NEO-VICTORIAN FAMILIES: GENDER, SEXUAL AND CULTURAL POLITICS

Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben, eds.
Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2011.

(by Maria Isabel Romero Ruiz. Universidad de Málaga)
mirr@uma.es

The publication by Rodopi of the second volume of the "Neo-Victorian Series" entitled *Neo-Victorian Families: Gender, Sexual and Cultural Politics* shows once more the growing interest in the Victorian past on the part of both scholars in the academia and the public in general. The first volume edited by the series editors, Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben, *Neo-Victorian Tropes of Trauma: The Politics of Bearing After-Witness to Nineteenth-Century Suffering* and published in 2010 has represented a major step in the analysis and critical debate of issues concerning the Victorian period. The revision and reformulation of these issues, which were the cause of trauma for the Victorian mind and their representation through contemporary literary productions are the main concern of the volume.

The second volume, reviewed here, focuses on an essential element in what constitutes the so-called "Victorian culture" and which is still a matter of concern for contemporary society: the family. Neo-Victorian fiction represents a quite recent trend in historical fiction which answers contemporary readers' desire to share with the writer an understanding, interpretation and repossession of the past. In Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn's words, "Historical fiction can be read as the most essential form of postmodernism, continually questioning as it does the very fabric of the past and, by implication the present" (2004: 141). Neo-Victorian writers are not only looking back but also using the appropriation of topic, style and genre to try to problematize our understanding of Victorian times; in this way,

they offer us an image of the Victorians which the Victorians would probably not recognize themselves or could not display due to the social constrictions of the period (Preston 2008: 99). This image also constitutes a reflection of the anxieties and traumas that our contemporary society has inherited from our ancestors.

In their Introduction, Kohlke and Gutleben assert the centrality of the family in Victorian and Neo-Victorian discourses. From the domestic sanctuary that the Victorian family represented, we move to a Neo-Victorian family which itself constitutes the site of trauma where respectability is questioned, but which also reflects the hidden inconsistencies of Victorian society. This family becomes the locus of exploitation and resistance where its reproductive function and ideologies concerning gender, sexuality, class, race and nation are questioned (5-7). This is certainly what we find in all the essays that engage in a Neo-Victorian critique of family ideology. As the editors state, the ideal of the nuclear family was reserved for the morally superior middle-class, excluding other classes and races. Nonetheless, the Neo-Victorian approach to the family endorses traditional conceptualizations of the structure while simultaneously subverting these values and framing them within non-heteronormative models. These models can be more fluid and represent different experiences of the family and of exerting agency both in the present and the past (10-11). In this sense, the role of women and children as well as that of middle-class reformers becomes essential in the process of constructing and deconstructing such a mainstay in Victorian society as is the family.

Part I of the book "Endangered Childhoods and Lost Fortunes: Filthiness and Philanthropy" contains chapters by Matthew Kaiser, Shurlee Swain, Louisa Yates and Marie-Luise Kohlke which analyse childhood in both Victorian and contemporary contexts, using Neo-Victorian literary and visual texts to bring to the fore controversial aspects connected with children and their welfare. In the last decades of the nineteenth century, there was increasing concern about the situation of Victorian children, especially after the publication in 1885 in the *Pall Mall Gazette* of W.T. Stead's series of articles entitled "The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon".[1] Children began to be seen as the future of the nation and the Empire, and were associated with innocence and the lack of sexual knowledge; this is the reason why child abuse and delinquency and deviancy in children became some of the main preoccupations for the Victorian mind (Jackson 2000: 1, 6). Hence the proliferation in the nineteenth century of charities, associations and organizations whose main aim was the rescue and protection of the "children of the poor", which runs parallel with contemporary attitudes towards childhood.

All the essays in Part 1 are concerned with aspects such as child abuse, child exploitation and trauma, and all of them underline the poor advance made in this field by our contemporary society. "Going slumming" and "slumming narratives"

are elements in Victorian culture that became familiar for people in the last decades of the nineteenth century. Social workers and philanthropists went slumming to see firsthand how the poor lived. Slums represented human suffering and they symbolized brutality and sexual degradation; they elicited sympathy and urged action (Koven 2006: 1-5). Matthew Kaiser in his chapter "From London's East End to West Baltimore: How the Victorian Slum Narrative Shapes *The Wire*" uses the idea of "going slumming" and defines "slumming narratives" as "detailed, documentary explorations —fictional or non-fictional— of the living conditions and personal sufferings of the poor, usually the urban poor" (51). The aim is to move the audience toward a better tomorrow; slums are presented as the world of "the others" and Kaiser establishes parallelisms with twenty-first century America.

In the same vein, Shurlee Swain in her essay entitled "Failing Families: Echoes of Nineteenth-Century Child Rescue Discourse in Contemporary Debates around Child Protection" reflects on the sad issue of removing and relocating the child of a failing family in a substitute family, together with its pros and cons. People and organizations like Dr. John Barnardo, William Booth and the Salvation Army, Henry Mayhew or Seebohm Rowntree, among others, devoted their time and energy to the rescue of poor people in the slums and sometimes took their children to their institutions. These children, treated as victims, could be redeemed and, if properly trained, could become valuable citizens (75). Simultaneously, the issue of child abuse was rediscovered in the 1960s together with issues of profligacy, neglect and ill-usage, bringing the idea of transgressing parental rights to the fore (83).

