Victorian Literature and Culture (2012), **40**, 339–346.

doi:10.1017/S1060150311000416

NEO-VICTORIAN STUDIES

By Margaret D. Stetz

LONG AGO, MARGERY WILLIAMS'S *The Velveteen Rabbit* (1922) taught us that toys become real when they are loved. Literary genres, however, become real when they are parodied. The neo-Victorian novel, therefore, must now be real, for its features have become so familiar and readily distinguishable that John Crace has been able to have naughty fun at their expense in *Brideshead Abbreviated: The Digested Read of the Twentieth Century* (2010), where John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) stands as representative of the type. Crace's treatment of Fowles's first-person narrator results in a remarkable effect: the ironic commentary upon the nineteenth century from a twentieth-century vantage point that runs throughout the novel gets subjected, in turn, to ironic commentary from a twenty-first-century point-of-view:

> We could also spend many pages discussing Victorian society from a modern perspective, with recourse to such imagery as computers, but first I would like to talk again of me. It's tough being a novelist in the 1960s, unsure if your characters exist and wanting to pretend you aren't controlling their story. Yawn.
> Enough of this. Now to the Undercliff, that secret world of vaginal fecundity where Miss Woodruff walks along. And where Charles is searching for a fossil.
> 'Miss Woodruff,' he says.
> 'Mr Smithson,' she replies.
> Dark passions begin to simmer.
> 'My health means nothing,' she declares. 'I know the French Lieutenant will never return, but the shame I bear defines me.'
> Had he been born 100 years later, Charles might have recognized this as an expression of Sartrean existential angst. Instead, he felt a disconcerting swelling in his trousers and kissed her on the eyelid. (Crace 235–36)

Crace captures the chief pitfall for both writers and readers of neo-Victorian fiction: the danger of smugness, based on the inescapable circumstance of knowing more about the world in which the characters find themselves, as well as about the worlds to come, than they can ever know. But as Crace also demonstrates deftly, one's own moment in time rapidly turns

into the past and will become equally risible – narrow in its preoccupations, limited in its understanding – from the vantage point of the future. With its emphasis on forging a British literary response to such anxiety-provoking postwar French phenomena as existentialism and the *nouveau roman*, Fowles's work looks today like an intellectual time capsule of London of the 1960s, as much as a narrative about the mid-Victorians from the "modern perspective."

In parodying *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, however, John Crace never does speak of it as a "neo-Victorian" novel. At least for now, this term for the genre remains largely unused by writers, readers, reviewers, librarians, or booksellers outside of academe. Titles that might fall under this designation tend to get classified instead by these other literary communities as "historical fiction"; film and television adaptations of such works turn up under "period drama," with the particular period involved left unspecified. Yet a growing wave of scholarly volumes has appeared in the last three years, all of them referring in their titles or subtitles to neo-Victorian fiction, neo-Victorian tropes, NeoVictorian returns (with a capital "N" and no hyphen), neo-Victorianism, and even to "the neo-Victorian" as a stand-alone adjective or noun.

Just how new (or neo) this category is, even in the academic sphere, becomes clear when we consider the earlier, though still very recent, studies of related subjects that began appearing at the start of the twenty-first century. These included a series of edited volumes of scholarly essays, such as John Kucich and Dianne F. Sadoff's *Victorian Afterlife: Postmodern Culture Rewrites the Nineteenth Century* (2000); Christine L. Krueger's *Functions of Victorian Culture at the Present Time* (2002); and Miles Taylor and Michael Wolff's *The Victorians Since 1901: Histories, Representations and Revisions* (2004), along with single-authored monographs such as Cora Kaplan's *Victoriana: Histories, Fictions, Criticism* (2007) and Simon Joyce's *The Victorians in the Rearview Mirror* (2007), as well as Tony Giffone's Introduction ("Aspects of Victorian Culture in Contemporary Popular Culture: A Preface") to a 2002 issue of the journal *Mid-Atlantic Almanack* containing articles on topics from A. S. Byatt's *Possession* to adaptations of Victorian style in dress and décor, and the Introduction by David E. Latané, Jr. and Elisabeth Gruner to a special forum, titled "Ghosts of the Victorian," in the *Victorians Institute Journal* of 2003. The phenomena addressed by these important publications went by many names, but "neo-Victorian" was never the word that linked or consolidated them. If anyone could claim to have highlighted the term first in a book title, it was perhaps Daniel Candel Bormann in his *The Articulation of Science in the Neo-Victorian Novel: A Poetics (and Two Case Studies)* from 2002, though Dana Shiller had already foregrounded it in her 1997 article, "The Redemptive Past in the Neo-Victorian Novel," for the journal *Studies in the Novel*.

