

Rosario Arias and Patricia Pulham, eds. 2010: *Haunting and Spectrality in Neo-Victorian Fiction. Possessing the Past*. London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan. xxvi + 197 pp. ISBN: 978-0-230-20557-4

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Ghosts, ghost stories and the tropes of haunting and spectrality are recurrent topics in contemporary literature and criticism. In 2010, the year of the book under review, we witnessed the publication of Peter Ackroyd's *The English Ghost. Spectres through Time*; Shane McCorristine's *Spectres of the Self: Thinking about Ghosts and Ghost-Seeing in England, 1750-1920*, and Andrew Smith's *The Ghost Story, 1840-1920. A Cultural History*, as well as the collection of essays edited by María del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren, *Popular Ghosts: The Haunted Spaces of Everyday Culture*. Similarly, proof of scholarly interest in Neo-Victorian studies is found in the proliferation of critical volumes on the topic, which, in the same year, 2010, included: Marie-Louise Kohlke's and Christian Gutleben's *Neo-Victorian Tropes of Trauma: The Politics of Bearing After-witness to Nineteenth-Century Suffering*; Louisa Hadley's *Neo-Victorian Fiction and Historical Narrative: The Victorians and Us*; Kate Mitchell's *History and Cultural Memory in Neo-Victorian Fiction: Victorian Afterimages*; and Ann Heilman and Mark Llewellyn's *Neo-Victorianism: The Victorians in the Twenty-First Century, 1999-2009*. Rosario Arias and Patricia Pulham, in *Haunting and Spectrality in Neo-Victorian Fiction. Possessing the Past*, have successfully combined these trends by bringing together, in the eight chapters of their volume, scholars who apply a variety of perspectives on the trope of the ghost, and on the notions of haunting and spectrality, to the study of Neo-Victorian texts.

Haunting and spectrality were not only recurrent notions in Victorian fiction but intrinsic aspects of the socio-cultural atmosphere of the times, as Julian Wolfreys demonstrated in his influential *Victorian Hauntings: Spectrality, Gothic, the Uncanny and Literature* (2001). It is not therefore surprising that they have become inherent components in Neo-Victorian fiction. As was the case in nineteenth-century literature, ghosts and spectres proliferate in Neo-Victorian texts; furthermore, the very essence of these writings is or implies a spectral structure in the sense that they invoke the haunting effect of history and of the past on the present.

Ghosts, spectrality and haunting are tropes that have been approached from different theoretical perspectives. In a highly illuminating introduction, the editors of the volume review theories of spectrality, highlighting the usefulness of Sigmund Freud's concept

of the “uncanny”, and revising Jacques Derrida’s writings on “hauntology” in *Spectres of Marx* (1994), as well as Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok’s “concept of the phantom”, as delineated in *The Shell and Kernel* (1994). The editors carefully elucidate the different perceived functions of the trope: while according to Derrida we should learn to invoke and engage actively with the ghost, in Abram and Torok’s view the spectre and the transgenerational trauma it conveys need to be exorcised. These theoretical reflections are subsequently evoked, employed or challenged in the different essays of the volume.

The book is divided into four sections, ‘Histories and Hauntings’, ‘Spectral Women’, ‘Sensing the Past’, and ‘Ghosts in the City’. This division seems appropriate, given that the trope of the ghost is especially useful when revising and destabilising traditional conceptions of time (‘Sensing the Past’) and space (‘Ghosts in the City’), and that ghosts and spectres have been literally and metaphorically invoked in relation to women’s slippery identity and liminal condition (‘Spectral Women’), as well as in detecting historical traces and erasures (‘Histories and Hauntings’).

