

**Horrible Histories: Review of
Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben's
*Neo-Victorian Gothic: Horror, Violence and Degeneration
in the Re-Imagined Nineteenth Century***

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Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben (eds.), *Neo-Victorian Gothic: Horror, Violence and Degeneration in the Re-Imagined Nineteenth Century*

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“**[N]***eo-Victorianism is by nature quintessentially Gothic*” assert Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben in their introduction to the latest volume in Rodopi's *Neo-Victorian Series* (p. 4, original emphasis). This is a bold claim, but a convincing one. The neo-Victorian ‘canon’ has a decidedly Gothic flavour, from Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) to Sarah Waters's *Fingersmith* (2002). In recent years, a certain Gothicised aesthetic has become *de rigueur* for representing the Victorian period in film and television, from Guy Ritchie's *Sherlock Holmes* (2009) to BBC1's *Ripper Street* (2012-13). And a Gothicised version of Victorian dress crops up year after year in fashion magazines, both on the catwalk and as inspiration for fashion shoots (in Spring/Summer 2013, it was the turn of the Pre-Raphaelites). It is becoming hard to imagine the Victorian period as anything *other* than Gothic, it seems.

As Kohlke and Gutleben demonstrate, neo-Victorian fiction engages with Gothic on multiple levels. Their extended introduction points out many of the tropes the two share, including “spectrality, monstrosity, the double, madness, spiritualism, incarceration, and the trace (of lost manuscripts/documents, histories and voices)” (p. 5). However, as they discover, it is not just shared themes and subject matter that align Gothic

and neo-Victorianism, but a fundamental attitude to history. Implicitly drawing on Chris Baldick and Robert Mighall's reading of Gothic as providing a Whiggish version of history (Baldick and Mighall 2000), they argue that both Gothic and neo-Victorian texts enable the vicarious indulgence of past oppression even as they shore up the 'enlightened' views of the present:

Just as much Victorian Gothic tends to unleash terror and/or horror only to eventually re-contain or vanquish it (at least seemingly, partly, or provisionally), neo-Victorian Gothic constitutes a funereal song that implicitly *celebrates* rather than laments the period's passing, even while inviting/enabling the recurrent return of its excesses and abuses in the cultural imaginary. (12, original emphasis)

That emphasis on the *celebration* of the Victorian era's demise and the simultaneous enjoyment of its horrors proves crucial in the editors' uncovering of neo-Victorian Gothic's unique ambivalence. Yet Kohlke and Gutleben are keen to point out that while Victorian Gothic is often defined by the eruption of past into present (what Robert Mighall has elsewhere termed "anachronistic vestiges" Mighall 1999: 18), neo-Victorian Gothic characteristically works in reverse, enabling writers "to transfer the (self-)otherness of the present into the past" (Kohlke and Gutleben 2013: 10). In this respect, we might say, it more closely resembles an earlier phase of Gothic fiction, in which writers used a fantasised Middle Ages to articulate their eighteenth-century concerns.

Given the shared enterprise of Gothic and neo-Victorianism that Kohlke and Gutleben identify, it is surprising that the intersection of the two has not been more extensively studied. Perhaps it has been taken for granted – or perhaps Gothic is the bad fairy at the neo-Victorian party, whose malign influence no one wishes to acknowledge. Gothic still has a disreputable tang in certain English departments. As the editors wryly concede, Gothic retains connotations of the popular and frivolous that "practitioners of the 'serious' business of cultural memory work and excavation" are shy of being associated with (p. 5). (Ironically, of course, many Gothic scholars seem equally keen to shed these frivolous associations, for much the same reasons.)

The editors point out that theirs is in fact the first book to make explicit the links between neo-Victorianism and Gothic in any detail. Noting the prominent publications already existent in the field of neo-Victorian studies, they scrutinise all references to Gothic and conclude that none “explicitly or consistently” explores the interconnection between the two (p. 5). Nevertheless, they demonstrate, reading neo-Victorianism through a Gothic filter helps to resolve, or at least tease out, some of its contradictions: “Thought-provoking and fickle, highly ethical and shamelessly commercial, neo-Victorian Gothic is full of paradoxes which it deliberately puts on display” (p. 42). Gothic, they suggest, is frequently subject to a kind of misrecognition, in which the distinctive combination of horror and humour, irony and the uncanny, fun and fear is overlooked. The ambivalence of Gothic is a theme that recurs throughout the essays in the volume, as the texts under scrutiny refuse easy resolution, simultaneously pulling in several directions. Nevertheless, this resistance to classical unity provides Gothic with a kind of critical and ethical purchase invaluable in the appraisal of neo-Victorian texts: “neo-Victorian Gothic appears full of contradictions, but it keeps challenging established codes, a salutary ethical priority” (p. 44).