In an age when scholarly listservs and blogs pick up notices for academic conferences and circulate them globally, so that calls-for-papers also function as heralds of cutting-edge fields of study, the impetus for the universal adoption of a new name was probably the September 2007 conference held at the University of Exeter, "Neo-Victorianism: The Politics and Aesthetics of Appropriation." Many who did not attend the event itself nonetheless saw the announcement of it and recognized that a potentially useful label had arrived – one that could, moreover, wrap a respectable cover around such related (and fascinating) areas of Victorian-centric contemporary popular literature and culture as steampunk. The word "steampunk" bore slightly suspect associations with fetish objects, leather-and-lace bondage wear, and fantasy war-craft and thus may have seemed too cult-like to find a place in the academic curricula at some institutions, as well as too specialized in its focus. "Neo-Victorianism"

sounded both safer and broader. (For a recent take on steampunk, see Herbert Sussman's "Steampunk at Oxford.")

Almost precisely one year after the conference, neo-Victorianism had what every field nowadays seeks as an anchor – a peer-reviewed journal. Based at the University of Swansea, Wales, the *Journal of Neo-Victorian Studies* began life as an electronic publication in the autumn of 2008. In the inaugural issue, the journal's founding editor, Marie-Luise Kohlke, declared that "the necessary 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." At the same time, she demurred from attempting on her own to "provide the (still) missing definitions or delineate possible generic, chronological, and aesthetic boundaries – objectives which more properly belong to the project ahead" (Kohlke 1–2). That process began, however, later in the same issue with Mark Llewellyn's essay, "What Is Neo-Victorian Studies?" which concluded by asserting that "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" – thus, about something more challenging than the fan-friendly, consumer-driven world of the so-called "Victorian theme park." Claiming, moreover, that neo-Victorianism would "develop from and engage with the debates that continue to rage within, and in some senses sustain, the vibrant field of Victorian studies," Llewellyn's essay implicitly assured those holding academic positions in the more traditional areas of nineteenth-century literature or history that they had nothing to fear, and everything to gain, from engagement with this new endeavor (Llewellyn "What" 179–80).

How important is it that a consensus appears now to have coalesced around the use of the term "neo-Victorian," particularly in relation to literary scholarship? The past offers interesting precedents. Certainly, in late-nineteenth-century Britain, the emergence of labels such as "New Woman" and, especially, "New Woman fiction" made an extraordinary difference, not only allowing a new political and aesthetic category to form and to attract adherents (along with equally virulent detractors), but to create an impact on the public consciousness, after it was taken up and spread by journalists. It seems no coincidence that among the central figures in the current movement both to put neo-Victorianism on the map and to map its dimensions are critics who, so to speak, cut their teeth on fin-de-siècle women writers – who learned from history how and why to deploy a consistent, catchy, easy-to-remember term for their own work.

