

Introduction: Speculations in and on the Neo-Victorian Encounter

Marie-Luise Kohlke
(Swansea University, Wales, UK)

An inaugural issue inevitably demands some sort of self-justification, especially in a subject area so closely connected to Victorian or Nineteenth-Century Studies, for which a wide range of prestigious journals, in both paper-based and on-line versions, already exists. Even more so, as such publications fairly regularly include essays dedicated to the afterlife of the nineteenth century in the cultural imaginary, whether on neo-Victorian novels, television and film adaptations, or the heritage industry more generally. Why, then, another academic journal to add to the profusion?

Over the last two decades, the production of neo-Victorian artefacts, fictions, and fantasies has become too prolific to be contained as a ghost in the corner of the Victorian Studies parlour, relegated to the margins of an established field with its own vital foci and concerns. Admittedly, Neo-Victorian Studies is still in the process of crystallisation, or full *materialisation* so to speak; as yet its temporal and generic boundaries remain fluid and relatively open to experimentation by artists, writers, and theorists alike, a state of affairs that forms part of its strong attraction. What properly belongs *in* and *to* this emergent, popular, inter-disciplinary field of study remains to be seen. Yet the necessary discussions and debates around ‘neo-Victorian’ – as term, as genre, as ‘new’ discipline, as cultural happening, as socio-political critique, as reinvigorated historical consciousness, as memory work, as critical interface between the present and past – urgently require an appropriate forum, both to be brought more fully into focus and to facilitate a long-term productive exchange of ideas on the neo-Victorian’s nature and purpose with suitable intellectual rigour. It is currently near impossible to gain some sort of genuine overview: of the full scope of existing creative and critical neo-Victorian works and practices; of where and in what disciplines relevant research is being conducted; of what related courses are already being taught; of where useful critical and theoretical material can be located. In other words, Neo-Victorian Studies is being held back by its diffusiveness, which currently undermines efforts to get to grips fully with the subject matter and with *why* it matters. *Neo-Victorian Studies* aims to provide the strategic focalising forum for such

research, so as to materialise the ghost that has stuck with us with such unexpected persistence for more than a century now.

Ideally, within future issues, that materialisation will also include the showcasing of creative work in neo-Victorian literature and art, to share the platform with theoretical investigations into the subject, so as to open up new avenues for dialogic engagement between the academic and creative. For theory inevitably relies as much on creative outputs as on analytical research, statistics of publication/production, the politics of the marketplace and those of educational programmes and institutions. Artistic products are more than part of the material cultural phenomenon of neo-Victorianism, the object of study; they also constitute the grounds on which theory is constructed and from which theorists derive their examples, illustrations, and applications. Put differently, without the prior work of artists and writers re-imagining the nineteenth century in various forms and mediums, neither Neo-Victorian Studies nor this journal would exist.

What this introduction will not, indeed cannot pretend to do, then, is provide the (still) missing definitions or delineate possible generic, chronological, and aesthetic boundaries – objectives which more properly belong to the project ahead. The same refusal of pre-emption also underlies the editorial board's decision to adopt the widest possible interpretation of 'neo-Victorian', so as to include the whole of the nineteenth century, its cultural discourses and products, and their abiding legacies, not just within British and British colonial contexts and not necessarily coinciding with Queen Victoria's realm; that is, to interpret neo-Victorianism outside of the limiting nationalistic and temporal identifications that 'Victorian', in itself or in conjunction with 'neo-', conjures up for some critics. Much as Martin Hewitt has argued of the problematics surrounding the term 'Victorian', "historical boundaries are permeable, and questioning the nature and positioning of chronological [and, indeed, generic and national] markers helps to avoid closing off fruitful lines of inquiry" (Hewitt 2006: 395), especially at such an early stage in the neo-Victorian proceedings. Rather, the work of definition, classification, and categorisation forms part of the long-term objectives of this journal, to be pursued via a constructive dialogue between the arts and humanities, and, one would hope, drawing the sciences into the debate also.

This inaugural issue commences just that conversation with several survey articles. Andrea Kirchknopf's '(Re)Workings of Nineteenth-Century

Fiction: Definitions, Terminology, Contexts’, in spite of its literary basis, addresses more general problems of boundaries and periodisation, while Rebecca Onion’s ‘Reclaiming the Machine: An Introductory Look at Steampunk in Everyday Practice’ examines a particular neo-Victorian aesthetic that infiltrates unexpected corners of everyday life, from visual and graphic media to fashion and design, in ways that resist notions of definitive taxonomy. Mark Llewellyn’s closing essay ‘What Is Neo-Victorian Studies?’ explores the neo-Victorian in terms of its wider cultural antecedents, current and future socio-political implications, and increasingly globalised contexts. Hence, for the remainder of this introduction, rather than summarising what is to follow, my aim will be to outline some of the directions in which I anticipate neo-Victorianism will develop, and to indicate some of the areas that I expect will assume increasing significance within artistic and critical neo-Victorian endeavours in the years to come.

