What Is Neo-Victorian Studies?

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Abstract:
This article sets out to explore some of the possibilities within the establishment of the journal *Neo-Victorian Studies* in the context of the history of Victorian Studies over recent years. The article outlines ways in which neo-Victorian research might intersect, interact and develop from current debates in the study of the Victorian period.

Keywords: "critical f(r)iction", interdisciplinarity, multidisciplinarity, Neo-Victorianism, Victorian Studies

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> I have settled for … 'Victorian', knowing how unsatisfactory it is. (Robin Gilmour 1993: xv)
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> Please to remember that I am a Victorian, and that the Victorian tree cannot but be expected to bear Victorian fruit. (M. R. James; epigraph in Taylor 2006)

In her recent book, *Our Victorian Education* (2008), Dinah Birch makes a compelling case for reading the ways in which Victorian educational policy remains with us today. Focussing on the work of Matthew Arnold, John Ruskin and other key Victorian educationalists, Birch argues that both the best and worst aspects of our contemporary educational system can be found in the work of our nineteenth century intellectual forebears. In her concluding chapter, 'New Conversations', Birch writes:

> This book has tried to suggest that Victorian ideas can give us a clearer understanding of the origins of our present problems, showing how our tangles over education and class, gender and religion took root in the first place. I want to argue that they can serve a still more useful purpose in suggesting ways in which we can begin to extricate ourselves from our difficulties…. The need for a national structure remains apparent, but it is also increasingly clear that its

> processes must co-exist with a flexibility that can make room for the individual pupil. Passionate voices warned Victorian educators of this need, and we should still be listening. (Birch 2008: 144-145)

Linking the Victorian past with our post-Victorian present, Birch's discussion raises important questions about the still under-explored and possibly even unacknowledged extent of our continued indebtedness to the nineteenth century, for good or ill; her suggestion that we continue to engage in "new conversation[s]" with that Victorian past is an important one. The key question I want to ask in the following essay[1] is whether Birch's book and other recent publications represent a neo-Victorian approach to critical work on the Victorians *and* on us. What this essay therefore seeks to do is find a methodology behind the neo-Victorian culture surrounding us at the present time, and explore the possibility that we are continually seeking to re-negotiate what it means to be the "fruit" of M. R. James's Victorian tree.

The establishment of this journal might appear focused in its design on neo-Victorian fiction, those works which are consciously set in the Victorian period (or the nineteenth century – there is a difference, as will be argued in a moment), or which desire to re-write the historical narrative of that period by representing marginalised voices, new histories of sexuality, post-colonial viewpoints and other generally 'different' versions of the Victorian. But the possibilities of the journal *Neo-Victorian Studies* extend well beyond this reading of creative dialogues with the past. In fact, neo-Victorianism has the potential to help us think through the ways in which we teach, research and publish on the Victorians themselves. In regularly bringing together a critically-inflected creative writing strand with a creatively-aware criticism, it opens up different interpretations which, while they cannot and do not claim to be all-encompassing reconfigurations of the Victorian, can nevertheless illustrate conflict and difference through their very act of undermining the stability of a presumed hegemonic historical narrative.

2008 marks the 50th anniversary year of the US-based journal *Victorian Studies*. When the journal was founded in 1957, its editors declared that:

> *Victorian Studies* hopes to capture something of the life of that era, to discuss its events and personalities, and to interpret and appraise its achievements.
>
> This hope is more likely to be realized through the coordination of academic disciplines than in departmental isolation. It is the tradition for journals to devote themselves to particular disciplines, but *Victorian Studies* will publish work addressed to all students of the Victorian age.(Appleman, Madden and Wolff 1957: 3)

In recent issues of that journal, however, a debate has raged about the appropriateness of the brand "Victorian Studies" for an interdisciplinary perspective that refuses to be tied to the chronological range of 1837-1901. There are also problematic implications about the 'global' nature of Victorian Studies and the various meanings attached to the first word, either through an associated colonial past, or its continued colonising presence as a form of academic discourse. Victorianists, as the epigraph from Robin Gilmour illustrates, have always been and continue to be wary, even hesitant, of their use of the term "Victorian", but either side of the millennial cusp has witnessed a new intensity to that anxiety of identification and periodisation. Writing in response to this debate, Martin Hewitt argues that the notion of Victorian Britain – and therefore the term "Victorian studies" – "does make sense". Hewitt writes of his essay that

