



Simonetta Falchi – Greta Perletti –
Maria Isabel Romero Ruiz (eds.)
Victorianomania.
Reimagining, Refashioning and
Rewriting Victorian Literature
and Culture

Milan, Franco Angeli, 2015, 205 pp.

As Lotman stated, cultures do not live in complete isolation: the exchange between past and present, which overcomes even geographical barriers, is inevitable, and its outcomes unpredictable. Our contemporary culture makes no exception. We are drawn to the rediscovery of a past which does not want to be forgotten: *Victorianomania. Reimagining, Refashioning and Rewriting Victorian Literature and Culture* intends to prove it by examining the varied ramifications of Neo-Victorianism in literature and popular culture.

Neo-Victorianism is not a passive reiteration (no adaptation can be) of already-exploited Victorian themes, recycled and emptied of their force, but a new reading, inevitably shaped by the fusion of contemporaneity and past, where the Victorian Age mediates and filters issues of our times.

With the raise of interest in the Victorian Age, some solid academic contributions have become the core of academic research: Hailmann and Llewellyn's *Neo-Victorianism. The Victorians in the Twenty-First Century* traced a path which still guides and orients research towards a precise ensemble of literary and non-literary works, united by the common



focus of «(re)interpretation, (re) discovery and (re)vision» (9) of Victorian times, themes and issues; Kaplan's *Victoriana: Histories, Fictions, Criticism*, and Gutleben and Kohlke's *Neo-Victorian Series* are also among the pillars of the field.

The force with which the Victorian age has overcome its historical borders and permeated our times is surely worthy of reflection, and the title of the book eloquently suggests an interpretation: the term *Victorianomania* clearly defines the modality of Victorian fascination on contemporary culture as a mania, an urge which, beyond a mere interest, becomes great excitement, even obsession: clearly something which cannot be escaped.

The content of the book certainly seems to confirm such feeling and justify the title: the numerous works analyzed, the plurality of the voices and the wide range of media involved suggest the extent of such fascination and of the possible variations on the subject.

It is a book which surely aspires to fuel the Neo-Victorian debate, without forgetting the readers who are new to the subject: the detailed introduction does not merely synthesize the essays included in the book, it also introduces the field and its core topics. The editors also ask themselves the reasons for such a consistent presence of Victorian suggestions in popular culture and literature, and which issues of contemporaneity find expression and voice through the Victorian filter. The meaning of rewriting the past and the will to make sense of contemporary topics by repositioning them in the Victorian context are the focus of this book, which lingers on the reflection between past and present, «repetition and difference, sameness and otherness» (7). The editors rightfully stress the various backgrounds of the scholars who contributed to the book as the guarantee of a wider perspective: the essays indeed manage to cover all major Neo-Victorian related themes, starting from its origins, as in Diniejko's essay which unravels the Neo-Victorian viewpoint in Fowler's *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. It is one of the earliest Neo-Victorian postmodern novels, «a model for the ways in which Victorian themes can be represented in postmodern metahistorical fiction» (35). The variety of discourses intertwined with the typical Victorian background of fallen women and love stories

includes the coexistence of the Darwinian theory, Marxist ideas and an existentialist message, which allow for the deconstruction of the Victorian model, deformed but enriched by the postmodern sensitivity.

The search for new meanings in gender and sexuality on the one hand, and the postcolonial look on the Victorian empire on the other, are the two dominant issues which have been tackled by the Neo-Victorian esthetic and, in turn, by Neo-Victorian studies. A closer look at the essays in *Victorianomania*, however, reveals a predominant interest towards gender-related issues. Since adaptations or rewritings tend to reveal more about the times which produce them than about the times they are inspired by, this might imply that modernity has found in neo-Victorianism the ideal voice, the proper filter to face the gender topic, whose importance at a social level is surely undeniable.

The Victorian age certainly appears particularly suitable to discuss and challenge ideas related to women and the female condition: it was, after all, a period of great contradictions, where the figure of the 'new woman' was born while restrictive role definitions and social codes were still expected, where a queen reigned but did not support suffrage. Romero Ruiz focuses then on Sarah Waters's exploitation of the Victorian obsession and fascination for the secret and the forbidden, in an attempt to give new energy to the development of lesbian sexual identity by bringing forth themes which were (and still are) debated as deviant. *Affinity* and *Fingersmith* establish a tradition of same-sex relationships in Victorian times, empowering women by revealing what was kept hidden, and dismantling some of the classic beliefs rooted in gender division: the centrality of the mother's influence in the construction of the female identity, and pornography seen as a male-dominated trade. With her open approach, indicative of the influence of the contemporary, Sarah Waters also directly addresses the contemporary debate concerning the explicitness in the description of same-sex encounters.

Gender is also the core of Jerez's essay: steampunk culture plays with fixed and stereotyped ideas related to gender and identity, expunging the duality and looking for unification. Mina Harker's transformation from *Dracula* to *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*

proves the renewed sensibility towards the female heroine: from a woman who needs to be tamed and framed into more familiar structures, to a dominant, fierce and warrior-like character, perfectly aligned with the utopian conception, typical of the steampunk movement and of Neo-Victorian philosophy, which emancipates marginalized people via social achievement.