One of these likely developments has already been alluded to, namely ascertaining the exact life-span of the neo-Victorian haunting. Again, the object is not so much to locate chronological boundary markers or points of origin as crucial nodal points in neo-Victorian output and dissemination. Where the novel is concerned, for example, neo-Victorian inception tends to be conflated somewhat too simplistically with the late 1960s, to coincide, according to individual critics’ preferences, with the publication dates of Jean Rhys’ *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) and John Fowles’ *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* (1969).¹ Among commentators on the neo-Victorian novel phenomenon, as far as I am aware, only Robin Gilmour has specifically projected the fountainhead further back in time to include Michael Sadleir’s *Fanny by Gaslight* (1940) and Marghanita Laski’s *The Victorian Chaise-Longue* (1953) as precursors of the genre (Gilmour 2000: 189). More lately, Matthew Sweet has outlined a range of texts, not all of them novels, forming part of what he terms the Modernists’ “open season on the Victorians”; adopting tones from sly condescension and satiric sentimentalism to parodic diatribe, some of these texts date back as far as the 1920s (Sweet 2002: xvii), further widening the range of potential neo-Victorian antecedents.

The Modernist moment of renegotiation with the Victorian past, the attempt at decisively ‘othering’ Victorian life, society, and subjectivity from their modern counterparts, constitutes a particular point of interest for theorists writing on Modernism, as well as the post-Victorian cultural turn

more generally,² who often take Lytton Strachey's *Eminent Victorians* (1918) as their point of departure. Yet it remains a distinctly under-explored area with regards to the neo-Victorian novel, affording much scope for future investigation into crucial continuities as well as ruptures between the official 'end' of the Victorian Age with Queen Victoria's death in 1901 and what followed immediately after. This will ideally include revisiting the oeuvres of writers whose life-spans bridged the fin de siècle and Modernist decades, so as to identify prototypical neo-Victorian departures and stirrings. Quite fittingly in this context, the inaugural issue opens with Cheryl A. Wilson's '(Neo-)Victorian Fatigue: Getting Tired of the Victorians in Conrad's *The Secret Agent*', which considers an especially early retrospective engagement with – and distancing attempt from – the high Victorian ethos, simultaneously noting the unexpected resonance of Conrad's nineteenth-century plot with post 9/11 debates surrounding terror and terrorism.³

In future, this kind of research will likely extend to less canonical and still comparatively neglected writers. I am thinking here of Catherine Carswell, for instance, both of whose loosely autobiographical novels, *Open the Door!* (1920) and *The Camomile: An Invention* (1922), follow fin-de-siècle female protagonists seeking to liberate themselves from Victorian values and oppressive gender roles; Kate O'Brien, whose *Without My Cloak* (1931) and *As Music and Splendour* (1958) likewise explore Victorian protagonists' struggles against stifling moral codes; or Sylvia Townsend Warner, who published a range of novels set in the nineteenth century – *The True Heart* (1929), *Summer Will Show* (1936), and *The Flint Anchor* (1954) – as well as *Lolly Willowes, or The Loving Huntsman* (1926) that, in spite of its post-Victorian setting, also mirrors Carswell and O'Brien's concerns with Victorian ideological legacies burdening twentieth-century women's lives. Indeed, it seems no coincidence that Sarah Waters, one of the prominent stars of today's neo-Victorian literary firmament, should include Townsend Warner's *Summer Will Show* among her list of ten favourite novels.⁴

Nevertheless, there remains a perceptible disjunction between the current fashion for all things Victorian and what might be called the relative unfashionableness of earlier twentieth-century works already in conversation with the resurrected Victorians. The first decade of the twenty-first century thus seems an opportune moment not only to move forwards in

re-conceptualising the nineteenth century but backwards too, so as to examine more fully how earlier generations of writers and critics laid the groundwork for our own neo-Victorian ventures. Such a more historicised perspective might also make it possible to speculate on the likely motives, modes, and mediums of further revisions of the Victorians in the decades and centuries to come, as our own generation of artists and critics is superseded by those inheriting, expanding, deconstructing, and/or rejecting our theorisations of the field. Will future generations perceive today's superabundance of neo-Victorian fantasies and criticisms as a superficial glut, little more than a complicit reflection of a self-indulgent, over-sexed consumer society? (The neo-Victorian after all, demonstrates a prurient penchant for revelling in indecency and salaciousness, as well as exposing past iniquities.) Or will they view the neo-Victorian project as a worthwhile, even necessary process of historical analysis, contributing formatively to an ethically informed subjectivity, mindful of the long-term consequences of socio-political policies, strategic decisions, and ideologies that continue to reverberate in the cultural echo chamber over a hundred years later? There is some hope for the latter reading in Abigail Dennis' interview with Sarah Waters, "Ladies in Peril": Sarah Waters on neo-Victorian narrative celebrations and why she stopped writing about the Victorian era', included in this issue. Echoing Adrienne Rich's feminist notion of "Writing as Revision" (Rich 1972: 18), Waters remarks that in spite of her loss of interest in the Victorians after writing three neo-Victorian novels, she can foresee coming back to them in time, when perhaps they "will have been reinvented slightly" enabling her to "go back with fresh eyes" (Dennis 2008: 51).⁵ Theorising the neo-Victorian as a much more multi-layered and longer-term process than a quasi-in-vitro postmodern 'invention' of the latter half of the twentieth century, not only in literature but in culture generally, thus looks set to become one of the most immediate issues concerning neo-Victorian researchers.

