

CO-OPTING THE CRINOLINE: NEO-VICTORIAN FEMINISM AND THE POLITICS OF APPROPRIATIVE MOURNING

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[George Eliot] proposes a view of the writing of history as an act of repetition in which the present takes possession of the past and liberates it for a present purpose, thereby exploding the continuum of history.

J. Hillis Miller ('Narrative and History' 471)

The latter years of the twentieth century saw the flourishing of a literary sub-genre that has come to be known as neo-Victorianism. Engaged in a project of rewriting, reconstructing, or rediscovering the nineteenth century, these novels often identify themselves as direct descendents of postmodernist fiction. They display a self-conscious awareness of the constructedness of history and historiography, self-reflexivity, and a tendency towards ludic intertextuality, all characteristics of what Linda Hutcheon has called 'historiographic metafiction' ('Pastime' 474), now itself an indispensable term. Such fiction, Hutcheon notes, 'problematize(s) the entire question of historical knowledge' ('Pastime' 474), and it is this which differentiates it from 'straight' or 'representative' historical fiction, a genre of which the Victorians themselves were particularly fond. Emerging, as it has, from theoretical discourses shaped by the radicalisation of gender politics that occurred in the second half of the twentieth century, and looking back as it does to a period now primarily remembered for a repressive social and moral orthodoxy (which, of course, tends to elide its many incipient 'liberal' sensibilities), neo-Victorian fiction has proven fertile soil for latter-twentieth century feminist authors and critics. Coming after modernism's drive to, as Simon Joyce suggests, 'define the Victorian period and thereby to declare it definitively nonmodern and utterly dead' (qtd. in Krueger xv), postmodernist engagement with the era has sought to resurrect the politically sensitive past in order to examine and interrogate it. For some feminists, this endeavour has been tied to a sense of a discovery of the loss of heritage: a forgotten, incomplete or unconsummated process of mourning for feminine creative precursors.

John Kucich and Diane Sadoff argue that 'rewritings of Victorian culture have flourished . . . because the postmodern fetishizes notions of cultural emergence' (xv). The process of mourning can also involve a fetishisation of the lost object. In these terms, could postmodernist literary feminism, and its project of resurrecting and/or recreating Victorian women's creative products (actual, unacknowledged, or imagined), tend towards a fetishisation of the

emergence of a vital feminine artistic sensibility as a part of this process? The recuperative project that arguably began with Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's now iconic 1979 study of Victorian women's literature, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, has proven an immensely valuable one, enabling, as Simon Joyce puts it, 'a fully fledged narrative (or multiple narratives) of Victorian otherness to be glimpsed beneath the surface, as it were, of our understanding of the period itself' (5–6). However, without devaluing the highly significant achievements of this movement, it is important to understand its implications for our reading—and rewritings—of the Victorians; and in particular to be aware of the impulse, in mourning, towards appropriation: as J. Hillis Miller observes, 'though the past does not have a fixed "meaning", I may give it meaning in the way I appropriate it for the present' ('Narrative and History' 468).

The rise of second-wave feminism(s) from the 1960s on engendered a literary and theoretical drive to recuperate nineteenth-century female authors, texts, tropes and figures, which a new, gendered historical awareness designated as 'lost'. From its inception the project was, one senses, deeply emotionally invested with a commingling of pride, restrained (and sometimes unrestrained) rancour, and a palpable sense of grief for those feminine voices silenced by the patriarchal apparatus of the Victorian era. Those engaged in the unearthing of women's literary potential appeared to experience these deaths—the deaths of innumerable individual creative consciousnesses, as well as a larger collective feminine creativity—as a recent (or recently discovered) bereavement. This newfound awareness of loss opened up a space for the mourning of these figures and ideas, and generated what the moral philosopher Adam Smith calls a sense of 'an unpayable debt to the dead', 'to whom we owe the tribute of fellow feeling' (qtd. in Schor 35–36). The sense of debt felt by contemporary women writers to their unacknowledged forebears also initiates 'a newly energized circulation of sympathy through a social body' (Wilt 823)—in this case, the social body of literary feminism—leading to the production of texts sympathetic to, and in mourning for, their literary ancestry. This grieving finds expression in neo-Victorian fiction that eulogises those persons, texts and ideas silenced by Victorian patriarchy, as well as paying tribute to those who resisted its dominant ideologies by writing subversively. As part of a therapeutic process of mourning brought on by the realisation of lost female creative potential, 'the processes of historical reconstruction themselves become attempts to bridge the gap and reconstitute the lost past. Representation thus becomes a substitute for a living connection to what is prized in bygone eras' (Holmes 53). But these novels are often also elegies to unwritten women's texts and to the 'lost canon'; and, in this sense, they mourn not only the lost, but also the never-known.