Neo-Victorian novels can be considered, among other things, as an attempt at exorcising the past, as well as a reflection on its continuity in the present and/or a way of projecting the future. Therefore, they overtly play with the ‘spectre’ of time. Each of the contributors to *Haunting and Spectrality in Neo-Victorian Fiction*, despite the subtitle of the volume (*Possessing the Past*), has chosen to emphasize one of these temporal dimensions and to study the different uses of time in Neo-Victorian novels. A reading of the collection as a whole leaves us with the impression that it is precisely this potential destabilisation of temporal markers that endows the Neo-Victorian text with its spectral quality.

Francis O’Gorman inaugurates the section of the book on ‘Histories and Hauntings’ with his chapter ‘Salley Vickers, Venice, and the Victorians’. Through his study of Vickers’s novel *Miss Garnet’s Angel* (2000), he contends that Neo-Victorian fiction in particular, and contemporary novels in general, convey a celebration of the past —the nineteenth-century, the Victorian and the historical— as well as of the present, or rather “a belief in the continuing vibrancy, the living ambiance of the past” (20). Of particular interest is O’Gorman’s study of the connection between the evocation of Ruskin, and of his writings on angels, and the study of the ghostly presence of these figures in Vickers’s novel.

In the second chapter of the volume, ‘Spectrality, S(p)ecularity, and Textuality: Or, Some Reflections in the Glass’, Mark Llewellyn analyses John Harwood’s books *The Ghost Writer* (2004) and *The Séance* (2008), Charles Palliser’s *The Unburied* (1999), Jem Poster’s *Courting Shadows* (2002), and Sarah Waters’s *Affinity* (1999), demonstrating that Neo-Victorian fiction and metahistorical novels in general are as much concerned with the present historical moment as they are with the nineteenth century (40). His intention is to “provide a reflection on our sense of belatedness and the need to write out or exorcize our Victorian spirits in the contemporary sphere” (24). Llewellyn’s essay takes into account Derrida’s thinking and the influence of psychoanalysis but it is also sustained by the work of prestigious Victorian scholars such as Isobel Armstrong and Julian Wolfreys.

The section of the book devoted to ‘Spectral Women’ opens with Agnieszka Golda-Derejczyk’s chapter ‘Repetition and Eternity: The Spectral and Textual Continuity in Michèle Roberts’s *In the Red Kitchen*’. This reading emphasizes the bond between writing and living, and the life-preserving potential of writing, thus joining, in the Kristevan sense of monumental temporality, past and present, and pointing to a future in which women will be endowed with the history, or histories, that they have traditionally been deprived of:

The bond between writing and living, acknowledging one’s life experience, seems thus to operate in *In the Red Kitchen* on two related levels. The first functions as spiritualism where the mediumistic activity of passive writing is literally bound up with the act of existing, approving the visiting spirit’s existence, spirit’s materialization. The second functions as the metaphorical representation of individual women’s nostalgia for giving themselves a history, having their life stories acknowledged, even though only in a fictionalized form. (53)

This rather hopeful reading of the potentialities of spiritualist *séances* and the mediumistic activity of (supposedly passive) writing which, according to Golda-Derejczyk, Michèle Roberts relates to “women as subjects *in* and *of* history” (46; emphasis in original), is not always shared by the rest of the contributors to the volume. Dwelling on the notions of “the uncanny double” and on Torok and Abraham’s concept of the “phantom”, Esther Saxey, in ‘The Maid, the Master, her Ghost and his Monster: Alias Grace and Mary Reilly’, argues that the supernatural in Victorian and Neo-Victorian fiction serves a rather ambivalent function in relation to issues such as class, gender and sexuality, since despite criticising restriction, repression and oppression, it does not overtly support liberation nor defend transgression. Silvana Colella’s contribution, included in the section ‘Sensing the Past’, offers a highly persuasive and original analysis of the spectral, uncanny nature of smells, whose trace is undeniable but which defy our possibilities of representation. In her study of Michael Faber’s *The Crimson Petal and the White* (2002), Colella contends that Faber’s awareness of the duplicity inherent in smells—both material and immaterial spectral ambassadors from a past that remains difficult to name—has interesting bearings on the epistemological questions posed by contemporary historical novels (92). Colella is here aligning herself with Saxey’s view of spectrality as a problematic, contradictory and ambivalent agent in the texts in which it appears.