Part of that process must involve extending our theoretical enquiries to other literary genres, arts, and performances. Hitherto the critical debate has been largely restricted to high-profile neo-Victorian novels and film adaptations, driven by popular markets and prestigious literary awards, leaving untouched questions of how neo-Victorian aesthetics operate and modulate in other forms. How do present-day writers, for instance, rework not just the eponymous 'loose baggy monster' of the Victorian triple-decker

but also nineteenth century poetry, once equally popular and sometimes even more so? Although neo-Victorian novels such as A. S. Byatt's *Possession: A Romance* (1990) or Lynne Truss' *Tennyson's Gift* (1996) also reanimate the period's poetic imagination and voices, the form of the dramatic monologue and/or verse drama can arguably do the same more resonantly and with greater versatility, as in Richard Howard's Pulitzer-Prize winning *Untitled Subjects* (1969), Anthony Thwaites' *Victorian Voices* (1980), or Robert Peters' *Hawker* (1984). Other contemporary poets have drawn on actual nineteenth-century voices of the poor and abused, recorded in court records or investigative journalism of the time, to bear retrospective testimony to past injustices, as in Charles Reznikoff's *Testimony: The United States 1885-1890: Recitative* (1965) and John Seed's *Pictures from Mayhew: London 1850* (2005).⁶ Similarly, the proliferation of neo-Victorian fictionalised biographies or re-imagined memoirs have their dramatic counterparts in performances of Polly Teale's *Brontë* (2005) or Peter Ackroyd's *The Mystery of Charles Dickens* (2000), as well as the actor Simon Callow's reenactments of Dickens' short stories, once featured on the novelist's own reading tours at home and abroad.⁷ Neo-Victorian theorists will need to address exactly how different creative media impact on neo-Victorian practice, politics, and audience expectations and responses. So too for visual and performance arts that incorporate neo-Victorian elements, for example Paula Rego's haunting series of pastels and lithographs for *Jane Eyre and Other Stories* (2001-2002),⁸ or Alexa Wright's digitally manipulated series of photographic images entitled 'I' (1998-1999).⁹ Superimposing congenital physical disabilities upon self-portraits, some of them posed on Victorian chaise longues or chesterfields, the sumptuous settings of Wright's images engage dialogically with the practice of nineteenth century freak shows, deconstructing 'abnormality' via an affirmative re-contextualisation/visualisation of the disabled body as beautiful. In a more complex multi-media example of neo-Victorianism, Iain Forsyth and Jane Pollard's *Silent Sound* performance and installation (2006) adapted/updated the Victorian séance act of the Davenport Brothers at St. George's Hall, Liverpool, with a contemporary soundproof booth replacing the 'spirit cabinet' on stage to explore the transmission of subliminal messages via the 'medium' of orchestral music, performed by the appropriately named ensemble Spiritualized.¹⁰ Such alternative aesthetic media and spaces clearly produce very different cognitive, emotive, and

indeed sensuous experiences, though just as capable as the neo-Victorian novel of problematising, even politicising, our engagement with the Victorian past and its cultural legacies.

The analysis of the nineteenth century as a harbinger of our own trauma culture is currently gaining critical mass as another neo-Victorian concern with evident political implications. Increasingly, the period is configured as a temporal convergence of multiple historical traumas still awaiting appropriate commemoration and full working-through.¹¹ These include both the pervasive traumas of social ills, such as disease, crime, and sexual exploitation, and the more spectacular traumas of violent civil unrest, international conflicts, and trade wars that punctuated the nineteenth century. With the extended military presence and continuing operations of US and allied forces in Iraq and Afghanistan, this has become a pressing current issue, as the recent strategic interventions resonate powerfully with nineteenth-century Western histories of empire-building, atrocities of colonialism, and the clash of opposing cultures. As Christine Krueger proposed in her introduction to *Functions of Victorian Culture at the Present Time* (2002), the 9/11 attacks, bringing back “into popular consciousness the long – and largely Victorian – history of the ‘great game’ of empire”, arguably “did more than any cultural critic could have [done] to impress upon us the urgent need to address our role as heirs of continuous historical process” (Krueger 2002: xi). Not surprisingly, the *Contemporary Narrative in English Research Group*, directed by Susana Onega at the University of Zaragoza, which recently began a five-year comparative project on ‘Ethics and Trauma in Contemporary Narrative in English’ funded by the Spanish Ministry of Education and Science, looks set to include a significant neo-Victorian component.¹²