The process of mourning necessarily entails the construction of an idea or simulacrum of what is no longer present, and this process can often result in idealisation of the dead—'there is an assumption of the deceased being unique and special' (Walter 80). In the attempt to retrieve matrilineal forebears, there is

the possibility—or danger—of overwriting (or adapting) the life and work of the departed, of retrospectively imposing a consolatory fiction, which we, who must live, act, create, and strive to be heard in the present, find politically practicable. In so doing, self-identified ‘postmodernists’ in particular lay themselves open to charges of what Jameson calls ‘project[ing] contemporary relevance onto history’ (19). The efficacy of this appropriative and, paradoxically, effacing gesture is, perhaps, intensified when the mourner seeks to represent a historically silenced other, since they may claim a twofold right to be heard: they speak not only for the dead, but also for those who were not heard in life. Since Victorian women were largely denied the use of their own voices, a consequence of creative and political occlusion, ‘their’ posthumous narratives acquire, for us, a political privilege; they thus constitute an example of ‘the dead as a site of moral authority’ (Wilt 823). Indeed, most of the heroines of neo-Victorian author Sarah Waters’s novels go one further: as Victorian lesbians, they face a threefold silencing, and Waters clearly relishes the opportunity to undo historical wrongs, bringing her characters to vivid life as articulate, ambitious and passionate women. Waters’s novels thus stake their claim in the contemporary cultural landscape as successful examples of the project of ‘recaptur[ing] the past in ways that evoke its spirit and do honor to the dead and silenced’ (Shiller 546).

Indeed, this would appear to be one of the central enterprises of the feminist recuperative project. Clearly, however, one cannot bestow a voice on the dead—one can only impose, mimic, or imitate, much like the female Victorian mediums who were seen, in their passive femininity, to be fitting conduits for the transmission of otherworldly voices.¹ This form of mourning could be seen as a hospitable gesture—the offer of a voice to the voiceless. Like most hospitable gestures, though, the offer is imbricated in a multiplicity of inferences and assumptions, the most significant being the implied gift-qualifier: ‘I give my voice to you to so that you may say what I want you to say’. Like the ever-shifting maternal dynamic, the relationship between heritage—what is past, but kept alive—and the living embodiment or progeny of that heritage is fraught with tensions and expectations. It is these tensions, perhaps, as much as the injustices they acknowledge, that lend many neo-Victorian texts a sense of political-historical urgency, and a discernible tendency to self-reflexiveness that, in turn, drives the genre to continuously re-examine its own contradictions.

These works do not only look backwards: they are hospitable to—they invite—readings that connect the Victorian past to the historical and political present. Most often this bridging or linking of the past and present functions to highlight similarities between the Victorians and ourselves, thus serving as a warning of the potential recurrence, or haunting, of insidious patriarchal ideology. As Shiller notes, ‘recycling past lives and past texts serves as a constant reminder that we are not alone, that we are always accompanied by the ghosts of bygone

