

Neo-Victorianism: An Introduction

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Neo-Victorian scholarship frequently adopts mirror metaphors to elucidate how contemporary literature and culture revises the nineteenth century. Simon Joyce, for example, though he does not apply the term neo-Victorian, uses the idea of a driver glancing into a car rearview mirror to show the way in which we can “never really encounter ‘the Victorians’ themselves but instead a mediated image” (4). His comparison emphasises that contemporary engagements with the Victorian prompt us to look forward into order to see what lies behind, and reminds us that this mirror image view is always a distortion. Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn extend this understanding of neo-Victorian literature’s “reflective stance between our own period and that of the nineteenth century”, suggesting that its preoccupation with spectrality is “a reflection of our inability to recapture the Victorians” and describing the texts themselves as “simulations of the ‘real’” (144-45).

Key scholars in the emergent area of neo-Victorian studies show that while readers of this genre of fiction may approach a “display case”, hoping to peer at history, they instead find a mirror that contains an image of themselves and the present (Heilmann and Llewellyn 163). Louisa Hadley demonstrates the methodological consequences of this interpretation by proposing that neo-Victorian fictions from the late 1980s onward ought to be read “within the context of Margaret Thatcher’s political appropriation of the Victorians” (3). In one of the earliest definitions of the term from 1997, Dana Shiller specifies that neo-Victorian novels must “adopt a postmodern approach to history” (558). This “postmodern” element involves fiction reconstructing the past by questioning what we think we know about history and exploring how the present shapes historical narratives (Shiller 558, 540).

Neo-Victorianism, whether in literature, film, television, or other media, typically excludes historical fictions set in the nineteenth century that do not have any sense of the present in mind, nor any metafictional aims. Heilmann and Llewellyn’s influential definition suggests that the neo-Victorian “must in some respect be *self-consciously engaged with the act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision concerning the Victorians*” (4). In accord with this perspective, while there are numerous novels set in the Victorian period published after 1901, it is not until the 1960s that a sub-set of these historical fictions begin to reinterpret the past that they depict, and which might rightfully be termed neo-Victorian.

The flowering of neo-Victorian fictions since the 1990s invites us to ask why there is a contemporary cultural desire to revisit and rework the nineteenth century. Heilmann and Llewellyn note that, in contrast, there are not many references “to...neo-Roman, neo-Classical, neo-medieval, or neo-Renaissance fiction” (24). Joyce proposes that this might be for simple reasons of chronology, observing that other periods do not have the same kind of “purchase on the present” (4) as the Victorian era, “in part because they are simply more distant in time” (5).

British imperialism, at its height in the nineteenth century, continues to have global ramifications and is one of the primary foci of neo-Victorian attempts to redress historical wrongs. In her article in this special issue, Marie-Luise Kohlke focuses on Barbara Chase-Riboud’s *Hottentot Venus: A Novel* (2003), which re-imagines the life of Saartjie Baartman (whose remains were only returned to South Africa for burial in 2002). Kohlke mobilises the

novel as a case study of the sub-genre of neo-Victorian bio-fiction, which retells the lives of actual nineteenth-century individuals. The article begins the process of theorising neo-Victorian life-writing by postulating three intermingling and overlapping descriptive modes, “celebrity biofiction”, “biofiction of marginalised subjects”, and “appropriated biofiction”. In her reading of *Hottentot Venus*, Kohlke also unravels the complicated revisionist politics of bestowing an “autonomous self” on a “historical Other” like Baartman.

Christine Ferguson explores a different strand of neo-Victorianism in her study of Tom Phillips’s artist’s book *A Humument*, a cut-up version of W.H. Mallock’s *A Human Document* (1892), which has been published in a number of ever-changing editions across a period of forty years. She looks past the emphasis on suspicion and political revisionism prevalent in contemporary neo-Victorianism through examination of what she describes as a non-hermeneutic branch of neo-Victorian writing. Ferguson illuminates the ways in which *A Humument*, as her primary example of this type of text, is more interested in the “presence effects” of the Victorian, rather than employing the typical strategies of historiographic metafiction. Works such as *A Humument*, she argues, are uninvested in ideological critique of the Victorian and are founded on “arbitrariness and improvisation”.

