On the Turn:
Review of Penny Gay, Judith Johnston, and Catherine Waters (eds.), *Victorian Turns, NeoVictorian Returns*

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Penny Gay, Judith Johnston and Catherine Waters, eds.,
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Scholarly footnotes can occasionally provide an interesting, even subversive or challenging, narrative alongside that presented in the main text. This book contains one particularly relevant and striking example. Footnote 5 of the editors' introduction (by Judith Johnston and Catherine Waters) reads as follows:

> 5. The term "Neo," when used in conjunction with a political movement, implies a desire to return to the political beliefs of that movement's past (for example, Neo-Fascism) and a desire for the reinstatement of earlier, and often conservative, values as opposed to more radical change. Margaret Thatcher's NeoVictorianism – her call for a return to "Victorian values" – might be interpreted in this way. However, used in conjunction with a genre, the implication is rather a new, modified, or more modern style, as in Neo-Gothic for instance. (pp. 10-11)

The determination to provide a precise (and positive) definition of neo-Victorianism in this note is clear, and it is no doubt essential when you are marketing this term as one half of your book's title. But it cannot mask the fact that the editors of this collection harbour an uneasiness, or at the very

least recognise a tension, in providing a working understanding of 'neo-Victorianism' (or as it appears most often in this book, which is not that often, 'NeoVictorianism'). The uneasiness is most noticeable in the fact that this signal towards meaning appears in a footnote, rather than the introduction text proper. There instead we find the rather catch-all phrasing that the "relatively new term, 'NeoVictorianism' … usefully categorises a vast range and variety of modern publications" (p.2). If there are such a "vast range" of publications under this generic banner, then surprisingly few are discussed in this collection, a point I will return to in a moment.

Starting from the footnote, I want to suggest that just as not all texts published between 1837 and 1901 are Victorian, so all texts post-1901 that happen to have a Victorian setting or re-write a Victorian text or a Victorian character do not have to be neo-Victorian. In fact, the editors' own definition cited above would prevent this being the case. Attempting to suggest that neo-Victorianism as politics or political philosophy is inherently conservative and opposed to radicalism does a disservice to several liberal thinkers and their attempt to return to Millian or classical liberalism in these early years of the twenty-first century (see my other review essay in this issue, on '"Posthumous Productivity", Political Philosophy, and Neo-Victorian Style'). To suggest that all neo-Victorian texts "in conjunction with a genre" – literary, filmic, visual — are positive, always representing the "new, modified, or more modern style", is similarly problematic. Plenty of texts might fit the broadest terms of neo-Victorianism by genre alone but are also inherently conservative, because they lack imaginative re-engagement with the period. This is a significant issue, since the divide between parody and innovation, pastiche and re-interpretation constitutes an important demarcation that separates genres, and, for want of a better term, has to 'police' the border between neo-Victorian texts and straightforward historical fiction/romance set in the nineteenth century. In order to be a distinct genre and to make an intervention that goes beyond superficial notions of form and style, that 'neo-' has to signify something beyond "new, modified, or more modern" – something that critics like myself are still grappling to adequately define. This collection serves as a useful reminder of the problem.

Definitions of the nature and practice of neo-Victorianism are frequently at issue, partly through not being openly discussed, in the editors' presentation of the collection and its parameters. In the 'Preface' by Penny

Gay the term "recycling" is used, albeit alongside the more acceptable "re-shaping" (p. xi), and the introduction itself speaks of "Victorian survival" (p.5). At one point the Victorian – or is it the neo-Victorian? – is even compared to the vampiric undead, presumably to tie-in with the prevalent term 'afterlife' so often used in contemporary critical discourses: "like Dracula the [Victorian] age would not stay interred; and late twentieth- and twenty-first century writers are evidently still in symbiotic relationship with its compelling allure." (p. 5) Once bitten, you always belong to Countess Victoriana, it seems. The Modernists are very briefly highlighted as the Crew of Light, attempting to stake down the wretched corpse of Victoria, while at the same time producing "their best and most radical work" on the back of it (p. 5). Yet such comments, here and in other works, always convey a sense that the Modernists knew they were fighting a lost battle, that there would be no keeping the period down, and that the dismissal of the dismal Victorians was little more than a convenient antagonism that itself parodied the self-conscious distancing the Decadents made between themselves and the Victorian as far back as the 1890s. In that respect, pinpointing *Dracula* (1897) as emblematic of the Victorian proves ironically appropriate given that text's own position as a story of tradition versus modernity at the *fin de siècle*. It might even invite us to read Stoker's novel as an early neo-Victorian encounter, but that remains a matter for debate elsewhere.