> the suggestion here is that the Victorian period should be thought of as a set of complex conjunctures that defy any simple typology or literary representation, in which changes can be comprehended as the working through or consolidation of lines of development established at its outset. It thus becomes possible to argue that the years roughly coinciding with Victoria's reign offer a periodization 'adequate' to the age – that British cultural history is marked by a significant set of often interrelated transformations occurring in the 1830s and around 1900, and by important continuities in the intervening period. To this extent, the notion of the Victorian period and of Victorian studies in its

> various professional and institutional manifestations, does make sense. (Hewitt 2006: 433-434)

What Hewitt might be seen to be arguing here is that the "Victorian" is distinct in terms of period, but also constitutes a challenge to the idea of stable historical process that periodisation seemingly represents. In other words, the Victorian period is possibly also eligible for alignment with the age of the postmodern in which neo-Victorianism exists; as Dianne F. Sadoff and John Kucich have noted, "the Victorian age [is] historically central to late-century postmodern consciousness" (Kucich and Sadoff 2000: xi). Perhaps more importantly, though not directly part of Hewitt's detailed discussion of a series of social, cultural, and historical themes or strands within the period 1830-1900, is the notion of belatedness that dogged Victorianism and the Victorian period itself. Part of the industry (literally and metaphorically) behind the creation of a conceptualisation of Victorian Britain might be found in the roots of not wanting to be seen as a 'post-Romantic' alignment. Isobel Armstrong, writing specifically about Victorian poetry, for example, makes a wider comment about the nature of the "Victorian"; she suggests that "[t]he Victorian period has always been regarded as isolated between two periods, Romanticism and modernism. Thus Victorian poetry is seen in terms of transition. It is on the way somewhere." (Armstrong 1993: 1)[2] This too might bear relation to the themes of this journal as the neo-Victorian attempts to negotiate its own post-Victorian position. At the height of our (post)modernity, why do we continually mark and stage a return to a period that was caught between two 'bigger' notions?

All categorisations and periodisations are necessarily about parameters. In 'Victorian Studies and the Two Modernities', one of the pieces that initiated the debate to which Hewitt responds, Amanda Anderson suggests that "Victorian studies" as a term represents "all-too-apparent limitations" (Anderson 2005: 195), not only for the period itself but for thinking about it now. The neo-Victorian might embody similar limitations, but it does so in an ironically expansive fashion; neo-Victorianism embraces a kind of democratism of imaginative representation that is not always found in Victorianism. In 'Why Victorian?: Response', for example, Kate Flint positions herself very clearly against some elements of the neo-Victorianism with which this journal may, ultimately, be concerned:

> I will put my cards face up on the table. 'Victorian' is an academic epithet with which I feel profoundly uneasy for a number of reasons. At a visceral level, I'm suspicious of the period fetishism it can connote, whether this be flaunted in the bric-a-brac of a *Masterpiece Theater* interior, or in sing-along performances of music-hall songs, or in the retro-marketing of sepia street scenes: none of these exercise any nostalgic tug on me. (Flint 2005: 230)[3]

There is the danger, inevitably, that a journal calling itself *Neo-Victorian Studies* and specialising in the often perilously close to kitsch or clichéd engagements with the Victorian period might fall into the trap of "period fetishism". But it might also be argued that this is a fact of our contemporary culture; that in bookstores and TV guides all around us what we see is the 'nostalgic tug' that the (quasi-)Victorian exerts on the mainstream identification of our own time as a period in search of its past.

Even to use the term 'mainstream culture', however, is misleading. The flurry of academic articles surrounding contemporary writers like Sarah Waters, and before her A. S. Byatt, John Fowles and Jean Rhys, underlines the relationship the academy is building with a concept of the neo-Victorian. Importantly, in the recent publication of a series of articles as part of Blackwell's *Literature Compass*, on the theme 'Where Next in Victorian Literary Studies?', the Victorianist Valerie Sanders identified the cult of contemporary art forms set in the period (film and literature mainly, but not exclusively) as one of the significant factors impacting on how contemporary students view, read, and think about the Victorians (Sanders 2007).[4] What the neo-Victorian represents, then, is a different way into the Victorians – for students and faculty alike. This is not contemporary literature as a substitute for the nineteenth century but as a mediator into the experience of reading the 'real' thing; after all, neo-Victorian texts are, in the main, processes of writing that act out the results of reading the Victorians and their literary productions.

