingly, Mitchell stresses Waters' deliberate resort to particularly 'feminine' narrative forms, such as the gothic and sensation fiction, capitalising on these genres' capacity for exploring "cultural anxieties, especially those pertaining to gender ideals and sexuality", thereby imbuing her invented history with added spurious authenticity, since "these genres are perhaps the most likely sites where a lesbian tradition could have been voiced or, in fact, may have been voiced in muted, displaced ways" (p. 118). This is a crucial insight, which deserved further elaboration with respect to wider neo-Victorian literature, offering as it does a compelling explanation for writers' apparent preference for resurrecting certain Victorian writers and their works over others and for reproducing particular kinds of generic forms and conventions. Another partial circumvention of more problematic readings of Waters' texts can be discerned in Mitchell's related consideration of the suitability of the indirect gothic mode and the intrusion of the fantastic (via the spectral trope) for queerings of history. In both novels, the links of lesbianism with fraud, criminality, egoistically destructive desire and will-to-power could be read as an ambiguous re-pathologisation of lesbianism at odds with the liberationist project of Waters' writing as depicted by Mitchell. There are mere hints of such an alternative reading, when she discusses how sensation fiction draws on eroticised versions of "transgressive, even criminal" femininity (p. 134), or comments on the gothic's "associat[ion] with demonising transgressive sexuality" (p. 141). Some consideration of neo-Victorian literary parallels, also dealing with homosexuality, might have helped establish the typicality or otherwise of Waters' ambiguous strategy. On the other hand, Mitchell proffers an original reading of the residual "apparitional status" of lesbianism in the novels themselves, asserting that Waters "construes this in a positive light", since this same invisibility frees desire from domestication by the law and the patriarchal gaze (p. 140).

Mitchell's final chapter picks up the theme of loss again, this time via the feminist-inflected loss of the mother-daughter connection, here figured not through mimicry of nineteenth-century textual but photographic reproduction. For Mitchell, the fictional trope of the photograph – itself an 'after-image' in the sense of words standing in for/conjuring up pictures – is where "memory, history and fiction come together" most clearly in neo-Victorian literature (p. 144). She posits the photograph, as an interrupted and non-linear mode of memory capturing isolated instants of past time, as an appropriate image of the selective and partial nature of our cultural memory of the Victorians, finely balanced between uninterrupted continuity and absolute difference. In Mitchell's terms, the lost mother returns as "an aberration of presence"– most strikingly figured by the photograph of Lucy's mother in *Sixty Lights*, which "has never been taken", so that "it exists only in, and as, Lucy's desire for it" (pp. 157, 156). Once again, Mitchell reiterates the precedence of the *desire for memory* over the past itself, with imagined memory supplementing/displacing its actual lack. The narrative records an *excess* of memory, preserving not just what was but also, as in "Lucy's record of 'Photographs Not Taken'" (p. 164), what *might have been/become* history but did not, what remains un-pictured but nonetheless represented as the trace of absence.

The dead mother's ghostliness in-and-out of the frame is read as "a metaphor for a past both lost and, paradoxically, perpetuated, endlessly returned and repeated in the present" (p. 144). In *Sixty Lights* and *Afterimage*, this metaphor is expressed not just through pictures but, more importantly, through the daughters' bodies, which, like photographs in Roland Barthes' terms, become "*emanation*[*s*] of past reality" (qtd. p. 146, original emphasis), "medium[s] for the repetition of the past, its unbidden persistence in the present" (p. 160). From carrier of memory, the body transforms into "a memory object", mediating "the actions, recollections and images of previous generations" through iteration and rendering them, however obliquely, readable for the present (pp. 160, 162). The body enacts a sort of 'repetition compulsion' as part of trans-generational or quasi evolutionary memory. This reading would have been strengthened further by reference to the nineteenth-century discourse on child development, which Humphreys' and Jones' depictions of adolescent protagonists evoke; if not outright borrowings, they certainly suggest further uncanny repetitions between Victorian ideas and contemporary memory discourse, with the

latter bearing the unacknowledged trace of the former. As Sally Shuttleworth puts it, for the Victorians, "the child came into the world bearing the marks and memories of its familial and racial history, offering itself up as 'key' to lost worlds" (Shuttleworth 2010: 355). Thus Thomas Hardy, for instance, recorded that "[t]he individual brain is virtually the consolidate embodiment of a long series of memories; where every body, in the main lines of his thoughts, feelings and conduct, really recalls the experiences of his forefathers[/mothers]" (qtd. in Shuttleworth 2010: 339).