A number of significant themes arise from the introduction. The editors note the centrality of haunted and haunting children in many neo-Victorian Gothic texts. The shift from Victorian to neo-Victorian is marked by a loss of innocence: the helpless child victims of Victorian Gothic are increasingly replaced by children exhibiting a “dubious and dangerous agency” (p. 13). It is, perhaps, disappointing that none of the chapters take up this highly suggestive theme. The traditional Gothic concern with the sublime is re-routed into imperialism (encounters with alien landscapes), Eco-Gothic (the threat of apocalyptic destruction) and steampunk (technology that inspires awe and terror). Graphic representations of crime and spectacles of violence produce an affectivity that competes with that of other postmodern media while also recalling the nervous excitement associated with sensation fiction. Imperialism, steampunk and crime are recurrent themes of subsequent chapters and strike keynotes of the collection.

The first section of the book is entitled ‘Imperial Impostures and Improprieties’ and investigates in various contexts the legacy of the colonial Gothic. It moves gradually outwards from the novel to drama, graphic

novels and fine art, and ranges geographically and thematically from imperial legacies in Polynesia and South Africa to American neo-imperialism. The chapters are loosely linked through the theme of haunting and a shared emphasis on the ambivalence of their chosen texts, that each author identifies as distinctly Gothic in provenance. Andrew Smith summarises the characteristic ambivalence of neo-Victorian Gothic pithily:

The past cannot be escaped because its politically complex and emotionally fraught dramas retain a seemingly disturbing grasp on the present. However, the past also, paradoxically, appears to re-energise the present and transforms political and private lives. (p. 71)

In particular, according to Smith, Elizabeth Kostova's engagement with Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) in *The Historian* (2005) allows an ambivalent engagement with European politics, simultaneously interrogating the power relations of historiography, while also putting forward a more conservative view of "mainland Europe as a possible danger to Western style democracy" (p. 61). Sebastian Domsch returns to the theme of twentieth-century neo-imperialism in his chapter on Alan Moore and Kevin O'Neill's celebrated comic and graphic novel series *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (1999-2007). As Domsch concludes, "[t]he true monster in the *League* series is Empire" (p. 118). The collision of the superhero team-up narrative with Victorian source texts enables Moore to gain particular insights as he

incorporates one of the central but commonly suppressed lessons of the superhero narrative: it is the superhero's own power that creates the demand for a counterforce, and therefore the super-villain. In the same sense, every Empire needs a demonic other to secure the integrity of its identity and to hide its own inherent monstrosity. (p. 119)

This sheds light not only on Victorian Empire-building but also on American neo-imperialism at the turn of the twenty-first century.

The concern with ambivalence recurs in Cheryl D. Edelson's chapter, which pushes neo-Victorianism into intriguing new geographical

territories in its examination of two Polynesian texts, Albert Wendt's short story 'Prospecting' (1986) and Victoria Nalani Kneubuhl's drama *Ola Na Iwi* (1994). For Edelson, neo-Victorian texts simultaneously indulge the horror of colonial Gothic while enabling the obscured voices of colonised peoples to haunt the narrative. Neo-Victorian Gothic reverses conventional tropes so that it is the colonial adventurer who is the source of terror while the ghost becomes the victim whose words need to be heard. Her essay chimes well with Jeanne Ellis's exploration of artist Leora Farber's 2007-8 work *Dis-Location/Re-Location*, a series of photographs in which the artist stages the nineteenth-century settler Bertha Marks symbolically grafting aloes onto her skin. For Ellis, Farber's visual narratives display an engagement with colonial settler histories "that persists as both identification and disavowal" (p. 127). Rather than the haunting voices of the silenced colonised, as in the works discussed by Edelson, the uncanniness of the white settlers, alienated from their homeland and alien to their adopted home, is expressed by Farber's unsettling images. As Ellis indicates, Farber's work "performs a bodily metaphors of *unsettlement* that invokes the uncanny shifts in meaning of the word *heimlich* circulating in and among the composites 'homeland', 'motherland' and 'homesick'" (p. 126, original emphasis). These two essays are among the most memorable in the collection, offering a version of neo-Victorian Gothic distinct from the clichés of decaying country houses and urban squalor.