Perhaps the chief example of such a figure is Ann Heilmann, who first built a distinguished transatlantic reputation through *New Woman Fiction: Women Writing First-Wave Feminism* (2000) and *New Woman Strategies: Sarah Grand, Olive Schreiner, Mona Caird* (2004), before turning her attention to twenty-first-century Victorian (re)constructions. With Mark Llewellyn, she has produced *Neo-Victorianism: The Victorians in the Twenty-First Century, 1999–2009* (2010), the most ambitious of the book-length studies that are defining this field. Theirs is not merely a descriptive project, for it also sets its sights unambiguously on prescribing what the label "neo-Victorian" should and should not embrace. In what has already become a much-cited pronouncement, they say, "What we argue throughout this book is that the 'neo-Victorian' is *more than* historical fiction set in the nineteenth century. To be

part of the neo-Victorianism we discuss in this book, texts (literary, filmic, audio/visual) must in some respect be *self-consciously engaged with the act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision concerning the Victorians*" (4). To a greater degree than several authors of related volumes, they openly declare their debt to Linda Hutcheon and to the influence of her concept of "historiographic metafiction" from *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988). (It is no surprise that an earlier collaboration by Heilmann and Llewellyn, an edited collection of essays from 2007, was titled *Metafiction and Metahistory in Contemporary Women's Writing* and contained an essay by Llewellyn on Sarah Waters, who also figures in *Neo-Victorianism*.) For them, neo-Victorianism is far more than a mere sub-category of or footnote to postmodernism. Nevertheless, their sense of the literary world of the present is grounded in the insights of postmodern theory, and they recur often to such work, as when they remark, a propos of the British television versions of *Little Dorrit* and of Sarah Waters's *Affinity*, "The thematic connections between the Victorian 'original' and the neo-Victorian reinterpretation function once more as a telling reflection on the palimpsestuous nature of adaptation identified by Linda Hutcheon" (Heilmann and Llewellyn, *Neo-Victorianism* 244).

Yet they also diverge from their predecessors among postmodern literary critics in their lively attention to *things* – to the material culture of the nineteenth century and to the neo-Victorian objects that respond to it. When it comes to fiction, they may be on the side of restrictive definitions, wishing to exclude from the canon of neo-Victorianism novels that are "straightforward pastiche" and that employ nineteenth-century forms in "meeting a market demand but not necessarily adding anything new to our understanding of how fiction works" (23). But in terms of their interest in matters such as Victorian illustration and in the twenty-first-century book designs that both replicate and comment upon it, they are indeed big picture thinkers in both a literal and figurative sense.

If any dispute divides the growing fleet of critical studies flying under the banner of neo-Victorianism, it is over the question of whether novels and creative texts in other media must be "*more than* historical fiction set in the nineteenth century" to qualify for consideration. In *Neo-Victorian Fiction and Historical Narrative* (2010), Louisa Hadley weighs in on this by announcing at the outset, "I define neo-Victorian fiction in the broadest possible terms as contemporary fiction that engages with the Victorian era, at either the level of plot, structure, or both" (4). Later, though, she does make distinctions that put her approach in harmony with Heilmann and Llewellyn's: "Neo-Victorian fictions, then, are not merely part of the contemporary fascination with the Victorian past; they are aware of the purposes the Victorians are made to serve and . . . self-consciously comment on the political and cultural uses of the Victorians in the present" (14).

But Kate Mitchell takes up this issue from a different perspective. In *History and Cultural Memory in Neo-Victorian Fiction* (2010), her concern is less with the critical commentary upon the past that authors themselves provide and more with "the role of the reader in producing historical meaning" – the "agency" that fiction encourages and enables its audience to exercise in how and what it will remember (33). For her, neo-Victorian novels, like all works of historical fiction, are "memory texts"; they "both communicate memory – that which is already know[n] through a variety of media about the Victorian era, for example—and offer themselves as memory" (32). Mitchell's emphasis on the cultural work that historical fiction performs for a community – on "the role of the reader as the bodily means through which the past is mediated, or revived" (34) – allows her, in turn, to be more generous in admitting to the neo-Victorian fold texts that other critics might bar. *Pace* Linda Hutcheon and the

demand that "contemporary historical fiction should privilege a problematisation [sic] of representation over the portrayal of history," she rejects the assumption that neo-Victorian novels must demonstrate "an ironic playfulness that undermines even their own attempt to depict the past"; instead, she also welcomes those that operate in different modes, including "faux-Victorian novels" that "are more earnest and affectionate . . . in their representation of the Victorian past" (26).