The interdisciplinary challenge outlined in the first editorial to *Victorian Studies* is also central, in different ways, to the material published in and solicited by this journal. For what is the relationship between the neo-Victorian and the Victorian, the neo-Victorianist and the Victorianist? The fact that there is a distinction between the two specialisms is obvious; yet

are not both groups of researchers actually engaged in a similar, if not identical, task? Is not the locus of their dual perspectives an approach to understanding the impact of the nineteenth century and its enduring legacy into the present? Indeed, returning to the already cited editorial from the inaugural issue of *Victorian Studies*, with its reference to "the life of that era … its events and personalities … interpret[ing] and apprais[ing] its achievement", could we not hope that *Neo-Victorian Studies* might share similar, perhaps even the same aims and intentions? In this sense, the neo-Victorian is about new approaches to the Victorian period rather than an attempt to indulge in escapism masked as historical narrative.

The issue that has been at stake for many years, not only in literary criticism but also across related fields, is precisely that of disciplinarity. Inter-disciplinarity remains a buzzword, but one without a fixed definition, a fact which respects the teleological differences at stake in the term (see Moran 2002: 14-8 and Shattock 2007). Proponents of inter-disciplinary research might argue that it is this lack of a fixed meaning which represents its strength. But the more junior partner in the relationship, multi-disciplinarity, often gets excluded from the debate.[5] Neo-Victorian Studies (both the journal and research field) should be embracing this lesser partner for two central reasons, one practical and one historical. First, it is more manageable and reflects the fact that in an increasingly discipline-specific research environment (at least, or perhaps especially, in the UK) multidisciplinary approaches are more likely to be achieved and produce results; and second, multi-disciplinarity reflects the roots of Victorian epistemology and therefore Victorianism itself, something which neo-Victorianism might therefore be well advised to emulate and simultaneously re-interpret. Amanda Anderson and Joseph Valente, in the introduction to their edited collection, *Disciplinarity at the Fin de Siècle* (2002), suggest that what we need to do as academics often locked within our disciplinary boundaries is look "back to consider the formation of disciplinary knowledge during the last third of the nineteenth century" (Anderson and Valente 2002: 1). Perhaps most importantly, they conclude with the following statement:

> a disciplinary history of the present reveals that interdisciplinarity can only lay claims to the kind of theoretical and practical 'breaks' that it assigns itself by

> distorting or suppressing its relation to the past, which also means distorting or suppressing its own disciplinarity. (Anderson and Valente 2002:15)

In contemporary culture's repeated return to the Victorian past, we may also be witnessing an attempted return to a sphere of multi-disciplinarity, and approaches to the nature of history and the individuals trapped within its narrative, which are newly opened up by re-thinking and re-visioning that past.

To take another recent example, Robert L. Mack's *The Wonderful and Surprising History of Sweeney Todd: The Life of an Urban Legend* was published in mid-January 2008 and, not accidentally, coincided with a cultural moment that also saw the release of Tim Burton's film *Sweeney Todd* and the release by Oxford University Press of Mack's new edition of the original 1846-47 *Sweeney Todd* 'penny narrative'. Reviewing Mack's book in a recent issue of the *Times Higher Education*, Kamilla Elliott noted that the text represented a "neo-Victorian palimpsest" as "Mack sets the avidity of the Victorian collector and the expansiveness of the Victorian intellectual in a postmodern ethos and framework" (Elliott 2008: 48). The combination here that makes the text neo-Victorian is both subject-related and stylistic. While the text is a piece of literary criticism, Elliott's suggestion of the palimpsestuous nature of the text's play with postmodern self-reflection and self-inflection on the one hand, and the more grounded, factual, and dogmatic principles of the multidisciplinary Victorian intellectual on the other, seems to argue for a different approach to literary, and more broadly cultural, scholarship. Neo-Victorianism offers this as a critical paradigm precisely because it blurs the distinctions between criticism and creativity, with each becoming a reflection on self and other, producing a sense of what I term 'critical f(r)iction' in the knowing and historicised, critical and scholarly perspective contained within the fictional text.[6] The importance of the palimpsest lies not in its writing of new texts over old ones, but in the simultaneous existence of both narratives on the same page, occupying the same space, and speaking in odd, obscure, and different ways to one another. For it is important to remember that, as the neo-Victorian text writes back to something in the nineteenth century, it does so in a manner that often aims to re-fresh and re-vitalise the importance

of that earlier text to the here and now. The contemporaneous historicism present in the text thus becomes the key to its neo-Victorian classification.

