



ESSE-8: LONDON 2006

29 August – 2 September 2006

S35. Revenants and Hauntings in Neo-Victorian Fiction

Tuesday 29 August: 2.00-4.00pm

Convenor: Patricia Pulham (University of Portsmouth)

Email: patricia.pulham@port.ac.uk

Co-convenor: Rosario Arias (University of Málaga)

Email: rarias@cica.es

The last two decades have witnessed the rise of historical fiction set in the Victorian period. The pervasive presence of the Victorian past in the “neo-Victorian” novel is fast becoming the subject of many critical studies. However, little attention has been paid to this genre in terms of “haunting”, the spectral continuity of the past in the present, which parallels a renewed interest in the impact of the occult and the supernatural on Victorian individuals.

“The Unprettified Truth”: neo-Victorian odours in Michel Faber’s *The Crimson Petal and the White*

Silvana Colella (University of Macerata)

Why is the Victorian ‘real’ so appealing to contemporary writers and readers alike? My paper investigates the present-day relevance of **Victorian** fiction by looking at the role of olfactory perceptions in *The Crimson Petal and the White*. I first describe some of the characteristics that distinguish smell from the other senses. I then analyse Faber’s post realist approach to the imagined world of the past and the structure of sensations upon which it is built. In the final section I address the question of the relationship between history and fiction, arguing that Faber’s novel neither mourns nor derides the legacy of Victorian fiction.

(Super)Natural History: Darwin’s Ghost in Neo-Victorian Fiction

Dietmar Boehnke (University of Leipzig, Germany)

The decisive impact of Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution on Victorian culture figures as a central theme in many of the novels that collectively make up the increasingly popular postmodern subgenre of neo-Victorian fiction: From John Fowles’s *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* (1969) through A. S. Byatt’s *Possession* (1990) and *Angels and Insects* (1992) to Alasdair Gray’s *Poor Things* (1992) or Roger McDonald’s *Mr Darwin’s Shooter* (1998), the ‘ghost’ of Darwin clearly haunts the neo-Victorian novel. In this paper, I will attempt to take this metaphor literally by looking at the connection of the Darwinian

element to another conspicuous (and arguably related) theme in several of these novels: the representation of spiritualism or a more general Gothic/supernatural element.

Repetition and Eternity: the Spectral and Textual Continuity in Michéle Roberts's *In the Red Kitchen*.

Agnieszka Golda-Derejczyk (University of Silesia)

Mid-Victorian interest in spiritualism and mesmerism was undoubtedly to find its way onto the pages of the neo-Victorian novel. Yet, the haunting presence of ghosts or mediums in this type of historical fiction seems to serve purposes beyond purely entertaining or historically correct. My interest in this paper lies in a parallel spiritualist and textual haunting that seems best illustrated in Michéle Roberts's novel *In the Red Kitchen*. In the novel the popular Victorian theme of spiritualism and mediumship furnishes a useful and inventive tool in constructing continuities between women's experience across centuries as governed by the two types of temporality: repetition and eternity, of which Julia Kristeva writes in her essay "Women's Time." On the other hand, the reference to the mediumistic activity of passive writing serves to establish a textual continuity through demonstrating the potent bond between writing and living, between self-inscription and self-definition.

Henry James: A Haunting

Pilar Hidalgo (Málaga University)

In 2004 two novels were published that had Henry James as their protagonist, David Lodge's *Author, Author* and Colm Tóibín's *The Master*. Tóibín seems to concur with Lyndall Gordon's observation to the effect that the writer was in his element with those who had died, and his novel pays less attention to the external circumstances of James's career while exploring "the part of him he guarded most fiercely, his hidden self, which no one in England knew about or understood." As the past in the present is transmuted into his fiction, haunting becomes a central trope in a novel about the author of one of the most popular ghost stories in English, a man who, in Tóibín's version, lived with and created out of the dead.

The Haunting Presence of Charlotte Bronte and Jane Eyre in *Charlotte: The Final Journey of Jane Eyre* by D.M. Thomas

Sarolta Marinovich-Resch (University of Szeged)

D.M. Thomas's *Charlotte: The Final Journey of Jane Eyre* (2000) is a good example of the paradoxical functioning of the postmodernist 'neo'-Victorian fiction. The haunting compulsion to return to the Victorian era and the ironical debunking of the past seem antithetical, yet display a nostalgic tendency. The confrontation between the present and the past is enhanced as Thomas's novel unfolds in parallel a Victorian and a contemporary story. The Victorian section, written in the form of pastiche, takes up the story of Jane Eyre where Charlotte Bronte left it, and subverts the canonical version transforming pastiche into parody. The contemporary plot recounts the adventures of a British Bronte scholar, Miranda Stevenson, and represents her experience of the uncertainty about the perception of reality and the possibilities of meaning. Studying

narrative fragmentation, textual heterogeneity and generic plurality in Thomas's novel my paper aims to show the oxymoronic quality of its 'nostalgic postmodernism'.

Liberating the Neo-Victorian Maid

Esther Saxey (University of Sussex)

In *Alias Grace* (Margaret Atwood, 1996) and *Mary Reilly* (Valerie Martin, 1990), both protagonists are haunted maidservants. These hauntings can be read as the liberation of the repressed – either the sexually repressed, or a rebellion against class and gender oppression. The position of the Victorian maidservant allows these liberations to be expressed in one figure; letting the working class woman tell her story is politically and dramatically appealing. But the novels also suggest a more complex understanding of power, beyond “liberation”, where one’s “story” is elicited by authority figures. How should we then read the ghosts?