The neo-Victorian’s implication in and contribution to on-going historical processes, from which modern-day societies differentially benefit or suffer, will likely provide fertile ground for further critical analysis and speculation. Not least, this can be expected to involve considerations of the radically different approaches and responses to neo-Victorian writings/readings of trauma by descendents of Western imperialist cultures, on the one hand, and those of indigenous and formerly colonised populations on the other. Trauma always raises uncomfortable questions as to *whose* trauma is being represented, by and for whom, and with what degree of verifiable ‘authenticity’. Accordingly, in spite of its potential to

create experiential connectivity between different peoples, societies, and periods, trauma can also prove highly divisive, re-inscribing an unbridgeable alterity.

Another traumatic legacy intimately linked to the age of industrialisation is attracting growing interest, namely the trauma of human-engineered ecological disaster, the commodification and destruction of the natural world and its biodiversity, and the resulting alienation of humankind from its environment.¹³ This subject draws together a variety of disciplines, including the natural sciences, environmental studies, economics, and history, as well as political activism. As regards the novel genre, the trope already features prominently in a range of prize-winning texts. Matthew Kneale's *English Passengers* (2000) parodically juxtaposes the titular Englishmen's pseudo-scientific search for the Garden of Eden in Tasmania with the white settlers' wholesale depredations of the island paradise, including the genocide of its indigenous human population; Jem Poster's *Rifling Paradise* (2006) depicts the arbitrary decimation of wildlife in the Australian Blue Mountains in the name of science, so as to expand a naturalist's collection; and Stef Penney's *The Tenderness of Wolves* (2006) paints a bleak picture of the aftermath of the ravages of the Canadian fur trade, which resonates hauntingly with current anxieties about global warming and the recession of the polar icecaps.

Probably most explicitly, however, nineteenth-century ecological trauma and its after-effects are explored in a new strain of neo-Victorian fiction and/or non-fiction, which so far appears to come mainly from North America. Anca Vlasopolos' *The New Bedford Samurai* (2007), for instance, retells the life story of the historical Japanese traveller Manjiro Nakahama, within the context of the near-extinction of one-time abundant species such as the whale and albatross, sacrificed to the Industrial Revolution and the nineteenth-century fashion trade. Vlasopolos counterpoints this narrative with emotive meditations on and denunciations of today's consumerist lifestyles that perpetuate destructive human relations with the natural world. Brian Schofield's *Selling Your Father's Bones: The Epic Fate of the American West* (2008) takes a similar approach, chronicling the Nez Perce Native American tribe's exodus from their ancestral home and their desperate struggle for survival, interspersed with occasional mythical and fictionalised passages. Schofield parallels the Nez Perce's careful husbandry and deeply ingrained love of the land with the ecological scars caused by the

pursuit of the exploitative settlers' myth of the inexhaustible bounty of the Wild West and its lasting legacies of despoilment and pollution. Self-consciously blending fact and imaginative reconstruction, such works explore different ways and mediums of representing and coming to understand destructive historical patterns.

For all its occasionally didactic overtones, neo-Victorian trauma writing – whether fiction, faction, or non-fiction – is actively involved in consciousness-raising and witness-bearing. As such it directly counters and contests charges of de-politicisation, based on a decadent sentimentalism, nostalgia, or spurious liberalism sometimes attributed to the neo-Victorian project.¹⁴ With increasingly heated debates about our environmental responsibilities, not least to future generations, and the growing pressures on and competition for ever scarcer resources, this neo-Victorian trend, in literature, history, and other disciplines, is likely to assume still greater significance in the coming years.

An associated growth area is the neo-Victorian's contribution to cultural memory work, including mourning, commemorative practices, and the construction of both public and private memory. The neo-Victorian phenomenon signals these thematics overtly via a recurrent spiritualist trope that acts as both metaphor and analogy for our attempted dialogue with the dead and for the lingering traces of the past within the present. In neo-Victorian literature, for instance, mediums, spirit guides, séances, possessions, and dark circles abound, together with the paraphernalia of accompanying trickery and possible misrepresentation,¹⁵ perhaps glossing the inherent malleability, unreliability, and performativity of memory and its easy cooption for personal and/or communal agendas and political profit. Haunting itself, of course, can be read as indicative of personal and cultural trauma: in Freudian terms, as the compulsion to repeat the past that has not, as yet, been adequately processed and integrated into consciousness. As such, spectrality links to the neo-Victorian's preoccupation with liberating lost voices and repressed histories of minorities left out of the public record and, hence, with imagining more viable ways of living with one another in the future. It is no coincidence that Jacques Derrida's deliberations on hauntology should begin with Karl Marx, that great nineteenth-century would-be liberator of the oppressed working classes. Derrida's hauntology too evinces a simultaneous retrospective and future orientation, as he concludes:

Could one *address oneself in general* if already some ghost did not come back? If he loves justice at least, the “scholar” of the future, the “intellectual” of tomorrow should learn it and from the ghost. He should learn to live by learning not how to make conversation with the ghost but how to talk with him, with her, how to let them speak or how to give them back speech, even if it is in oneself, in the other, in the other in oneself: they are always *there*, spectres, even if they do not exist, even if they are no longer, even if they are not yet. (Derrida 1994: 176, original emphases)

To make a claim for the neo-Victorian as some sort of inherently radical political project would be too ambitious, not to say naïve. Yet the neo-Victorian does repeatedly raise important questions of social justice and may yet prove instrumental in interrogating, perhaps even changing, current attitudes and influencing historical consciousness in the future.

Two essays in this issue engage with these interwoven themes of spectrality, memory and mourning, and the equivocal consolations they afford. Kate Mitchell’s ‘Ghostly Histories and Embodied Memories: Photography, Spectrality and Historical Fiction in *Afterimage* and *Sixty Lights*’ explores the role of photography as a visible trace of an absent presence – the lost and longed for body of the female protagonist’s mother in each of the novels – which also stands for the uncanny doubling of the ‘body’ of Victorian culture persisting in our own time. Andrew Williamson’s “‘The Dead Man Touch’d Me From the Past’: Reading as Mourning, Mourning as Reading in A. S. Byatt’s ‘The Conjugal Angel’” uses the spiritualist séance as a springboard to a wider analysis of neo-Victorian intertextuality and re-reading as processes of cultural memorialisation, not just traumatic but also liberatory repetitions *with a difference*. In disclosing the constructedness of the past, such repetitions also reveal what has been left out of the past’s telling. By re-imagining and mourning alternative lost pasts that *might have been*, the neo-Victorian circumvents the potentially debilitating and crushing inevitability of *what was*, instead configuring the past as the outcome of a complicated confluence of multiple contingent factors.

Admittedly, these neo-Victorian consolations of retrospectively ‘liberating history’ may prove dubious insofar as they do not translate into

ethical and/or political engagement and action in our own time. Yet they can also facilitate what Robert A. Rosenstone calls the vital “personal and emotional connection[s] with what has gone before” that academic history sometimes fails to provide in an age of sound-bites and information overload: “The point is this: we need to liberate history from its own history and to create forms of historical telling for today and tomorrow, forms of history suited to the sensibility of the times” (Rosenstone 2007: 11; 13). The neo-Victorian, for reasons as yet to be fully theorised, appears to be one such form, peculiarly well suited to re-popularising (nineteenth-century) history, rendering it accessible, newly topical, and appealing to present-day sensibilities. As Rosenstone goes on to argue: “We must tell stories about the past that matter not just to us; we must make them matter to the larger culture.” (Rosenstone 2007: 17) Yet telling stories about the past that matter, *making* them matter, is itself not without risk; it threatens to collapse critical distance and elide a rigorous self-examination of the value judgments and moral categories underlying our selections of *what matters enough to tell in the first place*.

There is something potentially self-regarding about today’s critical engagement with the nineteenth century, inadvertently revealed in the covers of critical publications on the subject. The cover of Krueger’s already mentioned *Functions of Victorian Culture at the Present Time* (2002) depicts an ageing Queen Victoria, with trailing white lace veil and matching fan, seated before a now outdated, pre-flat-screen computer monitor, gazing at her own image, the whole scene enclosed in an elaborately drawn picture frame. Although the double framing suggests self-consciousness, as indeed does Krueger’s title with its emphasis on the present moment, the image also situates the computer as a transparent window onto reality, unproblematically reflecting a ‘true’ image of the past. Although ‘in’ the picture, the twenty-first century is represented only as a mechanical apparatus without subjectivity, individuality, or emotional investments that might compromise objectivity. Put differently, the post-/neo-Victorian researcher is *not* fully within the frame of enquiry.

The cover of Miles Taylor and Michael Wolff’s edited collection *The Victorians Since 1901* (2004) reproduces a 1931 drawing by Max Beerbohm entitled ‘Osbert Sitwell watches the Victorians step up’. It aligns us post-Victorians squarely with Sitwell’s figure, seemingly taking censorious muster of the passing parade of eminent nineteenth-century

greats (though strictly speaking, of course, Sitwell's birth year of 1892 makes him at least part-Victorian). Yet a second glance reveals something quite different. The Victorians gaze uneasily at the contemptuous Sitwell; his arms are crossed in an attitude of deliberate aloofness and his eyes are apparently closed, while the Victorians' eyes are clearly visible. This raises questions as to the 'objectivity' of anything Sitwell sees/we see, since it might be little more than phantasmagoric (self-)projections striking our retinas.