Part of this paradigm must reside in an acknowledgement of our indebtedness to the Victorian, along the lines of Birch's suggestions concerning educational policy. In the introduction to *Functions of Victorian Culture at the Present Time*, Christine L. Krueger notes that "[n]o matter how vociferously we protest our postmodern condition, we are in many respects post-Victorians, with a complex relationship to the ethics, politics, psychology, and art of our eminent – and obscure – Victorian precursors" (Krueger 2002: xi). It is partly this obscurity, or the desire to reach beyond it, that lies at the root of much neo-Victorian creative and critical work. For what is obscure is, in a literal sense, that which is present but not seen clearly; it is there (or rather *here*) but not evidently readable; it is ultimately a kind of palimpsestuous vision. The narratives of A. S. Byatt and Sarah Waters also provide us with a means of discussing the obscured and the unseen. This is not to say that we take these texts as the evidence that we cannot find in the archives; nor does it propose that we ignore the evidence which *is* obscurely there in favour of these neater, rounded, and more clearly (*t)here* narratives. But it does mean opening up aspects of our present to a relationship with the Victorian past in ways that offer new possibilities for simultaneously thinking through where we come from.

Some of this work has already been undertaken in both Victorian studies and contemporary literary studies discourses. In 1994, commenting on cyberpunk and what we would now call the neo-Victorian, Herbert Sussman suggested that *The Difference Engine* (1990), William Gibson and Bruce Sterling's novel about machines and humanity viewed in the light of the Victorian theorist Charles Babbage's work, offered a combination of critique and re-vision that demonstrates the endurance of Victorian anxieties into the present. Sussman commented that

> Gibson and Sterling represent the Victorian age as the analogue of our own time, as a moment of choice between a panoptical disciplinary use of the intelligent machine and the enhancement of intelligence and creativity through the fusion of the machine and the human. For them, such choice in our own time remains obscured by the vestigial dualisms of literary humanism passed from the Victorians, dualisms that

> find powerful contemporary reinforcement in our recreations of the Victorian age. (Sussman 1994: 20-1)

In other words, what has come to be known as steampunk[7] fiction has the potential to illustrate quite directly the imagined and real linkages and similarities through difference that are negotiated in our own postmodernist, post-human landscape (see Badmington 2000), while at the same time demonstrating the roots of ideas surrounding choice, difference, conflict, and liberal idealism that can be found in the Victorian period. This idea intersects with the increasing attention Victorian literary and cultural critics afford liberalism and its impact on social relationships from the mid- to late-Victorian period and its bearing on the fundamental concepts of freedom and choice that we now find under threat in a post-9/11 world. In *The Way We Argue Now: A Study in the Cultures of Theory* (2005), for example, Amanda Anderson underlines the divided inheritance we have secured from the nineteenth century and its (re-)incarnations in current literary and critical theory's displacement of ideas about knowledge and meaning on to individuals, groups, and institutions, a process which has its fundamental roots in aspects of Victorian cultural theory.[8] At the same time, the cultural theorist Regenia Gagnier's commitment to the discourse of economics, rational choice within a consumerist society, and more recently ecological perspectives on the global impact of Victorian and post-Victorian thought (Gagnier 2008; Gagnier and Delveux 2006) illustrates the wider culturalist approach that needs to be taken towards literary texts (then and now) in relation to a series of discourses surrounding the individual within history and the historical process. I want to argue that these texts by Victorianists inform the neo-Victorian approach to the nineteenth century not because of neo-Victorian fiction's belatedness (in the sense of being written about a past that is now distant), but because they bring to the forefront of the debate a set of very *presentist* discourses that are part of that older, inherited tradition. The way we argue now is rooted in the nineteenth century, but one of the reasons for this is that we are still negotiating the subjects of that earlier debate.

Without wanting to reduce historical difference to the cyclical, it is noticeable that, even as we move further away from the Victorian, the ideas of the period come to haunt us more deeply and in unexpected ways, just as Victorian soft-furnishings and 'original' architectural features continue as

the staple of most property programmes on UK television programmes.[9] Whereas the adoption and adaptation of the Victorian period's literary inheritance is understandable, drawing on the nineteenth century for recent comparisons of science and biology, religious faith and economic meltdown are less readily fathomable: *Darwin Loves You*, proclaimed the title of George Levine's 2007 text, as it is fired into the debate about Christian fundamentalism in the global sphere, although employing specifically American contexts; under the avalanche of bad news about Northern Rock, comparisons were drawn with the banking scandals of the late nineteenth century City of London and the prescience of BBC's relatively recent television adaptation of Trollope's exposé of commercial greed and financial unscrupulousness, *The Way We Live Now* (1875); and Richard Dawkins casts himself as the new Darwin. The Victorian comparisons are omnipresent. The Victorians have, in Dante Gabriel Rossetti's phrase, "been here before" (Rossetti 1996: 1004), and so have we through them. There is little we can do about it except seek to learn from and re-interpret their example.