days' (555). In this respect, neo-Victorian texts build on the work undertaken first by Virginia Woolf and later by Gilbert and Gubar (as well as numerous others since then) in calling attention to the persistence of the pernicious ghost of the 'angel in the house', the iconic figure of perfect Victorian womanhood derived from Coventry Patmore's 1854 poem, that Woolf famously exhorted women to exorcise. Very far from dead, however, this ideal of femininity has proven remarkably resilient throughout the twentieth century. In an attempt to draw attention to her influence, feminist authors have taken literally Woolf's assertion that 'a woman writing thinks back through her mothers' (101), creating neo-Victorian heroines and texts that both resonate with contemporary readers and—often, but not always—claim some degree of historical authenticity (such as Margaret Atwood's fictionalised account of a woman convicted for murder in 1843, *Alias Grace*). In so doing, however, it has sometimes proven difficult to negotiate the double trap of creating either twentieth-century heroines forced into crinolines, or characters who by their very nature are anachronistic, 'un-Victorian'—the aberrant, such as Angela Carter's winged bird-woman Fevvers in *Nights at the Circus* (1984); the marginalised, like Waters's criminals, cross-dressers and lesbians, or Michel Faber's pornography-writing prostitute Sugar in *The Crimson Petal and the White* (2002); or the simply monstrous, as in the case of Peter Ackroyd's psychotic serial killer Lizzie in *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* (1995).

Judith Wilt has noted that 'The history of elegy was once a regression from "strong mourners" who made death make all things new to "weak mourners" unmade by the phenomenon of death' (824). It requires no great theoretical leap to take this dichotomy to its next logical manifestation, that of masculine and feminine mourning. Particularly for the Victorians, but continuing into our own era, mourning has been viewed primarily as the province of the female, and an innately feminine activity; as Walter notes, '[T]he nineteenth century identified grief as a properly feminine condition' (178). The process of feminist literary mourning I have described here might then be considered peculiarly culturally appropriate, a fitting expression of collective grief which simultaneously attempts to legitimise a narrative space for the reconstruction of the lost voice or subject. Subverting both the type of the 'weak, unmade' female mourner, and the notion that death signifies an end to creation, neo-Victorian fiction brings something new out of the grieving process, suggesting that 'though we cannot accurately reproduce the past, there is much to be gained by trying' (Shiller 551). However, along this path lie a number of formidable challenges—literary, representational, ethical, and political. An awareness of these challenges, and a robust, ongoing critical discussion of the role such works play in our approaches to the Victorians, will only become more important if this innovative genre continues to grow in popularity, commercial importance, and critical stature. For those interested in the recuperation of female voices, in particular, the neo-Victorian raises significant questions. Why does the figure of the silenced

woman continue to loom large in the feminist psyche, and what does the Victorian angel symbolise, more than thirty years after she was supposedly liberated? And, perhaps more importantly, is this unprecedented focus on the Victorian in fact a form of retreat—a retrogressive obsession with the glorification of past battles and heroines, and a welcome distraction from the immense challenges presented to female autonomy by the resurgence of religious and social fundamentalisms and increasing global insecurity?

Simon Joyce argues that ‘As an age of contradiction, [the Victorian era] was neither a good nor a bad thing, not something that needs to be mourned or derided’ (15), but this notion is far from universally accepted. Victorianism remains present enough to continue to incite strong responses, as evidenced by the increasing numbers of authors and readers drawn to rewritings of a cultural moment that we feel, as the recently bereaved often do, both close to and yet also distanced from. This paper has explored one facet of this relationship between the dead and the living, a cultural moment in which twentieth-century women writers have felt particularly close to their Victorian counterparts. In so doing, it has attempted to delineate some of the dangers of this perceived closeness. Do these works, as J. Hillis Miller says in speaking of Derrida’s ‘memorials or works of mourning for others’, ‘say the best that can be said for the dead and work to ensure their survival’ (197), or do they rather speak over the dead, ensuring the survival of what we require them to be? Frederick Holmes sees the ‘historiographical tactic’ of ‘adapting our images of the past to our needs in the present’ (55) as essentially benign, even beneficial; and, of course, this has often been the case. It is true, also, that deployment of such ‘historiographical tactics’ is inevitable as long as we relate history to ourselves and vice versa. It becomes even more important, therefore, to continue our attempts to become aware of and capable of interrogating such processes, and to explore the social, political and critical implications of this particular mode of literary-historical interpretation.

NOTES

¹ Thanks go to my colleague Andrew Williamson for suggesting this connection; he in turn credits Alex Owen’s *The Darkened Room*.

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