

VICTORIANOMANIA: REIMAGINING, REFASHIONING, AND REWRITING VICTORIAN LITERATURE AND CULTURE

Simonetta Falchi, Greta Perletti, Maria Isabel Romero Ruiz, eds.

Milan: FrancoAngeli, 2015.

(by Marta Miquel-Baldellou, Universidad de Lleida)

mmiquel@dal.udl.cat

As stated in the introduction, this volume aims to gain insight into the manifold ways in which Victorian culture can be revisited and reimagined from a contemporary perspective. While the focus of attention is necessarily the Victorian period, one of the main characteristics of this collection is that it regards the term Victorian in a broad sense, encompassing all the literature and culture of the nineteenth-century, as well as moving beyond the geographic boundaries of England. Bearing in mind the postmodern origins of Neo-Victorianism, this volume thus defends an inclusive rather than an exclusive approach to the phenomenon, as long as Neo-Victorian manifestations present a self-conscious engagement with the act of revising and reinterpreting the past. Given the current proliferation of texts of diverse natures adapting the Victorian past and the increasing interest in the academic discipline of Neo-Victorian Studies since the publication of novels like Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) and John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1967), which sanctioned the beginning of Neo-Victorian discourses, this book acknowledges the importance of some groundbreaking critical volumes previously published in the field of Neo-Victorianism, such as Robin Gilmour's *Rereading Victorian Fiction* (2000), Cora Kaplan's *Victoriana: Histories, Fictions, Criticism* (2007), Rosario Arias and Patricia Pulham's *Haunting and Spectrality in Neo-Victorian Fiction: Possessing the Past* (2009), Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn's *Neo-Victorianism: The Victorians in*

the Twenty-First Century (2010), Nadine Boehm-Schnitker and Susanne Gruss' *Neo-Victorian Literature and Culture: Immersions and Revisitations* (2014), and the monothematic volumes within the Neo-Victorian Series edited by Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben, which have been published regularly since 2010.

All the articles collected in this volume comprise analyses of contemporary texts of different genres, ranging from novels and films to digital rewritings, which share a self-conscious engagement with diverse aspects of Victorian discourses, but which also reflect upon how processes of repossession can shed light on how to make sense of our contemporary reality. In this respect, as a result of the emphasis placed on metafiction, the fragmentation of truth, and the politics of representation in Neo-Victorian fiction, the critical theory of postmodernism is often regarded as the theoretical framework in which Neo-Victorian discourses are grounded, especially as the earliest studies focused on contemporary reappropriations of the Victorian tradition—like John Kucich and Dianne F. Sadoff's *Victorian Afterlife: Postmodern Culture Rewrites the Nineteenth-Century* (2000) and Christian Gutleben's *Nostalgic Postmodernism: The Victorian Tradition and the Contemporary British Novel* (2001)—followed a postmodern approach. In tune with the concern about the incomplete quality of truth that characterises postmodernism, this volume underscores how Neo-Victorian texts often bring to the fore those marginalised or deviant voices that were silenced in Victorian times, but also underpins how Neo-Victorian adaptations present a dualistic approach, as these textual reinterpretations of the past look back in time either through subversive criticism or through nostalgic compliance.

Some of the articles included in this collection highlight the critical approach towards the ethical and social discourses pertaining to the Victorian period that Neo-Victorian textualities often present. As a case in point, Andrzej Diniejko's article focuses on John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* as an early representative of Neo-Victorian fiction and as a postmodern metahistorical novel, which disrupts stereotypical notions about the period and criticises its limitations, while it also emphasises the existentialist message that individuals should struggle against determinism, and instead, advance to freedom through self-awareness. In her interpretation of Sarah Waters' novels *Affinity* and *Fingersmith*, Maria Isabel Romero analyses how the author resorts to the Victorian past as suggestive of the silent discourse that has determined same-sex relationships in order to reconstruct a new sexual and gender identity for lesbian women based on multiplicity and diversity, which also serves the purpose of questioning the sexual politics of the postmodern era. Within the context of the movement of steampunk—which reinterprets the Victorian era through the incorporation of contemporary elements, such as equality of gender roles and cross-dressing—Marta Alonso provides a

comparative analysis of the character of Mina Harker in Bram Stoker's *Dracula* and Stephen Norrington's film *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*. Noticing how the steampunk movement reproduces Victorian values, but also adapts them to contemporary ideals, Marta Alonso plausibly argues that, if Mina is characterised as the emerging epitome of the New Woman in Stoker's novel, in Norrington's film she is physically portrayed through cross-dressing in order to suggest her eminently masculine features. Francesca Di Blasio focuses on Emma Tenant's novel *Two Women of London: The Strange Case of Ms Jekyll and Mrs Hyde*, which involves a reinterpretation of the male fictional world of Stevenson's classic, rewriting it from a female perspective and endowing it with a female protagonist, but also transforming the Victorian dichotomy between good and evil in Stevenson's text into the postmodern obsession with beauty and physical decadence. Pilar Somacarrera analyses Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* as a historical novel whereby Atwood explores Victorian Canada through its Scottish literary and political legacy, taking Walter Scott's novels as a model to follow, with the ultimate purpose of amalgamating different texts and documents in order to give voice to hidden historical testimonies of individuals, in particular within the private sphere of women. In her study of the Egyptian writer Ahdaf Soueif's novel *The Map of Love*, Silvia Lutzoni identifies the ambivalent attitude of postcolonial writers regarding Western Victorian canons. Being educated in Victorian literature, Soueif does not intend to undermine the Western literary canon, but to bring to light those texts that remain silent, thus supplying an alternative version of history and creating a fusion between Eastern and Western traditions. According to Silvia Lutzoni, in *The Map of Love*, the aesthetic values of Victorian literature are confirmed, but its imperialistic discourse is necessarily subverted. Through the study of Neo-Victorian films such as Christopher Nolan's *The Prestige* and Neil Burger's *The Illusionist*, Alessandra Violi focuses on the metaphors of fakery and magic explored in these films to bring attention to the inherently deceptive quality of Neo-Victorianism, owing to its necessary distortion of the Victorian past through contemporary preoccupations, and to place emphasis on the processes of reflection and reconfiguration of our present in the light of a Victorian past which was left unexpressed but which still inhabits our time as an anachronism.