But in part this was also how the Victorians felt. Anxious about their own position in the historical continuum, the thinkers of the nineteenth century frequently turned to history – classical, Medieval, Renaissance – to provide sustenance to their own stability and potential. Indeed, by the end of the nineteenth century, as he assumed the chair in Modern History at Cambridge, the historian Lord Acton felt able to declare that the process of historical learning had reached a culmination through the opening up of the materials held in archival sources:

> The production of material has so far exceeded the use of it in literature that very much more is known to students than can be found in historians [sic], and no compilation at second hand from the best works would meet the scientific demand for completeness and certainty.
>
> In our own time, within the last few years, most of the official collections in Europe have been made public, and nearly all the evidence that will ever appear is accessible now.

> As archives are meant to be explored, and are not meant to be printed, *we approach the final stage in the conditions of historical learning.*
>
> The long conspiracy against the knowledge of truth has been practically abandoned, and competing scholars all over the civilised world are taking advantage of the change. (Acton 1906: 315, emphasis added)[10]

In this statement, made in 1898, Acton argues for the multiplicity of history, the accessibility of materials, and the potential for "knowledge of truth" that this facilitates. If in 1898 we were approaching the "final stages in the conditions of historical learning", it is perhaps unsurprising that we have spent much of the intervening 110 years returning to that moment (or an earlier one) in search for an epistemological reference point, which might explain, or help to explain, who we are and how the choices made in the past have led to the *now*. Indeed, Acton's final stage of "historical learning" sounds hollow after the events of the twentieth century, but it echoes in Francis Fukuyama's premature pronouncement in 1989 of the end of history. Fukuyama, too, was proved wrong on September 11th 2001, but the roots of each of the cataclysmic events of the twentieth century, and now the twenty-first century, might be argued to lie in the nineteenth. The incomplete Millian ideal of an all-encompassing epistemological theory may have ended with the Victorians, but perhaps this is the reason we keep making that return journey. Just as utopian, proto-science fiction and speculative texts of the late-nineteenth century, like Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward 2000-1887* (1888), pushed the ideas of history forward in an attempt to find the future before it happened, so we are looking backward in a more literal sense, attempting to rediscover the ideals of the modern.

Echoing the critical work of Victorianists such as Isobel Armstrong, Christian Gutleben argues in *Nostalgic Postmodernism* that "[p]ostmodernism returns to a period *before* modernism as if it were not able to progress and had to turn around and step back: this is the fundamental aporia of nostalgic postmodernism" (Gutleben 2001:10). Perhaps the historical process did stop in 1898, as Acton proclaimed, or perhaps our methodologies and modalities have not yet moved beyond that date. Most striking of all is the post-millennial increase in attention back to

the nineteenth century. As Elaine Showalter noted quite early on in this process, moments of chronological crisis – the millennium and the *fin de siècle* – are prone to create anxieties about the degeneracy of cultural and social spheres (Showalter 1991). The birth of (modern) literary criticism itself has been recounted as occurring at one of these return moments, when the Victorians themselves looked to the literatures of the past.[11] This might explain some aspects of our turn backward to the Victorians, but it cannot accommodate all the varieties of response, revision, and reinvestigation that we see around us. Pinning down the exact causes of this fascination with the Victorian is difficult; as Cora Kaplan states "more is at stake in the ongoing popularity of Victoriana than can be registered in the categories of historical investigation, aesthetic appreciation or entertainment" (Kaplan 2007:5). Yet explaining what that "more" is proves even harder. Ultimately, we remain left with various questions. What is a neo-Victorian engagement? What is a neo-Victorian text? Can it be any text published after 1901 which is set in the Victorian period, or is it about characters from a Victorian text, or about real life Victorians? Can it be a text set in the contemporary period but with recognisable allusions to Victorian texts, characters, people? Where does conscious and deliberate appropriation begin and general awareness or accidental echoes of the Victorian end? What are the different shades of neo-Victorianism – and can they be theorised differently to the variations in other kinds of historical fiction? Answering these questions, or rather attempting to answer them, requires that we bring to our discussions the awareness of the multiple social contexts of our aesthetic response – historical, textual, analytical, cultural, gendered, raced, classed, economic, political and so on. In other words, the approaches required to reading the neo-Victorian and do it critical justice are exactly the same mix of contextual and textual awareness required to address the multiplicity of the Victorians themselves.

