

Neo-Victorian

MOLLY CLARK HILLARD

AT its inception in the early twentieth century, the term “neo-Victorian” was a noun—a person whose “values, attitudes, or behavior hark back to” the Victorian era. Two decades later, it had also become an adjective, meaning “resembling, reviving, or reminiscent of” the Victorian period.¹ By the late twentieth century, it came to describe postmodern works (primarily novels, such as John Fowles’s *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*² or A.S. Byatt’s *Possession*³) set in the Victorian or Edwardian periods. And recently, twenty-first century critical study has broadened the definition of neo-Victorian: now virtually any literary, filmic, or cultural text may signal our contemporary investment in Victorian modes, ideologies, and problems. Monographs like Jay Clayton’s *Charles Dickens in Cyberspace*,⁴ critical compendia like John Kucich and Dianne Sadoff’s *Victorian Afterlife*,⁵ and the founding of the *Journal of Neo-Victorian Studies* in 2008 exemplify neo-Victorianism’s entrenchment in the post-9/11 critical landscape.

When I first began writing on the intersections of Victorian and contemporary literatures, I, too, identified my studies as neo-Victorian, in part because it seemed to be the only way to describe contemporary texts that cede time and space to Victorian ideologies.⁶ But in recent years, I have struggled with the phrase. I have come to believe that, rather than “hark(ing) back” or “reviving” Victorian literature, certain twenty-first century works problematize the very notion of temporal borders. Such texts are not neo-Victorian, but in some sense *still* Victorian. My change in thinking has been inspired in part by the founding of the V21 Collective, and in part by those scholars who see strict periodicity as a form of nationalism. Rita Felski, for instance, has challenged the paradigm of historical periods that “consists of a vertical pile of neatly stacked boxes . . . each of which surrounds, sustains, and subsumes a microculture.”⁷ In this view, says Felski, “historicism serves as the functional equivalent of cultural relativism.”⁸ What Felski suggests instead is aligned with Bruno Latour’s actor-network theory,⁹ or what she calls “the transtemporal movement and affective resonance of particular texts.”¹⁰ More specifically reflecting on Victorian literature, Kate Flint sees periodization not as static knowledge formation, but rather as “a malleable instrument at our disposal,” and argues that “the importance of [the Victorian] period lies in the extent to which it is still contiguous . . . with the formation of our

own world and in the development . . . of a number of different modernities.”¹¹ Such critics are concerned with the state of the field (literary studies broadly and Victorian studies specifically). I, too, am interested in what light may be shed upon how and why we read and re-read Victorian literature: what it may offer to us in the way of resistance, and how it directs us to a variety of institutional spaces that we in the twenty-first century still inhabit, for better and for worse.

Such works that are still, rather than newly, Victorian, might embed specific Victorian literary texts directly into their frameworks (like Ian McEwan’s *Saturday*).¹² They might affiliate with Victorian modes, narrative styles, plots, and characters (like Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go*).¹³ They may be saturated more generally in Victorian literary and cultural history (like Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth*).¹⁴ In all cases, novels like these take on explicitly Victorian questions of community, authority, self-possession, and the nature and purpose of artistic production. And in all cases, such works perceive Victorian literature to be networked to them, creating a community that exists in time rather than space. Such a community is often uneasy rather than homogeneous or harmonious, but is nonetheless vitally important to constituting personhood, to building any kind of human belonging that matters. These contemporary works, then, demand that we reconceive of both globality and temporality. They suggest that literature produces its own diaspora, one networked with other scatterings—ethnic, religious, and economic. As Rebecca Walkowitz has said, “translation and global circulation create many books out of single texts, transforming old traditions and inaugurating new ones.”¹⁵ Wai Chee Dimock has called this way of seeing “diachronic historicism,” where “the text [is] a temporal continuum, thick with receding and incipient nuances.”¹⁶ In novels that vex periodicity through temporal simultaneity, their authors imply that global literature is diachronic as well as synchronic. In this way, we might begin to see Victorian literature as a contribution to world literature.