The book's second section, 'The Horrid and the Sexy', treads rather more familiar territory in its coverage of queer and female Gothic and the neo-Victorian legacy of Jack the Ripper. Patricia Pulham's capable essay on Colm Tóibín's *The Master* (2004) is somewhat at an angle to the others as it deliberately side-steps sex, rendering it spectral. The Ripper murders, however, are overtly sexual in nature and possess a strange attraction for contemporary readers, anatomised in two complementary essays. For Sarah E. Maier, "[t]he Ripper is symptomatic"; the proliferation of serial killers and detection dramas in fiction, film and television in recent years testify to a yearning "to impose order and understanding in the desire to theorise and, indeed, narrate the criminal mind" (p. 198) that speaks to the way in which the Ripper case itself was narrativised. Max Duperray provides a comprehensive account of fictional versions of the Ripper narrative, from Mary Belloc Lowndes's *The Lodger* (1913) to Peter Ackroyd's *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* (1994). Maier's more selective analysis of Caleb

Carr's *The Alienist* (1994), Michael Dibdin's *The Last Sherlock Holmes Story* (1978) and Alan Moore and Eddie Campbell's *From Hell* (1989-96) interrogates the way that the Ripper story generates complicity in its fictional investigators and, by extension, contemporary readers.

Marie-Luise Kohlke's essay on 'Neo-Victorian Female Gothic: Fantasies of Self-Abjection' is, however, the stand-out chapter in this section. Kohlke replays through a Gothic lens one of the key feminist dilemmas inherent to neo-Victorianism: whether the return to Victorian and especially Victorian Gothic narratives reinstates oppressive gender models, or whether it enables their rewriting. She argues that the Gothic turn that currently predominates in women's neo-Victorian fiction can be interpreted as a regressive move, as it "involves a voyeuristic re-victimisation of female characters that at times seems at odds with neo-Victorianism's ethical and liberationist agenda of bearing after-witness to unrecorded traumas of the socially disempowered and marginalised, including women" (p. 222). This betrays a lack of confidence about the outcomes of the second wave feminist project, as "all too often these novels replicate predictable patterns of female oppression, transgression and punishment, as if doubtful about the real extent of change achieved in women's lives since the nineteenth century" (p. 222). Eschewing easy answers, Kohlke frames her debate by citing the neo-Victorian canon of Atwood and Waters before proceeding to explore three stages of neo-Victorian female Gothic by lesser-known writers spanning a sixty-year period – Marghanita Laski, Maggie Power, and Kate Williams. For Kohlke, none of these writers can provide a seamless solution – each narrative, in its own way, is troubling to a feminist reader. Yet each writer also provides a different set of strategies for negotiating the "feminist impasse" of the contemporary female Gothic (p. 223). As Kohlke concludes, these novels critique not only systems of patriarchy but also some of the tenets of feminism itself, particularly a postfeminism presuming a liberal, self-actualised subject: "Victimisation, these texts propose, is not a pose voluntarily adopted or subversively indulged, but rather a state of abjection forcibly inculcated and imposed, the logical endpoint/vanishing point of which is a chimerical subjectless subjectivity" (p. 249).

The final section of the book, entitled 'Hybrid Forms', explores the inter-medial, metafictional and dialogic aspects of neo-Victorian Gothic. These three essays shift away from the socio-political concerns discussed in the earlier sections, towards a more formal concern with textuality. Van

Leavenworth explores a little-known area of neo-Victorianism with his innovative discussion of digital interactive fiction *Slouching Towards Bedlam* (2003), a hybrid text/game in which the reader/player inputs commands that control the narrative outcomes. This steampunk text, set in the infamous nineteenth-century asylum for the insane, requires the reader/player to sift through information in search of clues that will help them prevent the spread of a mysterious virus. For Leavenworth, the fiction replicates the Victorian epistemological project of classification, demonstrating its lasting effects in contemporary digital culture, while simultaneously facilitating its disruption through encounters with the Gothic sublime:

The Victorian attempt to organise and master the world for the social ‘good’ foregrounds on-going attempts to manage and oversee the ‘normal’ flows of information in the mediated networks that are integral to everyday life in Western societies. *Slouching* demonstrates how failures in these linked endeavours produce both pragmatic dangers and profound fears of the incomprehensible. (p. 275)

Kym Brindle’s ‘Dead Words and Fatal Secrets: Rediscovering the Sensational Document in Neo-Victorian Gothic’ investigates the ‘found manuscript’ motif in Margaret Atwood’s *Alias Grace* (1996) and Beryl Bainbridge’s *Watson’s Apology* (1984). The use of interpolated texts in these novels is not only one of the clearest ways in which neo-Victorian fiction connects with the Gothic, but also a reliable means of marking out qualitative difference between Victorian and neo-Victorian. Brindle’s chapter explains lucidly that in nineteenth-century sensation fiction, “discovered documents provide restorative hermeneutic evidence for fictional worlds under threat from social and sexual transgression” (p. 286). Postmodern fiction, on the other hand, “deconstructs how investigatory reading and interpretation take place” (p. 286). While sensation fiction privileges plot over character, “neo-Victorian novels use intercalated diary extracts, ruptured letter exchanges, and lurid newspaper reports to more closely explore the violent psychological excesses of murderous minds” (p. 286).