The Victorian and the neo-Victorian offer the simultaneous possibilities of proximity and distance. This is particularly true in relation to choices about individual identity, specifically in relation to sexuality and gender. In this sense, the Victorians, particularly in their status as multiply "Othered" subjects, offer the potential space for working through ideas and concerns that still dominate social discourses today. As Jeanette King's recent work on contemporary women writers and Victorian feminism reveals, this approach raises another set of questions:

> Why, in the last decades of the twentieth century, should so many women novelists have looked back a hundred years for the subjects of their fiction? Why should the Victorians hold so much interest for the age of superwomen and ladettes? What, in particular, is the interest of Victorian constructions of gender and sexuality for modern feminists? (King 2005:1)

These texts are clearly not about conflating difference and reducing the anachronisms inherent in the genre of historical fiction. For the best in neo-Victorianism offers more than 'straight' historical fiction, and much more than the escapism of displaced narratives.

Writing about developments in Victorian studies within the UK over the last fifty years, Helen Rogers highlights how the field of study has changed from confidence in its own diversity to the parallel danger of slipping back into disciplinarity; in other words, it seems to have charted a cultural mirror process to the notion of Victorianism itself from the mid-1850s to the *fin de siècle*. As Rogers writes:

> Over recent decades we have acknowledged, and indeed revelled in, the varieties of Victorianism and the many faces of the Victorians; perhaps it is now time to recognise more fully the differences among students of the Victorian period. Just because scholars elsewhere are considering a return to disciplinarity is no reason to abandon the Victorian studies project; but it must surely require us to examine that project more critically. It matters less whether we find the label 'Victorian' a help or a hindrance than that we establish fora where such issues can be rigorously debated, if not finally settled. We need to foreground and bring into dialogue the critical debates that are taking place within different areas of the field and, just as importantly, engage with significant intellectual developments in the study of other periods. (Rogers 2004:254)

Neo-Victorian Studies takes up this aspect of Rogers's challenge in the ways it tries to bring together the discussion of the contemporary with that contemporary's engagement with the earlier historical moment.

Perhaps most interestingly, recent fiction has started to make a conceptualisation of indebtedness. Two texts that reached particular prominence in 2007, neither of which would be taken as clear-cut examples of the neo-Victorian are Ian McEwan's *On Chesil Beach* and Lloyd Jones's *Mister Pip*. Both novels were longlisted, then shortlisted and alternated as favourites to win the Man Booker Prize; they were also both discussed by John Sutherland in his keynote address to the 'Neo-Victorianism: The Politics and Aesthetics of Appropriation' conference held at the University of Exeter in September 2007.[12] Significantly, both texts attempt to re-negotiate a settlement that is both hospitable towards and distant from our Victorian pasts. While McEwan's novella provides an account that bears relation to Matthew Arnold's 'Dover Beach' in its focus on the ramifications of the seemingly belated 1950s version of the Victorian honeymoon experience (see Michie 2006), Jones's novel of postcolonial civil war and racialised tension draws explicitly on Dickens's *Great Expectations*.

The use of Arnold in McEwan's text is less direct than in his seemingly deliberately unbelievable, unaccountable, and anachronistically volatile insertion of the poem into a moment of crisis in *Saturday* (2005). Yet the fact that the text haunts, ghosts, and demands reinterpretation in both of his most recent texts suggests something about this post-Victorian landscape in which we live; indeed, there is an increasing relevance about the spectrality trope and the idea of haunting in neo-Victorian texts and criticism. It is not easy to theorise this in the case of *Saturday* and *On Chesil Beach*. Does McEwan's indebtedness and need to open his texts to the cultural idea(l)s of Arnold partake of a more general social mo(ve)ment, or does it constitute a highly individualised interpretation? What is it about Arnold that is being utilized here, and does that use have the potential to make us re-think our relationship to the nineteenth century text? McEwan's use of Arnold in *Saturday* exerts particular fascination because of the series of misappropriations that he establishes in relation to the authorship of the text. In an ultimately clichéd way, Arnold's poem 'speaks' to the violent criminal Baxter, and prevents the rape of the young woman reading the text; however, the young woman is also insistently identified as the poet by the criminal: "You wrote that. You *wrote* that." (McEwan 2005:222) Is Baxter's refrain here a comment by McEwan about his lack of knowledge concerning Victorian poetry (which seems unlikely) or an ironic swipe at the way in

which texts now float free of their authorial attribution, and can be manipulated, misattributed, and misappropriated, because the chronologies of literary time have somehow ceased to function? More fundamentally, what does it mean to do this to texts, and are they any longer Victorian or neo-Victorian texts when it is done?