Given the contexts of this journal, I am going to direct most of my attention, naturally enough, to the neo-Victorian 'turns' in evidence here, though these only constitute six of the total of eighteen essays gathered in the volume, all featured in the second part, entitled 'NeoVictorian Returns'. Nonetheless, the other two thirds of the volume collected in 'Victorian Turns' deserve brief mention also, not least because they contain some useful examples of how the Victorians themselves consciously sought to return back to the previous generation, even if not quite as far back in their own history as the distance now separating them from us. I would highlight in particular R. S. White's comparison of Tertius Lydgate in George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1872) with the medical experiences of John Keats, and Jocelyn Harris' lively look at the connections between Jane Austen's character Jane Fairfax in *Emma* (1816) and Charlotte Brontë's titular protagonist in *Jane Eyre* (1847). Other useful pieces of recovery work include Katharine Newey's chapter on melodrama and its subversive

relevance to Brontë's *Villette* (1853), Gillian Beer's chapter on musical influences and Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), and Elizabeth Webby's 'George Eliot in Australia'. These, and the other chapters in Part One, are sound, scholarly pieces, which in most cases allow text and context to flourish despite some seemingly quite tight word limits.

One of the most interesting aspects of Part Two resides in the familiarity of the subjects and texts under discussion. Apart from Jennifer Gribble's astute, though to my mind overly generous, reading of Lloyd Jones's recent *Mister Pip* (2007) alongside Peter Carey's *Jack Maggs* (1997) in her chapter on 'Portable Property: Postcolonial Appropriations of *Great Expectations*', most of the neo-Victorian texts will be readily known to most readers of this journal and those interested in contemporary fiction's encounters with the Victorian. Most of the texts discussed derive from the 1980s or mid-1990s, with John Fowles as a kind of neo-Victorian father-figure, lurking over the section as a whole. Indeed, the fact that Fowles is the subject of the final chapter of the collection serves almost as a signal of the way in which this volume folds in upon itself in the second part. While dealing with the newness of the idea of the neo-Victorian, we are subject to *two* temporal returns, not only to the Victorians, but also to a safer, more comfortable version of an already historic postmodernism (*circa* late 1960s), rather than the "ongoing and productive engagement" referenced by the editors as part of contemporary culture (p. 10). This is not to disparage Joseph Wiesenfarth's essay on Fowles and religion, one of the best pieces in the collection, not least because it raises the prospect of faith, doubt, Christianity and the lived religious experience as elements that have pertinence to the neo-Victorian debate. Such elements are often excluded in our desire to look to sexual radicalism, class consciousness, or adventure narrative in how we engage with the nineteenth century now. Wiesenfarth's essay reminds us of the fundamental importance of the revision of Victorian religion in neo-Victorianism, something sidelined in many mainstream neo-Victorian fictions and related adaptations that nevertheless raises significant interpretative questions about how, in a post-religious, or at least post-Christian/post-Anglican landscape, we deal with the Victorians and faith. More work needs to be done in this area, and it might well emerge in the coming years through a reassessment of Richard Dawkins anti-god movement in the context of the 2009 Darwin bicentenary and the sesquicentennial of *On the Origin of Species*. Perhaps we could do with a

new neo-Darwinian novel, a *French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) for the twenty-first century.

