

Conclusion: 'What will count as history?'

The Victorian past has come to uncanny life in contemporary fiction.

(Hilary Schor, 'Sorting, Morphing and Mourning', 2000)

This book has traced the re-creation of the Victorian era in recent historical fictions, focusing on novels by Graham Swift, A. S. Byatt, Sarah Waters, Helen Humphreys and Gail Jones. It has argued that these fictions deploy the vocabulary of Victorian strategies of history-making and recollection in order to re-member the period as part of our cultural memory. These fictions, together with other cultural and political evocations of the period, explore both our continuity with, and difference from, our Victorian forebears, and formulate our relationship to the period as a series of repetitions which produce both the shock of recognition and the fright of estrangement. They naturalise and celebrate the desire for historical recollection and are themselves evidence of the continuing longing for cultural memory today.

I have suggested that throughout the twentieth century, and into the twenty-first, the Victorian period has proved remarkably amenable to rewriting. As we have seen, whether it has been produced as ancestor or as 'other', celebrated as superior or denigrated as inferior to contemporary culture, the Victorian period has played a central role in our representations of ourselves, to ourselves. A period that can be cast in terms of its elegance, propriety, and imperial grandeur and, equally, in terms of its squalor, poverty, discrimination and humanitarian neglect, offers ample resources for praise or censure, emulation or disclamation. Together, the contemporary returns to the Victorian era in fiction, history, politics and popular culture produce multifarious and sometimes

contradictory images of the period. They write and rewrite the Victorian period, but in so doing, they remember it, and perform the important work of shaping and producing cultural memory.

This book has added to the critical discussion of neo-Victorian fiction a focus on which particular images of the Victorian period they produce and to what ends. It has particularly highlighted the novels' representation of Victorian strategies of history-making. In *Waterland*, the era is governed by the exigencies of progress, particularly technological advancement, enabling ambitious, forward-thinking entrepreneurs to cast themselves as servants of the future. Yet this stereotypically Victorian image of faith in progress is undermined by a counter-narrative of doubt in progress and the desire for return. In *Possession*, the desire for return is no longer subjugated and instead becomes the defining feature of the era. Byatt's Victorian period is characterised by wide-ranging intellectual endeavour motivated by the desire to mediate the past, to make dead voices speak, whether through its fossilised remains or through poetic ventriloquism. *Affinity* and *Fingersmith* appropriate the conventionally feminine forms of Victorian gothic and sensation, genres not normally associated with the historical but which sought to represent Victorian culture to itself, in order to invent a history of lesbian representation in literature. In *Sixty Lights* and *Afterimage* the desire to make dead voices speak transforms into the desire to cheat the obliterating action of time and death by creating permanent images, though words and writing, as defences against forgetting. Thus, one of the period's important technological inventions, the photograph, is proclaimed as 'the future' but is, paradoxically, inextricably linked to the past via the yearning for memory-made-permanent.

While each novel highlights diverse aspects of the Victorian period and different strategies for historical recollection, what they have in common is the depiction of the period as one that looked back, desirous of a means to 'fix' memory, indeed, to materialise it. In *Possession*, *Affinity*, *Fingersmith*, *Afterimage* and *Sixty Lights*, the literary text is depicted an important medium for materialising the past. Texts written in the Victorian era and, in slightly different ways, contemporary texts that return to it, write the Victorian period into our cultural memory and continue to re-member it in new contexts and for a variety of purposes today. Dramatising Victorian strategies of recollection and celebrating the text-as-medium enables these writers to lay a claim to representing the past in a climate of historiographical crisis. It enables them to suggest, too, that in addition to textual traces, the past persists in the form of embodied memory and in repertoires of shared images

that form and inform our historical consciousness. Furthermore, each novel utilises its representation of the Victorian period to dramatised and promulgate the desire for historical recollection as fundamental to human experience.