Finally, the essays by Louisa Yates and Marie-Luise Kohlke put forward the idea that the child remains the organising principle of Neo-Victorian families, connecting the topic of child abuse and the suffering of children with trauma narrative and its association with individual and collective historical crises (135). However, in Victorian literature, the child played a redeeming role for adults, whereas in Neo-Victorian fiction the child invites adult transgression (143).

Part II "Performing (Impossible) Happy Families: Deconstruction and Reconstruction" attempts to question the validity of Victorian traditional values associated with the family through the essays of María Isabel Seguro, Regina Hansen, Sarah Edwards, Hila Shachar and Sarah Gamble. Victorian notions of "the domestic ideal" based on the "theory of the double spheres" delineated by John Ruskin's 'Of Queen's Gardens' informed notions of men's and women's duties (178). According to this theory, a woman's place was the home and her main role was that of mother and wife; a man's domain was the world outside the home, the world of work, politics, business and judicial responsibility. A woman's nature was defined in the same way: the essence of woman was respectability which was connected with dependency, delicacy and frailty; also with subordination,

self-sacrifice and appropriate behaviour (Poovey 1989: 6-9; Nead 1988: 28-29). Masculinity was defined by physical strength and militarism, and Seguro states that the social function of the middle class family was that of "the provider of harmony and moral strength necessary for the male to achieve social success in the capitalist world outside the home, as well as in the colonies outside the homeland" (158). As Michel Foucault observes, all these ideas permeated the different social and cultural discourses of the time thanks to the production of knowledge and the manifestation of power. However, these values are simultaneously contested and reproduced by our present societies; we can see for example in the original contemporary literary and visual versions of Victorian novelists like Dickens or Emily Brönte or Edwardian writers like Galsworthy the endorsement or the subversion of Victorian views on marriage, divorce or gender ideals connected with motherhood and patriarchy.

Part III of the volume, "The Mirror of Society: Familial Trauma, Dissolution and Transformation" moves from issues of trauma in the Victorian family and their reflection in our contemporary world to the creation and triumph of new forms of family that keep its traditional role as the basic unit in society but allow for other groupings which differ from the male-female tandem. Trauma has been part of the history of families, and trauma studies have become an important trend in literary and cultural studies in the recent years. The presence of prostitutes, murderers and murderesses, monsters and other marginal characters in Neo-Victorian novels like in Peter Acroyd's *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* (1994) constitute an example of the dysfunctional family discussed by Susana Onega; the lives of these characters reflect individual and social trauma, and London transforms itself into a "palimpsestic living organism constantly shifting shape" (293). Children are seen as the main victims of trauma and their protection constitutes the main concern of past and present societies (202-303); migrants are also marked by a history of trauma, and Melissa Fegan focuses her essay on a discussion of Irish migration in the novel by Joseph O'Connor's *Star of the Sea* (2002) as trauma. Rosario Arias's contribution opens up a new trend in Neo-Victorian studies with the introduction of Disability Studies and the idea of the narrative prosthesis, which, in her words means "dependence upon disability in narratives where there exists an infirm character who does not comply with normalcy and who prompts the unravelling of the story" (346). Georges Letissier also opens a path towards new contemporary models through the process of "queering the family" in her analysis of Sarah Waters's Neo-Victorian novels.

All in all, this volume provides highly relevant information about a wide range of theories and Neo-Victorian literary and visual texts. The essays have a critical potential in their approach to gender, sexual and social politics and tropes of trauma both in Victorian and contemporary representations, which make the volume fascinating and worth reading.

Note

[1]. For a further analysis of the articles and their implications, see Maria Isabel Romero Ruiz, 2011, "Women's Identity and Migration: Stead's Articles in the *Pall Mall Gazette* on Prostitution and White Slavery".

Works cited

Heilmann, Ann and Llewellyn, MARK. 2004. "Historical Fictions: Women (Re)Writing and (Re)Reading History". *Women: A Cultural Review* 15 (2): 137-152.

Jackson, Louise A. 2000. *Child Sexual Abuse in Victorian England*. London and New York: Routledge.

Koven, Seth. 2006. *Slumming: Sexual and Social Politics in Victorian England*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton U.P.

Nead, Lynda. 1988. *Myths of Sexuality: Representations of Women in Victorian Britain* London: Blackwell.

Poovey, Mary. 1989. *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England*. London: Virago Press.

Preston, Peter. 2008. "Victorianism in Recent Victorian Fiction". In Knezevic, Marija and Aleksandra Nikcevic-Batricevic (eds.) *History, Politics, Identity: Reading Literature in a Changing World*. Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing: 91-109.

Romero Ruiz, Maria Isabel. 2011. "Women's Identity and Migration: Stead's Articles in the *Pall Mall Gazette* on Prostitution and White Slavery". In Castro Borrego, Silvia Pilar and Maria Isabel Romero Ruiz (eds.) *Cultural Migrations and Gendered Subjects: Colonial and Postcolonial Representations of the Female Body*. Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing: 27-53.

Received: 17 June 2012