While neo-Victorian fiction often exhibits curiosity about children and children’s stories, most obviously in A. S. Byatt’s *The Children’s Book* (2009), literature written for young readers is rarely considered through the lens of neo-Victorianism, as Margaret D. Stetz notes (345). Sharon Bickle compares Cory Doctorow’s young adult short story “Clockwork Fagin” with Charles Dickens’s *Oliver Twist*, demonstrating the tensions between neo-Victorian critique and YA generic conventions, which, she suggests, work to undermine it. As part of her examination of the impact of the politics of young people’s fiction on neo-Victorianism, Bickle also problematises the story’s categorisation as steampunk, debating the very meaning of the term, which can vacillate between “materialist aesthetic” and “anti-materialist principles”.

Most scholarship that theorises the neo-Victorian concentrates on fiction. Yet within global subcultural circles a variety of fashion styles that rework and remodel Victorian clothing, including steampunk, have come to recent prominence. Christine Feldman-Barrett explores how three subcultures upend traditional expectations of the Victorian era through their dress. She proposes that these groups “reinvent or subvert the Victorian imaginary for their own, contemporary ends”, with “goths challeng[ing] the stark stratification of social class, Lolitas empower[ing] the childlike, and steampunks question[ing] the mythology and chronology of ‘progress’”. All three subcultures, Feldman-Barrett contends, are metaphoric time travellers who “correct” the inequalities of the Victorian period while simultaneously fashioning a contemporary alternative lifestyle choice.

Despite the healthy body of neo-Victorian scholarship on literature, little attention has been afforded to how poetry might “(re)interpret, (re)discover and (re)vision” the Victorian in ways that accord or diverge from the workings of novels. Andrew Morton examines how contemporary poets return to the “Browningesque dramatic monologue”, both replicating its traditional use as a form that concentrates on marginal figures (as in the poetry of Anthony Thwaite) and putting it to new uses. In his article, Morton considers the critically neglected work of Scottish poet Mick Imlah, drawing out the ways in which he expands the nineteenth-century model of the dramatic monologue to explore the “interrelation of England (often represented by Oxford) and Scotland, and their literary and intellectual heritage”.

In a recent review of neo-Victorian criticism, Stetz states that the most common trope

identified within neo-Victorian fiction “involves the concept of the ghost and/or the practice of spiritualism” which is related “to the ‘haunting’ presence of the Victorians in (post)modern life” (343). Jessica Gildersleeve builds on the critical interest in spectrality in neo-Victorian fiction, arguing that this emphasis of haunting enables a reading of the discourse of trauma in psychoanalysis “as a mode of neo-Victorian Gothic writing”. She contends that the metafictional elements of neo-Victorian fiction, which Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben describe as “quintessentially Gothic”, and the genre’s self-consciousness with respect to history as a construct, “puts into action precisely the means by which traumatic memories and histories work”.

This special issue includes research on all of the fictional types that Shiller identifies as falling within the umbrella of the neo-Victorian: “texts that revise specific Victorian precursors, texts that imagine new adventures for familiar Victorian characters, and ‘new’ Victorian fictions that imitate nineteenth-century literary conventions” (558). These articles also contemplate fictions that work across these categories and which further complicate the process of glancing in the historical mirror, as in the case of fiction that rewrites real historical lives. Finally, articles in this special issue also engage with manifestations of neo-Victorianism outside the novel form, namely in subcultural fashion, poetry, and visual art. These diverse sites of neo-Victorianism contribute angled mirrors, in the manner of a kaleidoscope (a nineteenth-century invention), to our forward-looking glance back to the Victorians. They draw attention to neo-Victorianism’s capacity to produce overlapping and eerily repetitive images that can be shifted in an instant, rather than simple static reflections.

Works Cited

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