I have attempted, in both the theoretical foundations and the textual analyses, to suggest that history, fiction and historical fiction, together with memory, are mutually implicated, although conventionally distinct, discourses that each lay a (more or less contested) claim to historical representation. My account of historical fiction's relationship to 'official' histories has argued that the genre has always been supplementary and revisionary of official history in ways that problematise the notions of objectivity and reference. Adding to the critical discussion of these novels by positioning them in relation to their generic heritage, I have also suggested that contemporary recreations of the Victorian period elaborate and extend the theoretical approaches to contemporary historical fictions that remain influential today. The first, Linda Hutcheon's account of 'historiographic metafiction' as the representative genre of postmodernism, foregrounds the problematisation of historical reference, and reads these texts in terms of their deployment of self-reflexivity, irony and complicitous critique to question the very possibility of historical knowledge. The second theoretical approach, Amy J. Elias' conception of 'metahistorical romance', foregrounds the romance elements of these fictions in order to posit their desire for 'history itself'; history as unproblematic presence and locus of Truth.

The texts discussed here challenge Hutcheon's opposition of nostalgic recuperation versus a critical engagement with the past signalled by the pattern of complicity and critique. Emerging amidst a broader cultural fascination with the period, their very evocation of the Victorian era makes nostalgia a structuring principle of these texts, yet this does not negate their critical engagement with the past they represent. Indeed, contrary to Christian Gutleben's assertion that a nostalgic text *cannot* be subversive (Gutleben, 2001: 218), it might be the case today that the cultivation of nostalgia to critically engage the past is not only possible, but constitutes a potentially more subversive approach to historical recollection today. As Jennifer Green-Lewis persuasively suggests, the academic formulation of nostalgia that

dismiss[es] it as reactionary and politically suspect, a combination of poor history and narcissistic imaginings ... forgets the postmodern complexities of history and indeed threatens a new essentialism by

inferring a retrievable, primary past to be subverted or erased by the falsification of nostalgic imagination. (Green-Lewis, 2000: 44)

I have suggested that re-presenting (making present) and representing (creating a portrayal of) the Victorians fold together in these novels. The resultant representation of the past is not an invocation of history as presence/Being/Truth, as Elias' account suggests. Rather, in these novels, the depicted past is a ghostly, aberrant presence, 'nowhere as such, and yet everywhere; and yet everywhere different' (Wolfreys, 2002: 140). The ghost marks disappearance. Having no presence of its own, its meaning derives only from those attributed to it in the present. As Hilary Schor claims in the epigraph above, 'the Victorian past has come to *uncanny* life in contemporary fiction' (Schor, 2000: 235, emphasis mine).

This book has demonstrated the centrality of the figure of the ghost in these fictions as a metaphor for both the persistence of the past and our relationship to it today. Reversing the conventional image of the beckoning ghost returning to make a claim upon the present, in these fictions the ghost does not reach out to us, rather we seek it out, conjure it up. Our very desire to remember produces both Victorian texts and contemporary fictionalisations of the period as mediums through which we remember the past. By suggesting some of the meanings that the spectre accrues in these fictions, and by pointing to the prevalence of ghostly metaphors in neo-Victorian novels, this book has laid the groundwork for further investigation of the uses of spectrality in these fictions. One productive avenue to explore would be a comparison of the use of the spiritualist movement in contemporary fictions and their Victorian counterparts. If the use of the supernatural opens up a space for discussing the illicit and unsayable in Victorian fictions, for example, does it continue to function this way in contemporary uses of the Victorian supernatural?¹ Are we and the Victorians haunted by the same ghosts?

Yet in an age of historiographical crisis which, paradoxically, proliferates historical representation in histories, fictions, politics, literary and cultural criticism, in advertising, fashion, home furnishings and on websites, it is not only 'history itself', that is the spectral figure. Rather, this commingled obsession with and scepticism toward history produces the question 'what will count as history?' as the ghost that haunts contemporary culture.