Ann Heilmann offers a study of various creative adaptations of Henry James’s masterpiece *The Turn of the Screw* (1908). Heilmann convincingly demonstrates how Joyce Carol Oates’s ‘Accursed Inhabitants of the House of Bly’ (1994), Sara Waters’s *Affinity* (1999), Alejandro Amenábar’s *The Others* (2001) and A.N. Wilson’s *A Jealous Ghost* (2005), despite belonging to different generic categories (Gothic tale, Neo-Victorian lesbian Gothic, supernatural film and litcrit campus-thriller) are all structured around six categories related to crises or transformations at the turn of the century: social architecture, the family, the question of (narrative) authority, femininity, sexuality and

identity (129). Although Colella's and Heilmann's essays comprise the section 'Sensing the Past', both demonstrate how the spectral is used to offer a reflection on the present.

The chapters included in the last section of the book, 'Ghosts in the City', reveal how cities are haunted by phantoms that subvert time dichotomies as traditionally conceived. Thus, Rosario Arias and Patricia Pulham deal with ghosts and spectres in the city of London. Michel de Certeau asserted in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1988) that the modern city is haunted by the past, and this is precisely what Rosario Arias and Patricia Pulham demonstrate in their respective chapters, both dealing with ghosts and spectres in the city of London. Arias analyses the spectral traces of the river Thames and of the mid-nineteenth-century sanitary movement in the neo-Victorian novels *Sweet Thames* (1992), by Matthew Kneale, and *The Great Stink* (2005), by Clare Clark. In a well documented chapter, underpinned by the theoretical contributions of Freud, Derrida, and Abraham and Torok, Arias studies how both novels offer a verticalised image of the city of London that emphasises the connectedness of past and present, above and below, inside and outside, the public and the private, and that exposes both the personal and the cultural traumas haunting its inhabitants. These two neo-Victorian novels as interpreted by Arias offer a reflection on the river and on the sanitation movement that convey an image of London "as a storehouse of concealed secrets and unresolved conflicts . . . an encrypted structure, haunted by its traces" (148).

While Arias finds in the portrayal of the river Thames and of the sewer, as well as in allusions to the sanitation movement, traces of history in the modern city that function as a powerful metaphor for the return of the repressed and the uncanny (144), Patricia Pulham opts for focusing on the spectral presence and haunting effect of the Golem in Ian Sinclair's *White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings* (1987) and in Peter Ackroyd's *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* (1994). The presence of the Golem, Pulham argues, conveys the intrusion of Jewish history and undermines the centrality of the Ripper narrative in both novels. Pulham informs her study with Amy Elias's notion of "metahistorical romances" and Dana Shiller's use of Linda Hutcheon's concept of "historiographic metafiction", and convincingly contends that the Golem represents "the retrieval, and unrepresentability of the past in the neo-Victorian novel" (160), "both a challenge to historical 'truth' and narrative realism, embodying the potential for textual and historical disruption" (177).

The collection *Haunting and Spectrality in Neo-Victorian Fiction* is an enlightening and up-to-date contribution to Neo-Victorian studies which, by focusing on the recurrent trope of the spectre and spirituality, discloses as much about Victorian history and literature as it does about our own contemporary world. It exposes how the traumas, repressions and disturbances that haunted the nineteenth-century have not been exorcised in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The widely different, and at times contradictory, visions of spectrality and haunting offered by the contributors—like the complex relation between the literary phantom and the past that it evokes, the present it haunts and the future it projects—, can be read as reflecting the slippery nature of their subject, the ghost: a notion that resists definition but, as the editors and contributors to the volume successfully show, is hardly an exhausted topic.

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