By contrast, the rest of articles collected in this volume focus on texts that revisit the Victorian era through unquestioning reinterpretations, placing a strong emphasis on nostalgia and the aesthetic portrayal of the Victorian past. Anna Stevenson examines the depiction of Victorian women in film musicals, such as Baz Luhrmann's *Moulin Rouge*, Tim Burton's *Sweeney Todd*, and Tom Hooper's *Les Misérables*, through the recurrent use that directors make of the metaphor of the caged bird, which underlines the constraints placed on women at the time, but leaves Victorian gender roles unquestioned. In her article about Andrew Davies'

film adaptation of Charles Dickens' *Little Dorrit*, Simonetta Falchi underscores the simplified attitude towards gender issues that this film mostly presents—regardless of a veiled reference to Miss Wade's possible homosexuality— together with its neglect of the social discourses tackled in Dickens' novel, since, according to Falchi, this adaptation mostly seeks to reproduce the glorious aura of the Victorian past. Claudia Cao focuses on *Great Expectations* as the most frequently adapted of Dickens' novels, and emphasises how fan communities rewrite literary classics, as in the case of the Twitter version of *Great Expectations*. In Claudia Cao's view, in these communities, the reader becomes a consumer as well as a producer, bringing attention to secondary characters or subplots, rewriting the novel through colloquial language, and underlining aspects such as the comic, sensational, and gothic elements of the original novel. Nonetheless, Cao also emphasises the superficial quality characterising these Neo-Victorian adaptations of *Great Expectations* emerging in the web, which, in her view, disregard the social criticism pervading the original text. In her article on Susanna White's and Cary Fukunaga's recent film adaptations of Charlotte Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre*, Sarah R. Wakefield notices how these Neo-Victorian texts regard the affair between Jane Eyre and Edward Rochester as their main focus of attention, and even though they portray the character of Bertha Mason in a pitiful way in comparison with Brontë's original text, they still tend to silence her, thus paying no heed to the centrality that early Neo-Victorian adaptations, such as Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*, had attached to Rochester's first wife.

This collection of articles is a significant contribution to the field of Neo-Victorianism, particularly because, instead of favouring a theoretical approach, like many previous compilations in this area, this volume presents a series of case studies and interpretations of Neo-Victorian texts of an eminently practical nature that put to the test the tenets of Neo-Victorianism. Likewise, this book favours a broad concept of the term Neo-Victorian, comprising all sorts of textualities set in the nineteenth-century, bridging the gaps between high and low culture, and drawing attention to processes of appropriation and self-reflexivity through a postmodern approach. However, in spite of envisioning Neo-Victorianism as encompassing any works set in the nineteenth-century, this collection overlooks prolific contemporary adaptations of the works of indispensable nineteenth-century authors, such as Jane Austen, Emily Brontë, Arthur Conan Doyle, H.G. Wells or Oscar Wilde, to name a few; it does not bestow much attention on some literary genres, such as science fiction and the detective novel, which arose precisely at the time, while it also omits the study of contemporary writers that have published works with significant Neo-Victorian traits, such as A.S. Byatt and Peter Ackroyd, or even Anne Perry and Susan Hill. And yet, this collection can be regarded as a representative compilation addressing different kinds of Neo-

Victorian textualities, and should be welcomed for hinting at the significant dualistic assumption that Neo-Victorian texts look back to the Victorian past either through a critical approach giving voice to silenced discourses at the time or with the mere aim of recreating the appealing aesthetics of the period to suit contemporary audiences.

Works Cited

- ARIAS, Rosario and Patricia PULHAM. (eds.) 2009. *Haunting and Spectrality in Neo-Victorian Fiction: Possessing the Past*. Houndmills, Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- BOEHM-SCHNITKER, Nadine and Susanne GRUSS. 2014. *Neo-Victorian Literature and Culture: Immersions and Revisitations*. London: Routledge.
- GILMOUR, Robin. 2000. *Rereading Victorian Fiction*. Houndmills, Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- GUTLEBEN, Christian. 2001. *Nostalgic Postmodernism: The Victorian Tradition and the Contemporary British Novel*. Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi.
- HEILMANN, Ann and Mark LLEWELLYN. 2010. *Neo-Victorianism: The Victorians in the Twenty-First Century, 1999-2009*. Houndmills and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- KAPLAN, Cora. 2007. *Victoriana: Histories, Fictions, Criticism*. New York: Columbia U.P.
- KUCICH, John and Dianne F. SADOFF. (eds.) 2000. *Victorian Afterlife: Postmodern Culture rewrites the Nineteenth Century*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press.