All three of these very fine and valuable studies of the neo-Victorian field as a whole – Heilmann and Llewellyn's, Hadley's, and Mitchell's – wind up identifying a set of common tropes within the larger category of neo-Victorian fiction. The most prevalent of these involves the concept of the ghost and/or the practice of spiritualism, which they relate to the "haunting" presence of the Victorians in (post)modern life. Two other recent volumes, however, make this particular trope the focus of their analysis: *Haunting and Spectrality in Neo-Victorian Fiction: Possessing the Past* (2010), a collection of essays edited by Rosario Arias and Patricia Pulham, and Tatiana Kontou's *Spiritualism and Women's Writing: From the Fin de Siècle to the Neo-Victorian* (2009). Remarkably, there is very little overlap between them, though each one does include a chapter devoted to Michèle Roberts's *In the Red Kitchen* and each pays homage, to a greater or lesser extent, to Sarah Waters's *Affinity* as a central text for any consideration of the "spectral." Arias and Pulham explain the importance of ghostly "doubling" to neo-Victorian novels, which are always "looking backwards to the Victorian period while simultaneously exploring uncharted territories in contemporary fiction" (xxv). (Of course, their metaphor is itself a sign of "haunting and spectrality" in the scholarly sphere, as it evokes so obviously the Victorian obsession with exploration and with the activities of mapping and charting that accompanied nineteenth-century imperial travel.) Kontou, on the other hand, attempts to locate in Victorian spiritualism itself, especially as embodied by women mediums, not a passive but an active set of practices that both subverted social hierarchies and enabled experimental forms of writing. Thus, neo-Victorian novels such as *Affinity* are merely recovering what was already present in the world of the nineteenth-century séance, including "lesbian sexuality": "Waters' [sic] invention is far from anachronistic and is actually rooted in pre-existing elements of sensation fiction and spiritualism, two Victorian discourses in which transgressive and unconventional women were able to thrive, where sexual and social propriety were continuously overturned" (173) – an idea that, at the least, adds new resonance to the concept of "table-turning."

For Kontou and for the critics represented in Arias and Pulham's collection, the Victorian ghosts and other unearthly creatures that roam through novels being written now are not merely signifiers of an overriding sense of present-day grief or loss. Indeed, as Esther Saxey notes in her essay for *Haunting and Spectrality in Neo-Victorian Fiction*, Valerie Martin's *Mary Reilly* and Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* "are full of pleasurable class and gender transgressions prompted by supernatural elements" – transgressions that satisfy the contemporary reader's desire to see the "inner, psychological liberation and outer, social empowerment" of those who were assigned to the bottom of the Victorian hierarchy (60). Pleasure, however, has very little role in the volume edited by Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben, *Neo-Victorian Tropes of Trauma: The Politics of Bearing After-Witness to Nineteenth-Century Suffering* (2010). For Kohlke and Gutleben, ours is a "so-called 'trauma culture,'" in which "all individuals become (at least *in potentia*) 'lost' and traumatized others-to-themselves," afflicted not only with memories of the twentieth- and now the twenty-first-century horrors that they have endured directly, but with a consciousness of accumulated "acts

of aggravated historical violence" from the nineteenth century. How these "acts" produce "long-term cultural and political aftershocks" that keep "resonating" in neo-Victorian fiction is the subject of the essays in this volume (3). Instead of approaching neo-Victorian works, therefore, as texts engaged in postmodern irony and play, Kohlke and Gutleben situate them within the field of trauma studies, as the "traumatised [sic] subject of modernity pre/rediscovers *itself* in its manifold nineteenth-century others" (14).