Mister Pip presents a more direct and open engagement with the (mis)uses of Victorian literature in the contemporary global sphere. The novel's (un)easy conflation of the nineteenth century fictional text by Dickens with the text we read might be interpreted as a comment on more than the lastingness of the Victorian novel's influence on literature, specifically in its status as a landmark Victorian *bildungsroman*. It is also a comment on a continued desire to understand and re-interpret canonical texts within a more global, intellectualised and emotionalised schema. The concluding lines of Jones's novel attributes a power to the nineteenth-century story that leads ultimately to a reductiveness of the twentieth-century individual's lived experience:

> The Mr Dickens I had known also had a beard and a lean face and eyes that wanted to leap from his face. But my Mr Dickens used to go about barefoot and in a buttonless shirt. Apart from special occasions, such as when he taught, and then he wore a suit.
>
> It has occurred to me only recently that I never once saw him with a machete – his survival weapon was story. And once, a long time ago and during very difficult circumstances, my Mr Dickens had taught every one of us kids that our voice was special, and we should remember this whenever we used it, and remember that whatever else happened to us in our lives our voice could never be taken away from us.
>
> For a brief time I had made the mistake of forgetting that lesson.
>
> In the worshipful silence I smiled at what else they didn't know. Pip was my story, even if I was once a girl, and my face black as the shining night. Pip is my story, and in the next day I would try where Pip had failed. I would try to return home. (Jones 2007: 219)

Interestingly, what seems to be desired in and through *Mister Pip* is not the potential for a postcolonial critique of Dickens's *Great Expectations* (1860-61) but a re-assertion of the themes of emotional authenticity, sentimentality, and sincerity within individual human relationships. It might be no coincidence, then, that these very same themes are now emerging in a series of new debates within Victorian studies too, and that feeling and the affective are re-entering critical discourse on this period.[13]

But *Mister Pip* is a strange hybrid of the postcolonial and the Victorian. At the novel's end we are left with the question of whether the narrator, in reinventing Dickens and incessantly re-reading his *Great Expectations* as a text somehow personal to her, has been strengthened or conned; what does it really mean for the narrator to have her own "Mr Dickens"? For is not that final longing to 'return home' little more than nostalgia in its older sense, a kind of cultural sickness that distorts the mind rather than liberates its potential? If the narrator always has her voice, why must she read herself as Pip; indeed what does it mean for Pip to be her "story"? This odd and in some sense traumatic moment of the text demands a different kind of criticism, for *Mister Pip* is neither a Victorian or neo-Victorian text but lies in a different sphere of both critique and appropriation, acknowledgement and challenge, the colonising and the postcolonial moment. What we need to initiate in these virtual pages is a debate about where and how this text 'fits' into the critical and creative landscape, and how its re-reading and re-visioning of the Victorian must itself be re-interpreted within the multiple cultural moments it (re-)enacts. *Mister Pip*, then, like many other recent neo-Victorian fictions, is a text which both reads and must be read in new ways.

Anyone working on neo-Victorianism – be it as readers, teachers or researchers – will welcome the development of this new journal. This hospitality towards the idea of the neo-Victorian, though, should not be the only purpose of the work published here. For neo-Victorianism is as much about criticism and critical thought as it is about the creative, re-visionary impulses towards the historical found in contemporary literature, art, TV adaptations, or the heritage industry. Just as creative writers have drawn aspects of their historical narrative from the intervening criticism of the period between the Victorians' and our own time, so we now have an opportunity to utilise the creative re-imaginings of the Victorian in our work

as researchers. This is not to argue that historical fiction (in or of any period) has an equal validity to historical narrative ("facts, facts, nothing but facts", to take a key Victorian educationalist phrase), but rather to suggest that neither is valid without the recognition of the fabrications of history as process, history as narrative and the historical as an imaginary configuration and combination of critical and creative thought.

