

HAUNTING AND SPECTRALITY IN NEO-VICTORIAN FICTION: POSSESSING THE PAST

Rosario Arias and Patricia Pulham, eds.

Basington: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

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The increasing proliferation of Neo-Victorian publications bears witness to the contemporary fascination with the Victorian tradition. Generally speaking, Neo-Victorian studies have focused their attention on the ongoing debate on nostalgia and the notions of parody and pastiche. Rosario Arias and Patricia Pulham's co-edited volume, tellingly entitled *Haunting and Spectrality in Neo-Victorian Fiction: Possessing the Past* (2010), undoubtedly makes a significant contribution to this field of research. As they proudly state, their "collection of essays [is] the first to focus on the neo-Victorian novel against the backdrop of the master trope of spectrality and haunting" (2010: xi). In doing so they favour those approaches which take postmodern contemporary fiction as a form of "refraction" (Gutleben and Onega 2004), that is to say, they privilege "the assumption of a dialectical process between the canonical and the postmodernist text" (2004: 7). The book's main aim is precisely the exploration of the "dynamic relationship" (xxv), between the Victorian tradition and the contemporary present.

This collection of essays offers an invaluable introduction which broadens our knowledge of the different approaches to contemporary representations of the Victorian tradition and the tropes of haunting and spectrality. They usefully remind us of the distinction between Sally Shuttleworth's term 'retro-Victorian fiction' and Dana Shiller's 'neo-Victorian fiction': while the former aims at reviving the past, the latter is rooted in revisionism and "reinvention" (xii-xiii). Then, Arias and

Pulham bring to mind David Lowenthal's "mistrust of nostalgia" to argue that "we no longer seek in the past a refuge from the present; instead we excavate the past to expose its 'iniquities and indignities'" (xiv). This interpretation lays the ground for their link of the neo-Victorian with Sigmund Freud's notion of the uncanny. As they state, in the neo-Victorian novel, the Victorian trace functions as a "revenant, a ghostly visitor from the past that infiltrates our present" (xv). Thus, in their return from the past, these Victorian spectral traces open up an illuminating dialogue with the present, while also problematizing set conceptions about both the Victorian tradition and the contemporary present (xv). For their argument to gather strength, they offer an illuminating overview of the so-much quoted Jacques Derrida's *Spectres of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International* (1993), Nicolas Abraham's and Maria Torok's theory of phantom (1994), and Julian Wolfrey's *Victorian Hauntings: Spectrality, Gothic, the Uncanny and Literature* (2002). This explanation is of utmost significance, since these theories frame most of the essays of the collection.

A case in point is that most of the essays collected in this volume locate, to some extent, the site of spectrality in the very textuality of the impressive scope of neo-Victorian novels they analyze. The essays provide a detailed analysis of the narrative voices, perspectives, metaphors and a wide range of intertextual allusions to other Victorian texts, through which they smoothly draw the readers' attention towards the spectral networks and wavering borders that each of the neo-Victorian novels under consideration interweave and challenge. To give but one example, in keeping with Julia Kristeva's description of temporality (cyclical and monumental) and female subjectivity, Agnieszka Golda-Derejczyk provides a precise narratological analysis of Roberts's revisionist 1990 novel *In the Red Kitchen*. This examination allows her to associate Roberts's text with "an echo-chamber" (56). But it is the second chapter, by Mark Llewellyn, that most openly deals with the spectral nature of the neo-Victorian text itself. He makes use of Isobel Armstrong's reading of the glass motif to compare the neo-Victorian text with "a glass permitting a double-viewed reflection" (26). Commenting on the ever-growing contemporary interest in Victorian spiritualism, he goes so far as to assert that "we are enacting a specifically nineteenth-century preoccupation with the spectral, s(p)ecular and reflective possibilities of the historical mirror, whether intact or crack'd" (25). That is to say, we seem to be looking for "a version of the Victorian afterlife" (25) in the neo-Victorian text. What I find most interesting is that, contrary to the main idea put forward in the introduction, whereby great emphasis was placed on the Victorian as the spectre of contemporary fiction, Llewellyn identifies the spectre of the neo-Victorian text with the contemporary novelist (35). This parallelism provides an insight into the paradoxical situation of the neo-Victorian text, whose transparency and attempt to find a source of faith

in the text is problematized by the novelist's metafictional comments and the use of a cryptomimetic method. In this view, neo-Victorianism becomes a source of both faith and deception.