Finally, Christian Gutleben's chapter breaks new ground by taking on the tricky but important topic of neo-Victorian humour. He stresses that the 'comic turn' is not new to Gothic, but has specific applications and effects in contemporary neo-Victorian fiction. He hypothesises three effects: humour provides an anti-nostalgic distancing device; it encourages "a reconsideration of key neo-Victorian Gothic concepts such as otherness, the uncanny and monstrosity" (p. 303); and it enables the renewal of the genre through aesthetic diversification. He later goes so far as to argue that the combination of fear and fun is at the heart of neo-Victorianism, essentially one of its defining features, and this is its creative innovation: humour in neo-Victorian Gothic surpasses the destructive effects of parody to create "a new generic blend" (p. 320). Gutleben makes a strong argument that the serious concerns of Gothic fiction – "humanity's capacity for evil, the persistence of the unknown, the unexplainable and the irrational, the blurred frontier between matter and spirit, natural and supernatural, life and death" – do not necessitate the tragic mode. "In other words, it is not the matter but the manner, not the topic but the tonality of Gothic which is altered in neo-Victorian fiction" (p. 321). These texts are not necessarily any the less fearful for that; they simply offer a self-consciously playful response to fear.

One of the problems of writing about self-conscious fiction is avoiding simply repeating what the text already knows about itself, or in other words merely glossing the critical and theoretical insights knowingly provided by the author. The majority of essays here, however, transcend this impasse to offer fresh insight, or at the very least bring unfamiliar texts to light. Kohlke and Gutleben's introductory essay should be required reading for anyone embarking on the study of the neo-Victorian or of contemporary Gothic – it lucidly, thoroughly and intelligently summarises the key issues, with recourse to a wide range of fictional examples. The links they set up richly pay off across a wide and varied list of contributions that examine Gothic repercussions in a range of media, genres and geographic regions. The volume is at its most satisfying when, as in Kohlke and Gutleben's individual chapters, it addresses central theoretical questions about the conjunction of Gothic with neo-Victorian. It would perhaps have benefited from a greater drive toward the 'bigger picture', which the editors amply provide but some of their contributors struggle to match. Nevertheless, the overall quality of writing and scholarship is consistently high. Judicious editing enables themes to arise and return between chapters, often cross-

referenced, creating the impression of a set of scholars in close conversation. Key texts from the neo-Victorian canon (*Alias Grace*, *Fingersmith*, *From Hell*) are referenced throughout, creating a kind of cushion on which less familiar works can sit more comfortably. One of the book's strengths is its willingness to expand the neo-Victorian across a range of media, including fine art, graphic novels and digital interactive fiction. While there are absences which mean that the volume cannot be considered definitive (no volume on neo-Victorian Gothic feels entirely complete without an essay on Sarah Waters) the editors work strenuously to fill gaps through the enormous array of texts referenced in their introduction.

Gothic Studies is a comparatively new field, often dated from 1980 and the publication of David Punter's landmark *The Literature of Terror*. Neo-Victorian Studies is newer still, a development within twenty-first-century academia, and is still in the process of self-definition. One of the questions that this volume elicits is: if neo-Victorian writing is quintessentially Gothic, then what does Neo-Victorian Studies add that Gothic Studies does not already accomplish? Is neo-Victorian fiction merely a sub-field of the Gothic? What of neo-Victorian texts in which Gothic is not the dominant mode? Kym Brindle quotes David Punter and Glennis Byron's suggestion in *The Gothic* that "there are very few literary texts that are 'Gothic' and the Gothic is more to do with particular moments, tropes, repeated motifs that can be found scattered, or disseminated, through the modern western literary tradition" (Punter and Byron 2004: xviii). This flexible understanding of Gothic as a mode or discursive site can help negotiate this particular problem: while many neo-Victorian texts are overtly Gothic, others deploy the Gothic more fluidly or sporadically, or hybridised with other forms – as did Victorian novels. Even those texts we consider most 'realist' engage with Gothic in quite explicit ways, as Royce Mahawatte's 2013 monograph on *George Eliot and the Gothic Novel* shows. Kohlke and Gutleben conclude their introduction by celebrating just this hybridity, arguing for neo-Victorian Gothic as "a mixed set of practices", and emphasising that however it is mixed or mashed up, "the Gothic's radical spirit and purpose are never lost" (p. 43). Their suggestion that this is a mutual exchange in which neo-Victorianism also influences contemporary Gothic requires more evidence: in this instance, it is hard to see what distinguishes neo-Victorianism from self-conscious postmodern fiction

more generally. Ultimately, then, the question of what the neo-Victorians can do for Gothic is too new to answer yet in any full or definitive way, but one thing is for sure: future scholars will uncouple the neo-Victorian from the Gothic at their peril. Its “*quintessentially Gothic*” nature will henceforth be difficult to ignore.

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