Historical fictions can, perhaps, be considered some of the many '*competing* narratives' that Hayden White envisages as forming, together, intellectually engaged and rigorous accounts of the past (White, 1999:

28).² White's discussion of the narrative properties of even traditional histories highlights the way in which the question of what will count as history is often contested over the question of generic appropriateness. For White, all narrative histories are subject to generic considerations; the same facts can be shaped into a variety of generic forms, and the same facts accrue different meanings, depending upon whether they are given a tragic, comic, or epic structure (ibid.: 29–30). He argues that while some genres are considered more appropriate to the telling of particular events – he points to the often unarticulated stipulation that 'a serious theme ... demands a noble genre, such as epic or tragedy, for its proper representation' – there are actually many genres that can produce meaningful versions of the same events. White takes Art Spiegelman's *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* (1972, 1973–1991), which uses the form of a comic book to present the events of the Holocaust, as an example of the successful deployment of a 'low' genre to produce 'a particularly ironic and bewildered view of the Holocaust ... one of the most moving narrative accounts of it that I know of, not least because it makes the difficulty of discovering and telling the whole truth about even a small part of it as much a part of the story as the events whose meaning it is to discover' (ibid.: 31).³ Although White's persuasive argument about the value of a variety of genres in the telling of history focuses upon traditional histories, it points, too, to the ways in which historical fictions, and even counterfactual histories, can play a role in producing meaningful, competing narratives of past events despite, or even because, of their particular generic, and figural, properties.

In the last few decades, the proliferation of fictional accounts of the Victorian period, when considered in relation to each other and to other constructions of the period by historians, politicians and cultural critics, form a textured, diverse, and at times contradictory picture of a period that continues to fascinate the contemporary imagination. These accounts revise and contest each other, so if the period is always written and rewritten, a palimpsest, its meaning is also never fixed. In *Waterland's* terms, these constructions and reconstructions of the Victorian period ensure that our histories of the era are continually dredged. They serve to remind us of the fictiveness, that is, the constructedness, of all the significations that we ascribe to it.

Thus, the question of what will count as history continues to hover, contested. In fact, because of the problematisation of narrative as a means for representing past reality, which has highlighted, too, the shared conventions of historical and fictional narratives and elided their discursive differences, history and fiction appear again, in some

way, as they were in the eighteenth century, united as branches of rhetoric in an effort of understanding. This is not a coming full circle, an arching backward, or a regression, but rather a distorted repetition. In contrast to the eighteenth-century understanding, the question is not which discourse most effectively provides access to history, conceived as unproblematic presence. In an age that treats the narratives of history and fiction as more or less ideologically suspect versions of the past, the question becomes, will anything count as history? Posed another way, this is the question raised by Fredric Jameson and others and addressed in the Introduction to this book: can contemporary culture think historically at all? Instead of being more or less authentic ways of accessing the meaning of the past, history and fiction today are alike engaged in exploring the ways in which the past can be meaningfully produced in an age that has problematised the very notion of historical reference.

Neo-Victorian novels, such as those by Swift, Byatt, Waters, Humphreys and Jones, emerge from, contribute to and dramatise a continuing desire for cultural memory today. Acknowledging that arriving at a final, complete version of the past is impossible and, indeed, undesirable, these novels shift the aim and focus of historical recollection from the production of an accurate account of past events to the always-unfinished *process* of remembering. In doing so, they participate in what Jerome de Groot has called the 'historical imaginary'. Like other forms of non-academic history 'they reflect the complexity of contemporary cultural and social interface' (De Groot, 2009: 6). Thus, historical novelists continue to explore the creative possibilities of their own role in historical recollection. The re-presentation of the Victorian era in these novels celebrates the potential of the literary text as an act of memory. Its imaginative re-creation stems from a desire to re-member the period as part of our shared history, our cultural memory, and asserts both continuities and discontinuities between Victorian culture and our own. The novels examined here propose that the persistence of the Victorian era today takes the form of repetitions and restructurations, through embodied memories, both personal and collective, and, importantly, through the manifold meanings that we continue to attribute it in our cultural, political, historical and literary discourses. These novels return to Victorian vocabularies of history, memory and loss in order to recast historical inquiry as desire, to avow the enduring importance of historical recollection. The very prevalence of contemporary historical fictions today is witness to this desire and its importance, and suggests, too, that the field of literature can productively contribute to

ongoing debates about what will count as history. In an age charged with the inability to think historically, these historical novels exploit their generic heritage as modes of historical recollection to explore the ways in which it is still possible, desirable and necessary to re-present the past.