The frontispiece of Simon Joyce's *The Victorians in the Rearview Mirror* (2007) initially *seems* to put our modern-day selves squarely in the driving seat and, hence, in the picture. We gaze upon a doubled London panorama, the modern cityscape of Big Ben and the Houses of Parliament, with a speedboat on the Thames in the foreground, and the nineteenth century skyline dominated by St Paul's in the titular rear-view mirror. We do the looking, but what we are *not* looking at – what once again is missing from the picture – is our own reflection in the mirror. In fairness, however, within the text itself, Joyce *does* self-consciously ponder the complications attending critics' self-investments in their objects of study. His chapter on 'Victorian Vision and Contemporary Cinema', for instance, ends on a cautionary note:

Recovery work always poses the problem that renewed attention to repressed or demonized elements of the culture [...] can also tend to reify our sense of its dominant characteristics. It is just as important to interrogate the motives that subtend all such efforts at reevaluation, recognizing that they often involve powerful stakes and interests. (S. Joyce 2007: 110)

The cover design of John Kucich and Dianne F. Sadoff's edited collection *Victorian Afterlife: Postmodern Culture Rewrites the Nineteenth Century* (2000) works somewhat more in this direction of interrogating our own motives as retrospective readers and analysts of Victoriana. It presents a gender-ambiguous figure in what looks like a dandified black frockcoat, with an exaggeratedly ruffled high collar obscuring the face; hints of a feminine parting and what might be the end of a chignon vie with the suggestion of a straggling beard. Though rendered a mysteriously enigmatic

Other, the impenetrable Victorian figure throws the gaze back on ourselves; the figure could even wear our own face for all we know – ourselves in Victorian drag – or we could project any face of our desiring upon the obscured space, investing the apparition with a character of our own devising. Writing in ways that resonate strongly with what I am driving at, the historian Joan W. Scott reflects on the complex relation “between desire and critique” that “explains the impossibility of disinterested objectivity” (Scott: 2007: 32). In her essay appropriately titled ‘History-writing as critique’, Scott stresses the importance of always remaining mindful of the need to interrogate “the grounds of our knowledge”, to self-critically examine its analytic terms, presuppositions, categories, organising principles and methodologies, so as to render visible not only those missing or left-out from history (women, homosexuals, non-white peoples, etc.) but also our own elided partialities, un-admitted personal agendas, and ideological blind spots (Scott 2007: 33).

The development of such a self-reflective, self-interrogative approach to the neo-Victorian enterprise will pose one of the most urgent challenges within Neo-Victorian Studies in the near future. We need to theorise and problematise our own critical practice with a much greater awareness of the cultural forces and historical processes which shape it, and to which it in turn contributes. We need to consider the ethical and political implications of neo-Victorian creative and critical praxes, together with how these inform and structure public memory and its transmission. In a sense, writers and critics and their works become alternative “‘sites’ of memory” in the terms discussed by Patrick Joyce; that is, they enlarge “the scope of collective memory” by producing alternative ‘sources’ and ‘traces’ (P. Joyce 2007: 89), generating different kinds of conceptual archives, be they fictional or factual, to act as conduit of and to the nineteenth-century past for current and future generations. Much as we read Victorian texts as highly revealing cultural products of their age, neo-Victorian texts will one day be read for the insights they afford into twentieth- and twenty-first-century cultural history and socio-political concerns. As Patrick Joyce reminds us, “the creation of history” – arguably including the neo-Victorian kind – is always “a *political* matter” as well as “an *ethical* one”, for inevitably “the sites of memory that the writing of history occupies are involved in power” and in “the politics of knowledge”: determining where exactly the truth of history is deemed to lie, how ‘credibility’ is created, how

particular truth claims are made and sustained, and how rights derived therefrom are conferred and exercised (P. Joyce 2007: 89, original emphases). We need to question the assumptions we bring to the neo-Victorian – as postmodern, as nostalgic, as traumatic, as commemorative, as cathartic, as liberatory, and so forth – and the implicit pedagogic protocols and strategic aims we employ/deploy neo-Victorianism for, not just in terms of the politics of power and knowledge but also the equally ambiguous politics of the market, of so-called ‘edutainment’ and pleasurable consumption. To properly ‘address’ the manifold spectres of the nineteenth century, with which we cohabit in the present, also means addressing our own complex investments in resurrecting the past, acknowledging how desire makes the spectres dance to our tune, delimiting what we choose to hear when we make the ghosts speak – or speak for them.