If Jones' and Humphreys' novels supplement "history as willed recollection" with "memory as unconscious repetition" via corporeal re-enactment (p. 145), the same could have been argued of *Possession* and *Fingersmith*, which likewise feature daughters who have 'lost' their mothers, resulting in a traumatic disconnection from their 'real' histories. Mitchell's assertion that "the loss of the mother symbolises the loss of history" (p. 154) is strikingly applicable to Waters' protagonists in particular, and both chapters 5 and 6 in effect offer *traumatic* readings of history, predicated on the disruption of trans-generational memory. Similarly, although Mitchell notes the role of "two world wars and economic depression", in changing our perceptions of the Victorians, ensuring that, by the mid twentieth century, the (post)modern "present no longer came off [quite as] favourably" in comparison (p. 45), she avoids any use of 'trauma' in this context or elsewhere. Yet the notion of trauma is crucial to memory discourse and to how we conceptualise individual and cultural memory, along with its lapses, blind spots, and repressions, and the direct relevance of trauma theory to Mitchell's textual analyses is unmistakable. In the chapter on *Waterland*, for instance, she notes how images of flooding and chaotic, anti-teleological 'natural history', symbolised by the Fens and the waters' obstinate refusal to submit to human containment and design, evoke the apocalypse of meaning recurrent throughout Swift's novel, where a coherent progressive continuum between past and present collapses into the "horror" of a confused and overwhelmed/overwhelming "Here and Now" (p. 77). Mitchell's sensitive description of this painful disorientating crisis as a confrontation "with the limitations of stories" and "the limits of our powers to explain", which render constructed history liable to rupture or dissolve at any moment (p. 77), echoes trauma theory's notion of the subject as unable to experience its trauma *as* experience at the time of its occurrence, always grappling with it

belatedly, *in medais res*, post-event, without ever arriving back at a point of origin, that is, the elusive traumatic 'real' itself:

> [I]t is that moment when we confront an event which seems inexplicable, for which we have no contextualizing, explanatory story. For this reason, the Here and Now is also an aperture where, very briefly, reality, in Tom's sense of 'emptiness', is glimpsed. This evanescent experience is the closest we come to non-narration, to being 'outside' story and meaning. […] Thus, an encounter with the Here and Now is always a more or less bloody apocalypse, an encounter with the end; the end of meaning, the end of a particular story which has framed and filled reality. (p. 77)

Mitchell's trope is arguably that of the traumatic sublime, dramatising the reductive diminution or abjection (rather than ennobling elevation) of human consciousness in the face of imminent non-being and/or non-meaning. Similarly, in Chapter 6, the multiple traumas impacting Jones' and Humphreys' protagonists, including early bereavement, exile/forced emigration, and the Irish Famine, are never linked to trauma theory's focus on the potential unrepresentability of traumatic histories, as suggested, for instance, by the non-existent photograph of the lost and longed-for mother.

My rather digressive review indicates how much of interest there is for neo-Victorian scholars and students in Mitchell's thought-provoking study, the most important arguments of which can be readily adapted for critical explorations of other media such as graphic novels, film, and videogames. *History and Cultural Memory in Neo-Victorian Fiction* will likely become standard reading on most neo-Victorian university courses. Not only does it provide a sound introduction to some of the most widely taught classics of the genre and ably cover many of the prominent debates in the field, it also points to significant work remaining to be done in re-reading the genre's multiform productions in terms of memory discourse.

Bibliography

Sally Shuttleworth, *The Mind of the Child: Child Development in Literature. Science, and Medicine, 1840-1900*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.