The main advantages of the dialectical process taking place at the neo-Victorian text is that this two-way dialogue opens a door for the release of "occluded secrets, silences and mysteries which return and reappear in a series of spectral/ textual traces" (xx). In this sense, Arias and Pulham's interest in the tropes of haunting and spectrality may be said to follow the line of research of trauma studies which has also been simultaneously undertaken by other critics such as Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben in their latest collection of essays (co-edited), *Neo-Victorian Tropes of Trauma: the Politics of Bearing-After Witness to Nineteenth-Century Suffering* (2010). As has been clearly shown by Kohlke and Gutleben, Neo-Victorian fiction "gives historical non-subjects a future by restoring their traumatic pasts to cultural memory" (2010: 31). The second section of Arias and Pulham's book is devoted precisely to this idea. More specifically, it tackles the issues of gender politics and the supernatural in a series of neo-Victorian novels in which "Spectral Women" take the narrative lead and focus. In "Repetition and Eternity: the Spectral and Textual Continuity in Michèle Roberts's *In the Red Kitchen*", Golda-Derejczyk centers on the positive and productive results of the novel's introduction of the themes of "spiritualism, mediumship, and writing as self-description" (47). She concentrates on the shared experience of abuse and oppression that three female characters of Roberts's novel undergo. Golda-Derejczyk wittingly points out that it is the mediumistic skills of the Victorian character of the novel that open a glimpse of hope for these three characters (46). Here, spiritualism becomes not only a powerful channel of communication between them but also a form of passive writing (53). In contrast to Golda-Derejczyk's optimistic observations, Esther Saxey provides an insight into the paradoxical situation of the figure of the ghost and the uncanny double in both Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* (1996) and Valerie Martin's *Mary Reilly* (1990). Her essay addresses the ways in which these novels "employ the ghost and the monster to toy with the idea of liberation, but then to undermine it" (80). As Saxey perceptively explains at the beginning of the essay, the supernatural element has traditionally been used in both the Victorian and the neo-Victorian period as a mode through which sexual repression and social oppression could be expressed and denounced (58-59). Yet, drawing on Foucault's 'repressive theory', Saxey provides an illuminating discussion of the novels' use of the figure of Hannah Cullwick as the uncanny double and Abraham and Torok's figure of the phantom. This allusion allows Saxey to introduce several themes and complexities which these two novels bring to the fore: is it legitimate to exploit the sexual attraction that the maids held for their masters in order to obtain employment? In stressing the ambivalence and double-bind meanings of the use of the supernatural in both novels,

Saxey argues that these novels avoid the misleading self-gratifying ending of the neo-Victorian liberation plot while, at the same time, bringing to the fore the social hypocrisy and gender problems faced by women in the nineteenth century; problems which, in one way or another, continue to haunt modern culture.

The last section of the collection, entitled “Ghosts in the City”, covers the textual depiction of mid-nineteenth-century London in neo-Victorian fiction as a place haunted by repressed fears and anxieties from the past. I would like to highlight the lucid way in which Arias combines her close-reading of Matthew Kneale’s *Sweet Thames* (1992) and Clare Clark’s *The Great Stink* (2005) with Abraham and Torok’s theory of the crypt and Sarah Dillon’s metaphor of “the palimpsest of the mind” (148). Firstly, she equates the city of London with “a cryptic space” (147). Thus, the novels’ “maze-like” (143) and “verticalized” (144) depiction of the city is compared with the main characters’ unconscious minds. Besides, she also draws our attention to the way, in which London’s architectural depiction reflects Victorian society. Finally, her interpretation of the river Thames as a fluid space which blurs all binary oppositions between absence/presence, past/present, cleanliness/pollution attests to Arias’s identification of Victorian London with “a ‘phantom’ in neo-Victorianism” (155).

All in all, the editors ought to be congratulated on the high standard of the publication. It provides useful information on a wide-range of theories and neo-Victorian novels. Arias and Pulham have handsomely gathered eight essays which demonstrate the enormous critical potential of the tropes of haunting and spectrality in the field of Neo-Victorian Studies. Furthermore, the analysis of these tropes offered in the collection has proved to be a useful tool to expose and problematize both Victorian and contemporary gender, sexual, and social politics. It is for this reason that scholars engaged, not only with neo-Victorian fiction, but also with gender and trauma studies, should find this volume worth reading and inspiring.

Works cited

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Received: 18 June 2011