Notes

1. Sally Shuttleworth describes Fowles’ novel as “[o]ne evident progenitor” and Rhys’ text as “[a]nother progenitive model” for what she calls the ‘retro-Victorian’ strain of historical fiction (Shuttleworth 1998: 256). Petra Deistler views Fowles’ text as “den Auftakt zu dieser neuen Form der ideengeschichtlichen und erzähltheoretischen Auseinandersetzung mit dem 19. Jahrhundert” – “the prelude to this new form of the historically minded and narrational-theoretical debate with the nineteenth century” (Deistler 1999: 7, translation my own). Tatjana Jukić describes *Wide Sargasso Sea* as “the first great intertextual dialogue with the Victorians” (Jukić 2000: 78), but heralds *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* as “the first comprehensive *postmodernist* model reviving the Victorian era” (Jukić 2000: 77, emphasis added). Christian Gutleben speculates that Rhys “little thought that she was starting a new literary movement whose very essence consisted in re-thinking and rewriting Victorian myths and stories” (Gutleben 2001: 5). Cora Kaplan opts for *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* as “[t]he original of this sub-genre” of historical fiction, although she also discusses *Wide Sargasso Sea* as a provocative example of “the rewriting and reinterpretation of the Victorian” that she terms ‘Victoriana’ rather than ‘neo-Victorian’ (Kaplan 2007: 8; 154).
2. See Steve Ellis’ *Virginia Woolf and the Victorians* (2007) and Simon Joyce’s *The Victorians in the Rearview Mirror* (2007), both reviewed in this issue. See also William C. Lubenow’s opening chapter, ‘Lytton Strachey’s *Eminent Victorians*: The Rise and Fall of the Intellectual Aristocracy’, in Taylor and

Wolff's collection *The Victorians since 1901: Histories, Representations and Revisions* (2004).

3. It gives me particular pleasure to be able to include Wilson's article in this issue, as it was the very first submission received by the journal in response to the inaugural Call for Papers.
4. See Amazon's 'Sarah Waters's 10 Favorites in Fiction', viewed 15 August 2008, http://www.amazon.com/gp/richpub/syltguides/fullview/1IOI02ML4K3MD/ref=cm_syt_dtpa_f_1_rds0?pf_rd_p=253457301&pf_rd_s=sylt-center&pf_rd_t=201&pf_rd_i=0140161767&pf_rd_m=ATVPDKIKX0DER&pf_rd_r=1WD6HX4GSXRTQR1NJXCP.
5. Rich defines 're-vision' as "the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction [...] Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves." Her proposed "radical critique of literature" can be usefully extended to wider cultural production, "tak[ing] the work first of all as a clue to how we live, how we have been living, how we have been led to imagine ourselves, how our language has trapped as well as liberated us; and how we can begin to see and name – and therefore live – afresh." (Rich 1972: 18)
6. I am grateful to Miriam Elizabeth Burstein and Glyn Pursglove for drawing this range of poets' works that re-imagine the nineteenth century to my attention. For a further text in this vein by Peters, see *The Picnic in the Snow: Ludwig of Bavaria* (1982) / *Ludwig of Bavaria: Poems and a Play* (1986, revised ed.).
7. My thanks to Ben Poore, whose current research on adaptations of Dickens' works, including Ackroyd's play and Callow's performances, brought these examples to mind.
8. One of these, 'Come to Me', appropriately features as the cover of *Victoriana: Histories, Fictions Criticism* (2007), Cora Kaplan's recent study of the cultural contexts of neo-Victorianism.
9. See Wright's website at <http://www.medphys.ucl.ac.uk/mgi/alexa/ipg.html>.
10. See <http://www.iainandjane.com/work/silentsound/index.shtml>. I am grateful to Christine Battersby for bringing the Alexa Wright and *Silent Sound* websites to my attention.
11. I am indebted to Lies Wesseling from the University of Maastricht for this idea, which arose in the course of email correspondence during 2007.
12. Susana Onega, personal email correspondence, 2007. For further details of the project, launched in January 2008, see

http://cne.literatureresearch.net/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1&Itemid=2.

13. Onion's earlier mentioned essay also touches briefly on the ecological sensibility of Steampunk, and Steampunk's relationship with environmental concerns will be more fully explored in a *Neo-Victorian Studies* special issue on Steampunk planned for late 2009.
14. See, for example, Gutleben's contention that neo-Victorian fiction elides "political responsibility" for self-satisfied denunciation of "a number of social and historical wrongs", leaving "a majority of these contemporary novels [...] totally bereft of any narratorial or diegetic consideration about the present situation" (Gutleben 2001: 169).
15. Examples in which the trope appears include: Michèle Roberts' *In the Red Kitchen* (1990), Isabel Colegate's *The Summer of the Royal Visit* (1991); A. S. Byatt's 'The Conjugal Angel' in *Angels and Insects* (1992), Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* (1996), Melissa Pritchard's *Selene of the Spirits* (1999), Sarah Waters' *Affinity* (1999), Nora Hague's *Letters from an Age of Reason* (2001), Marge Piercy's *Sex Wars* (2005), Carol Goodman's *The Ghost Orchid* (2007), Faye L. Booth's *Cover the Mirrors* (2007), and John Harwood's *The Séance* (2008).