But the kind of "haunting" in which these critics are interested raises a new set of questions, involving the responsibilities of those who appropriate and recreate the past. Is it, in fact, morally justifiable to constitute oneself as an "after-witness" to someone else's nightmare – to claim to be able to imagine Victorian suffering and to build a literary career out of doing so? Or is this neo-Victorian stance akin to the sometimes ghoulish and potentially exploitative interest in visiting sites of atrocities and collecting souvenirs that was itself an invention of the nineteenth-century tourist industry? Perhaps not surprisingly, given that they are offering a large group of essays dedicated to investigating this topic, Kohlke and Gutleben decide that "representing the other's trauma is *not* unethical in itself and that neo-Victorian fiction *can* assume an ethical function in 'speaking-for-the-other'" (22).

Just as Kohlke and Gutleben usefully complement the other critical studies of neo-Victorianism by emphasizing issues not highlighted to the same degree elsewhere, so they turn a brighter light on postcolonial neo-Victorian texts. The chapters that follow their Introduction show a welcome breadth in terms of geographical and cultural setting. Although the writers of these short studies focus particularly on the trauma of Victorian imperialism, they consider such diverse aspects of it as the aftermath of the 1857 Mutiny in India, the dispossession of Aboriginal peoples in Australia, and the mid-nineteenth-century famine in Ireland, all through the lens of neo-Victorian re-imaginings.

Even in this collection on trauma, however, a handful of familiar texts do recur as subjects of interest, suggesting that a canon already is forming in this very new field of neo-Victorian studies. Thus, both Georges Letissier's "Trauma by Proxy in the 'Age of Testimony': Paradoxes of Darwinism in the Neo-Victorian Novel" and Mark Llewellyn's "'Perfectly innocent, natural, *playful*': Incest in Neo-Victorian Women's Writing" include in their analyses A. S. Byatt's *Angels and Insects* – a work prominent in Kontou's *Spiritualism and Women's Writing*, as well. So, too, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* receives attention not only in Letissier's essay, but in another chapter in Kohlke and Gutleben's collection: "Apes and Grandfathers: Traumas of Apostasy and Exclusion in John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and Graham Swift's *Ever After*," by Catherine Pesso-Miquel.

Fowles's novel, which Silvana Colella, in "Olfactory Ghosts: Michel Faber's *The Crimson Petal and the White*" (from *Haunting and Spectrality in Neo-Victorian Fiction*), identifies as the point of origin for the neo-Victorian enterprise (Arias and Pulham 103), also plays an important role in the idiosyncratically titled *Victorian Turns, NeoVictorian Returns: Essays on Fiction and Culture* (2008), edited by Penny Gay, Judith Johnston, and Catherine Waters. In this *festschrift* in honor of the Australian scholar, Margaret Harris, the Victorian turns outnumber the NeoVictorian [sic] returns, with the bulk of the essays examining nineteenth-century texts in their usual nineteenth-century contexts. Nonetheless, Graham Swift once again makes an appearance, as do Peter Carey and Lloyd Jones, who figure in other neo-Victorian volumes. But Fowles also gets a chapter of his own, "*The French Lieutnant's Woman:* Goodbye to All That," in which Joseph Wiesenfarth concludes with an argument that resonates across neo-Victorian studies in general: "Fowles's attempt to give

new life to an old form is an attempt to produce a mutation in the species novel by making the form of Victorian fiction serve the purposes of life as it is now lived" (Gay, Johnston, and Waters 213).

The notion of using the Victorians to "serve the purposes of life as it is now lived" goes right to the heart of what sustains current scholarly initiatives, too, such as the *Journal of Neo-Victorian Studies*, along with the increasing numbers of book-length academic works being published under the "neo-Victorian" rubric. Many of these volumes, it seems, are being issued by the firm of Palgrave Macmillan, though Rodopi has just inaugurated its own "Neo-Victorian Series," under the editorship of Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben. Perhaps the coming years will see the major university presses – Oxford, Cambridge, Harvard, Yale, and others – welcoming this new area of study just as warmly.