The other chapters in Part Two cover varied topics: John Rignall writes on landscape and history in relation to Walter Scott and Graham Swift; Rosemarie Bodenheimer discusses David Lodge's *Nice Work* (1988); Barbara Garlick compares Anthony Thwaite's poetry collection *Victorian Voices* (1980) with George Meredith's *Modern Love* (1862); and William Christie covers film and theatrical adaptations of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1816). Each raises important points in relation to the works under discussion, but apart from Garlick's salutary reminder of neo-Victorianism's presence in poetry as well as fiction (and, indirectly, of how important poetry was to the Victorians themselves), there is little that engages with neo-Victorianism happening now or serves up the under-explored, the under-referenced or the under-read. One reason for this might be found in the odd disjuncture between the two halves of the volume. The first part shows no fear of dealing with popular genres or popular writers; the editorial introduction is at great pains to point out the significance of the related expansion in mobility and print during the Victorian period and the ways this changed what was read, who read it, how it was read, and who did the writing for the growing reading public. Conversely, I detect a certain level of cynicism – if not the outright patronising comment – about twentieth century attempts to diversify, adapt, and (re-)adopt the Victorian into popular mass culture. William Christie's essay provides ample evidence of what might be termed the collective thinking on this score: the "vulgar evolutionism" he detects in an admittedly mass market adaptation by Kenneth Branagh (1994) of Shelley's *Frankenstein* is, as he puts it, only one example of what happens when a text "enters the field of popular entertainment" (p. 160). Yet that is surely no reason to sneer at the fact that Leonore Fleischer, the author of that adaptation, also co-authored a book on 'brain building' – actually several, including *Brain Power: The 12-Week Mental Training Programme* (Piatkus 1990) and *Brain Building in Just 12 Weeks* (Bantam 1991). In the vein of the neo-Victorian emulating the Victorian, perhaps Fleisher's book is a self-help volume on a par with Samuel Smiles's *Self-Help* (1859)? As apparent from Christie's own essay, it might also be worth remembering that "the omnivorous monster of modern corporate entertainment" (p. 158), was a Victorian invention, although Christie proves oddly reluctant to spell this out as clearly as he

might have done. Perhaps the editors could have reminded contributors of the likely fact that "NeoVictorian" itself is billed in the title of the collection in line with publishers' desires for marketability.

The editors could also have done more than this in order to ensure that this volume cohered as a collection united around a specific theme. I can see little evidence of a structural co-ordination of the flow of essays outside the (unequal) divide between Parts One and Two; the introduction talks of "change and movement and journeying" between the two sections that should involve "pleasure, diversity and exploration" (p. 5), but some kind of tour guide might have been involved in planning the postcards that could be exchanged between the sections. There are no cross-references between the individual essays, even when they deal with the same author or related themes. Why, for example, does the chapter on George Eliot and Australia not engage in dialogue with the essay on *Mister Pip*? There are also some irritating inconsistencies, the most important of which is the failure to give the original publication date of a text on first citation. In fairness, Beer and Jolly do in their essays, but others don't, while John Rignall gives the dates on first mention of twentieth century texts but not nineteenth century ones. This might appear like a relatively minor quibble, but it does have an impact on the perceived readership. If this text is meant for Victorianists, then in some ways this is not so bad, the implication being that we need to be told that Graham Swift's *Waterland* was published in 1983 in case we mistake it for the same period as Walter Scott, but we all know the dates of works by Carlyle, Eliot, Hardy, and Kipling. If, however, this text is to be sold to both parts of the title – the Victorianist and the neo-Victorianist – or those readers in both camps, then some concession to the latter in terms of providing them with a context for the nineteenth century texts would be useful. It does raise that more significant question: who exactly is this collection aimed at? It's also worth wondering if it will survive the reading: this volume, like others from Cambridge Scholars Press, unfortunately falls apart rather quickly; in just one sitting thirty-five pages fell out of my copy.

Ultimately, we must, like the Victorians, return and keep returning to the issue of definition. For readers of this journal, the expense of the volume might not be justified in terms of the variations on the theme explored in the last six essays, though in the tensions of the scholarly footnote, the odd thought provoking comment might still be found.