Tellingly, the works that inspired contemporary novels like the ones above are themselves about literary inspiration. *Frankenstein*, *Jane Eyre*, *Villette*, *Wuthering Heights*, “Dover Beach,” *Mill on the Floss*, and *Daniel Deronda* are all Victorian texts that offer crucial scenes of reading and re-reading. These are all works in which acts of reading begin or escalate the action, in which books—history books, science books, devotional books—are central to the text’s aims. These novels in particular feature characters whose acts of reading may make or mar them, but in one way or another seal their fates. These characters insert themselves into a

literary history—not just resonating with it or speaking back to it, but actually taking the book as literal or real. Frankenstein’s creature reads *Paradise Lost* as “a true history”;¹⁷ Jane Eyre sees *Gulliver’s Travels* as “a narrative of facts”;¹⁸ Maggie Tulliver and Mr. Lockwood are in thrall to found texts with handwritten marginalia that directs or arrests their attention.¹⁹ I would argue that these are *literary subjects*; by calling attention to the books in their hands they remind us of the books in ours, and their fabrication, their materiality. Simultaneously, though, they suggest that we are bound to, subject to, subjects *of*, the books we read.

We should be alive to those contemporary works with scenes and characters that demand, like their Victorian counterparts, to be read as literary subjects. We are used, perhaps, to define literary subjectivity as does Simon During: “a love of literature, more or less disjunct from explicit identification with political programmes” and the production of “fictions and simulacra and the provision of spaces and occasions for individuals to be communicated to” in a kind of “secular mimesis.”²⁰ And if we do define it in this way, we are apt to associate literary subjectivity with, at best, an embarrassing lack of critical distance, and, at worst, a dangerous political and social myopia. But what if we were to take literary subjectivity more literally—and seriously? What if we were to dilate more precisely on “subjectivity,” taking it not merely in the sense of “perceptible only to the individual,” “absorbed in one’s personal feelings,” etc. that we have tended to mean by this term, but also in the philosophical or metaphysical sense of “conscious being” and “relating to the thinking mind,” and in the geopolitical sense of being “under the influence of” or pledging “obedience or allegiance to” that it also means?²¹ In this sense, literary subjectivity could mean that we are *part book* in ways that are pleasurable as well as painful. I propose that we consider those works that pledge allegiance to Victorian paratexts less neo-Victorian than a networked relationship of, in the words of Leah Price, “reading . . . handling . . . and circulating . . . the book,”²² a relationship that leads us constantly back to Victorian texts and narrative strategies.

NOTES

1. “neo-Victorian, n. and adj.,” OED Online, Oxford University Press, <http://www.oed.com> (accessed November 25, 2017).
2. John Fowles, *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* (New York: Jonathan Cape, 1969).

3. A. S. Byatt, *Possession: A Romance* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1990).
4. Jay Clayton, *Charles Dickens in Cyberspace: The Afterlife of the Nineteenth Century in Postmodern Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).
5. John Kucich and Dianne F. Sadoff, eds., *Victorian Afterlife: Postmodern Culture Rewrites the Nineteenth Century* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).
6. Molly Clark Hillard, "'When Desert Armies Stand Ready to Fight': Re-Reading McEwan's *Saturday* and Arnold's 'Dover Beach,'" *Partial Answers* 6, no. 1 (2008): 181–206.
7. Rita Felski, "Context Stinks!," *New Literary History* 42, no. 4 (2011): 573–591, 577.
8. Felski, "Context," 577.
9. Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).
10. Felski, "Context," 574.
11. Kate Flint, "Why 'Victorian'? Response," *Victorian Studies* 47, no. 2 (2005): 230–39, 238, 231.
12. Ian McEwan, *Saturday* (New York: Johnathan Cape, 2005).
13. Kazuo Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go* (New York: Vintage, 2005).
14. Zadie Smith, *White Teeth* (New York: Vintage, 2000).
15. Rebecca Walkowitz, "Unimaginable Largeness: Kazuo Ishiguro, Translation, and the New World Literature," *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 40, no. 3 (2007): 216–239, 226.
16. Wai Chee Dimock, "A Theory of Resonance," *PMLA* 112, no. 5 (1997): 1060–71, 1061.
17. Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* (London: Penguin, 2003), 132.
18. Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (London: Penguin, 2006), 28.
19. George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss* (London: Penguin, 2003), 302; Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights* (London: Penguin, 2003), 19.
20. Simon During, "Literary Subjectivity," *Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature* (1996): 1–12, 5.
21. "subjectivity, n.," OED Online, Oxford University Press, <http://www.oed.com> (accessed November 25, 2017).
22. Leah Price, *How to Do Things With Books in Victorian Britain* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 5.