Bibliography

- Contemporary Narrative in English Research Group [Homepage], viewed 1 July 2008,
http://cne.literatureresearch.net/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1&Itemid=2.
- Deistler, Petra. *Tradition und Transformation – der fiktionale Dialog mit dem viktorianischen Zeitalter im (post)modernen historischen Roman in Großbritannien*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang: 1999.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, Peggy Kamuf (trans.). New York & London: Routledge, 1994.
- Ellis, Steve. *Virginia Woolf and the Victorians*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.
- Forsyth, Iain; and Jane Pollard. *Silent Sound* [performance and installation], 2006, viewed 9 August 2008,
<http://www.iainandjane.com/work/silentsound/index.shtml>.
- Gilmour, Robin. 'Using the Victorians: The Victorian Age in Contemporary Fiction', in *Rereading Victorian Fiction*, Alice Jenkins and Juliet John

- (eds.). Houndmills, Basingstoke & New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000, 189-200.
- Gutleben, Christian. *Nostalgic Postmodernism: The Victorian Tradition and the Contemporary Novel*. Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi, 2001.
- Hewitt, Martin. 'Why the Notion of Victorian Britain *Does* Make Sense', *Victorian Studies*, 48:3 (Spring 2006), 395-438.
- Joyce, Patrick. 'The gift of the past: Towards a critical history', in *Manifestos for History*, Keith Jenkins, Sue Morgan, and Alun Munslow (eds.). London & New York: Routledge, 2007, 88-97.
- Joyce, Simon. *The Victorians in the Rearview Mirror*. Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2007.
- Jukić, Tatjana. 'From Worlds to Words and the Other Way Around: The Victorian Inheritance in the Postmodern British Novel', in *Theme Parks, Rainforests and Sprouting Wastelands: European Essays on Theory and Performance in Contemporary British Fiction*, Richard Todd and Luisa Flora (eds.). Amsterdam & Atlanta, Georgia: Rodopi, 2000, 77-87.
- Kaplan, Cora. *Victoriana: Histories, Fictions, Criticism*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007.
- Krueger, Christine L. (ed.). 'Introduction', in *Functions of Victorian Culture at the Present Time*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2002, xi-xx.
- Kucich, John; and Dianne F. Sadoff (eds.). *Victorian Afterlife: Postmodern Culture Rewrites the Nineteenth Century*. Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 2000.
- Lubenow, William C., 'Lytton Strachey's *Eminent Victorians*: The Rise and Fall of the Intellectual Aristocracy', in *The Victorians since 1901: Histories, Representations and Revisions*, Miles Taylor and Michael Wolff (eds.). Manchester & New York: Manchester University Press, 2004, 17-28.
- Rich, Adrienne. 'When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Revision', *College English*, 34:1, *Women, Writing and Teaching* (Oct. 1972), 18-30.
- Rosenstone, Robert A. 'Space for the bird to fly', in *Manifestos for History*, Keith Jenkins, Sue Morgan, and Alun Munslow (eds.). London & New York: Routledge, 2007, 11-18.
- Schofield, Brian. *Selling Your Father's Bones: The Epic Fate of the American West*. London: HarperPress/Harper Collins, 2008.
- Scott, Joan W. 'History-writing as critique', in *Manifestos for History*, Keith Jenkins, Sue Morgan, and Alun Munslow (eds.). London & New York: Routledge, 2007, 19-38.

- Shuttleworth, Sally. 'Natural History: The Retro-Victorian Novel', in *The Third Culture: Literature and Science*, Elinor S. Shaffer (ed.). Berlin & New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1998, 253-268.
- Sweet, Matthew. *Inventing the Victorians*. London: Faber and Faber, 2001.
- Taylor, Miles; and Michael Wolff (eds.). *The Victorians since 1901: Histories, Representations and Revisions*. Manchester & New York: Manchester University Press, 2004.
- Vlasopolos, Anca. *The New Bedford Samurai*. Kingsport, Tennessee: Twilight Times Books, 2007.
- Waters, Sarah. 'Sarah Waters's 10 Favorites in Fiction', viewed 15 August 2008, http://www.amazon.com/gp/richpub/syltguides/fullview/11OIO2ML4K3MD/ref=cm_syt_dtpa_f_1_rdssss0?pf_rd_p=253457301&pf_rd_s=sylt-center&pf_rd_t=201&pf_rd_i=0140161767&pf_rd_m=ATVPDKIKX0DER&pf_rd_r=1WD6HX4GSXRTQR1NJXCP.
- Wright, Alexa. [Homepage], viewed 9 August 2008, <http://www.medphys.ucl.ac.uk/mgi/alexa/ipg.html>.