Women can reclaim identity but also lose it. The 'caged bird' metaphor, at the core of Ana Stevenson's essay on Neo-Victorian film musicals, describes women deprived of liberty and initiative, bound to be prisoners of the house. Such metaphor has been exploited in both its aesthetic ramifications (the woman being represented as a delicate and beautiful human being) and its social implications (where women are torn between the safety of the domestic wall and the adventures of the outer world, symbolized by the garden). In the musical *Les Misérables*, Cosette's cage is merely metaphorical but she does not show particular initiative or strengths; in Baz Luhrmann's *Moulin Rouge*, Satine's cage is also the gigantic set (from which she wishes to fly away) for her performances; Johanna's cage in *Sweeney Todd* is concrete and restrictive. The demise of women in *Sweeney Todd* (Johanna and her mother) is rooted on an aesthetic according to which women are helpless without men's protection, and beautiful in their defenselessness. These works hide a vivid male gaze which, barely scraping the surface, does not have the sensitivity to see beyond this aesthetic and fails to face on a deeper level the issue of the restrictions placed on women by Victorian society.

One more example of contemporary vision unable to pay justice to the complexity of the Victorian text can be found in BBC adaptations of Dickens. Falchi demonstrates that issues related to social conditions, once privileged in Dickens's writing, are left aside in Andrew Davies's 2008 BBC adaptation of *Little Dorrit* in order to please an audience drawn to «romanticism of pure love in a remote era of respectable values» (92). The gender problem, however, is still present: Amy's insistence on being called Little Dorrit, for instance, implies the renunciation of her identity as an individual; Miss Tattycoram is the fallen, unconventional woman, the 'madwoman' – this time not confined in the attic – who, once tamed, is ready to fulfill the classic womanly expectations; Dickens's

disenchanted awareness of the true aspects of marriage surrenders to a classic marriage scene reminiscent of the 1995 BBC adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*.

A different aspect concerning Dickens is shown in Cao's analysis of modern versions of *Great Expectations*: the osmotic process which derives from the intersection between old and new media contributes to the evolution and the development of Victorian storytelling in new and unexpected ways. The secondary plot of Dickens's stories, often sacrificed in adaptations, benefits from this approach and gains a new dignity. The satiric elements related to Pip's hopes of ascent, for instance, are being rediscovered thanks to Twitterliterature and fanfiction: further examples of how modern eyes can look back at the past, with a new public of contemporary teenagers drawn to a masterpiece which now speaks a more familiar language.

With Wakefield, the gaze turns back to gender issues. In order to preserve the perfection that the main character must always incarnate, contemporary film adaptations of *Jane Eyre* heighten the feeling of affection for the little Adele (whereas little doubt is left in Brontë's novel as to Jane Eyre's cold approach): such forced motherly love exemplifies the tension towards the ideal image of a woman and a mother. The true madwoman in the attic, Bertha, the symbol of the feminist literature, is also the object of renewed attention. Far from following Brontë's dehumanisation, the adaptations choose to exploit Bertha's humanity and 'vindicate' her: instead of taking Rochester's hand and endure her imprisonment, Bertha voluntarily chooses to die.

Di Blasio focuses on Emma Tennant's postmodern retellings of classic novels, with the addition of an unexpected twist, which, once more, exposes gender stereotypes. Stevenson wrote a deviant short novel, focused, even stylistically, on the game of the double. The double, in Tennant's case, stems from the pressure of accepting the established model for women in society: Mrs Hyde's only choice is to split. Moreover, Tennant reinstates the Victorian dualism between good and evil and connects it to the contemporary obsession for beauty.

The postcolonial perspective in Neo-Victorian studies is a key feature which cannot be left behind, and the book does not fail to include

it. The political spectrum of Neo-Victorianism emerges with Somacarrera's essay on the influence of Walter Scott in Atwood's Neo-Victorian novels. There is not a direct adaptation from a Victorian work, but the Victorian fascination with Scotland surely represented the fundamental starting point for the novel: by adhering to Scott's model of «national narratives with postcolonial resonances» (163), Atwood's *Canada* mirrors Scotland, a country which both contributed to the creation of the empire and paid the price for its survival.

Lutzoni ideally brings together the two core Neo-Victorian themes; it shows the postcolonial attitude of using the Victorian novel as a narrative model and as a political delegitimization tool on the one hand, and it offers a solid feminist perspective on the other. The dichotomic attitude of postcolonial writers is here evident in the choice of the Victorian narrative model and in the will to give cultural representation its rightful space. Far from providing an unambiguous picture of the historical events, Soueif opts for multiple and contradictory voices, refusing the idea of a true historical knowledge and embracing the «historiographic metafiction» (173) introduced by Linda Hutcheon.

The essay which closes the book pivots on another Victorian theme: illusion. Violi looks at the cinematographic universe which in 2006 released two similar movies, *The Illusionist* and *The Prestige*, reconnecting the roots of contemporary entertainment industry to the Victorian practice related to magic and illusion; the metaphor of the mirror is typically Neo-Victorian, as a multifaceted reference to the Victorian world.

Creating a definitive guide to the trends of the Neo-Victorian phenomenon is impossible: the speed at which new works are released in literature or in popular media is surely challenging, and new themes might be explored in the future. The book, however, certainly provides an extensive and in-depth investigation of the neo-Victorian phenomenon, stressing the importance of continuously looking to the past, the filter through which to face issues of modernity, in order to move forward. Looking at the ensemble of essays, it emerges how Neo-Victorianism has an important role to play the postmodern feminist movement, whose issues clearly occupy the larger part of the book; a

reflection on the postcolonial approaches, however, is not forgotten by the editors: neo-Victorianism can also contribute to a fruitful reflection on past politics and contemporary threats.

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The review

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