Concluding his overview of the Victorians, Robin Gilmour resorts to the trope of spectrality:

> We have seen how time-haunted the Victorians were, and how obsessed by history: to steady themselves in a rapidly changing present they reached for the cultural self-understanding represented by historical writing, painting, architecture, and for the private self-understanding of autobiography. (Gilmour 1993: 245)

As with the current growth in the field of memory studies, including the establishment of a new journal dedicated to the theme (*Memory Studies*), so neo-Victorian studies aims to tap into the potential for re-reading, re-voicing, and re-imagining the collective memory of a global cultural moment. That this moment is still with us – in our municipal spaces, our collective identities, our parliamentary, educational, and social systems, not to mention our TV schedules and attitude to the rest of the world – is self-evident. To a large extent, the Victorians *are* the very fabric of the spaces we now inhabit, and it is through fabrication – through f(r)iction – that we seek to address what that means to us in the here and now. But that visible presence should not hide the ways in which they remain obscured from us, just as they found themselves obscured from the generations before them. To a greater or lesser degree, then, we are the new Victorians. What this journal can do is explore the new methodological, critical, creative, and cultural possibilities that bringing together two periods of study can enact. *Neo-Victorian Studies*, consciously or unconsciously, will develop from and engage with the debates that continue to rage within, and in some senses sustain, the vibrant field of Victorian studies.

Notes

1. I am using this term in its older sense of *essai* or an attempt.
2. As an important neo-Victorian aside, it is worth noting that Armstrong is the dedicatee of A. S. Byatt's *Possession: A Romance* (1990).
3. See also Bristow 2004.
4. See also O'Gorman, Amigoni, Bowen, and Shattock (2007), all in the same issue.
5. Rohan McWilliam, for example, categorises multidisciplinarity as only "juxtaposition": "At the risk of placing the interdisciplinary bar too high (so that most scholars fail to make it), a genuinely interdisciplinary approach needs to do more than just demonstrate an awareness of what other disciplines are doing and must be more daring than the older approach based on juxtaposition." See McWilliam 2005: 3. See also Gagnier 2005: 1-20, especially pp. 17-20.
6. Notable recent neo-Victorian examples of this might include D. J. Taylor's *Kept: A Victorian Mystery* (2006), Michael Cox's *The Meaning of Night: A Confession* (2006), and Michel Faber's *The Crimson Petal and the White* (2002) and the follow up short story collection *The Apple: New Crimson Petal Stories* (2006).
7. Steampunk is a term for fantasy and speculative fiction narratives that combine ideas drawn from the industrialised, steam powered Victorian landscape and project them into the future or a warped version of the past, frequently the nineteenth century. Another notable text broadly within the genre is Neal Stephenson's post-cyberpunk novel *The Diamond Age, or A Young Lady's Illustrated Primer* (1995), which recasts Victorian fictional characters, including most prominently, Little Nell from Dickens' *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840), into a steampunk inflected future. In *The Diamond Age*, Stephenson makes specific reference to the neo-Victorian in the name given to one of the social subgroups in the novel.
8. See Amanda Anderson, *The Way We Argue Now: A Study in the Cultures of Theory*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005, especially pp. 63-65, 69-114, and 161-188. For a discussion of Anderson's work in relation to re-readings of Victorian narratives, see Helen Small, 'On Conflict', in Dinah Birch and Mark Llewellyn (eds.), *Conflict and Difference in Nineteenth Century Literature*. Basingstoke: Palgrave, forthcoming 2009.
9. For a discussion of this aspect of neo-Victorianism, see Miriam Bailin, 'The New Victorians' (Bailin 2002: 37-46) and Ellen Bayuk Rosenman, 'More

Stories about Clothing and Furniture: Realism and Bad Commodities' (Rosenman 2002: 47-63).

10. The passage appears in a 1898 letter to Acton's fellow editors in the Cambridge Modern History series.
11. For a useful summary of how the 'birth' of literary criticism might be found in how the Victorians re-read the literature of the past, see Latane 1999: 391-395.
12. Like John Sutherland, I have my concerns about the two McEwan texts and the novel by Lloyd Jones as regards what they try to do with the Victorian, though for different reasons.
13. See, for example, the recent issue of the Victorian e-journal *19* on 'Re-thinking Victorian Sentimentality', 4 (2007), http://www.19.bbk.ac.uk/issue4/index.htm, as well as, the theme of the British Association for Victorian Studies conference in 2008: 'Victorian Feeling'. Both these examples suggest a critical return to the sphere of the affective.

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