Whether we employ the broader or the narrower definitions of the genre, neo-Victorian texts are everywhere, inside and outside of the academy, and most certainly throughout both transatlantic and postcolonial literary and popular culture. They are also, however, where none of the authors of the current volumes have been interested in looking – that is, in texts designed for the Young Adult and children's markets. "Children and the idea of children's stories," as Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn remark perceptively in *Neo-Victorianism*, "have become more prominent in recent neo-Victorian fiction" (156). But ironic, playful, appreciative, and/or traumatic versions of Victorianism abound in literature for younger readers, as well, and they deserve critical attention alongside those novels sold to adults that take children as their material. The Victorians themselves never upset this hierarchy, assigning second-class status to writings for children and to the writers – mainly women – responsible for such works. Can we not transgress, in this matter? Must we continue to be such *good* Victorians ourselves?

University of Delaware

WORKS CONSIDERED

Arias, Rosario, and Patricia Pulham, eds. *Haunting and Spectrality in Neo-Victorian Fiction: Possessing the Past*. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

Bormann, Daniel Candel. *The Articulation of Science in the Neo-Victorian Novel: A Poetics (and Two Case Studies)*. Bern: Peter Lang, 2002.

Crace, John. *Brideshead Abbreviated: The Digested Read of the Twentieth Century*. London: Random House, 2010.

Gay, Penny, Judith Johnston, and Catherine Waters, eds. *Victorian Turns, NeoVictorian Returns: Essays on Fiction and Culture*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2008.

Giffone, Tony. "Aspects of Victorian Culture in Contemporary Popular Culture: A Preface." *Mid-Atlantic Almanack: The Journal of the Mid-Atlantic Popular/American Culture Association* 11 (2002): 1–4.

Hadley, Louisa. *Neo-Victorian Fiction and Historical Narrative: The Victorians and Us*. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

Heilmann, Ann. *New Woman Fiction: Women Writing First-Wave Feminism*. Houndmills: Macmillan/New York: St. Martin's, 2000.

———. *New Woman Strategies: Sarah Grand, Olive Schreiner, Mona Caird*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2004.

Heilmann, Ann, and Mark Llewellyn. *Neo-Victorianism: The Victorians in the Twenty-First Century, 1999–2009*. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.
Joyce, Simon. *The Victorians in the Rearview Mirror*. Athens: Ohio UP, 2007.
Kaplan, Cora. *Victoriana: Histories, Fictions, Criticism*. New York: Columbia UP, 2007.
Kohlke, Marie-Luise. "Introduction: Speculations in and on the Neo-Victorian Encounter." *Neo-Victorian Studies* 1.1 (Autumn 2008): 1–18. Web. 10 Oct. 2011.
Kohlke, Marie-Luise, and Christian Gutleben, eds. *Neo-Victorian Tropes of Trauma: The Politics of Bearing After-Witness to Nineteenth-Century Suffering*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2010.
Kontou, Tatiana. *Spiritualism and Women's Writing: From the Fin de Siècle to the Neo-Victorian*. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.
Llewellyn, Mark. "What Is Neo-Victorian Studies?" *Neo-Victorian Studies* 1:1 (Autumn 2008): 164–85. Web. 10 Oct. 2011.
Mitchell, Kate. *History and Cultural Memory in Neo-Victorian Fiction: Victorian Afterimages*. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.
Shiller, Dana. "The Redemptive Past in the Neo-Victorian Novel." *Studies in the Novel* 29.4 (1997): 538–60.
Sussman, Herbert. "Steampunk at Oxford." *Victorian Literature and Culture* 39.1 (2011): 278–84.
Taylor, Miles, and Michael Wolff, eds. *The Victorians Since 1901: Histories, Representations and Revisions*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2004.