

Silvia Caporale Bizzini, ed. 2003: *We, the "Other Victorians": Considering the Heritage of 19th-Century Thought*. Alicante: Publicaciones de la Universidad de Alicante. 215 pp.

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While Victorianism used to connote all that is old-fashioned and residual, revisions of Victorianism from a distance make you more modern—although they come in various guises, such as conservative neo-Victorianism, postmodern rewritings of Victorian fiction, and retrospective exhibitions such as the one at the Victoria and Albert Museum in 2001 (“The Victorian Vision: Inventing a New Britain”). With respect to the latter, Deborah Orr argued that “[i]n refusing to recognise so much of ourselves in the Victorians, we have failed to move on from their influence” (*The Independent*, qtd. by Tim Marshall on p. 71 of this volume). This is a major leitmotif in *We, the "Other Victorians": Considering the Heritage of 19th-Century Thought*. The volume sets out to read a number of contemporary cultural phenomena through the distorting lens of their analogues or forerunners in the nineteenth century, and on the whole manages to do it quite admirably. In this sense, it will be of interest not just to cultural critics working on issues such as consumerism, drugs, body technology, historical metafiction, etc.: it is also an interesting contribution to the postmodern critical genre of “retroactive rereading”—I am thinking of books like Robert Kiely’s *Reverse Tradition*, Michael André Bernstein’s *Foregone Conclusions*, David Galef’s collection *Second Thoughts, or Postmodernism Across the Ages*, edited by Bill Readings and Bennet Schaber. Although *We, the "Other Victorians"* is less directly concerned with the perspectival phenomenon of hindsight, it does acquire occasionally this interesting hermeneutic dimension.

In dealing with such a wide topic as nineteenth-century “thought” or “culture,” a problem arises through the lack of clear borders as to what will count as “cultural studies.” For instance, this work fails to consider such people as Spencer, Darwin, Matthew Arnold, Newman, William Morris, or, why not, Marx, Bulwer Lytton, Disraeli, Ada Byron, Pankhurst, Nightingale, Oscar Wilde, etc. I only mean, of course, that the volume was not planned as a treatise, as it originates in a call for papers. It could not therefore be intended to provide a comprehensive overview of the field. It is instead a collection of papers related in their concerns and approach, interestingly varied so as to provide a number of strategical vantage points from which to survey the cultural landscape, but hardly trying to map the contemporary relevance of 19th-century thought *as a whole*, which would be a rather taller order.

Half the papers in the collection are good, with a couple of excellent ones, the other half are middling although still worth reading for scholars interested in the specific subjects they deal with. There is just one contribution from Spain, most being by scholars working in British, American or overseas universities, although there are no “celebrity” scholars among the contributors.

The book’s title nods to Foucault’s genealogical critique of discourses and institutions. Actually, it has been inspired by the mistranslation of “Nous autres, Victoriens” (“We Victorians”) rendered as “We, other Victorians” in the English-language edition of the *History of Sexuality*—a blooper possibly due to a short-circuit in the translator’s mind with the title of Steven Marcus’s *The Other Victorians*. (And who knows, Marcus may well have

been at the back of Foucault's mind in the first place.) But what may have originated in a mistranslation provides a fruitful idea for this volume's project of bringing to light the roots of contemporary ideologies stretching back to, or hiding, as an uncanny Mr. Hyde, in the Jekyll-like Victorian age. Silvia Caporale had already co-edited a collection on Foucault, which may help account for the emphasis of some of the essays here and especially for the critical bias of her preface; feminism, the other major approach in Caporale's work, is less immediately evident in the collection, although perhaps on the whole the general flavour of the book reminds one more of Elaine Showalter's or even of Gillian Beer's cultural studies than of Foucault's. The preface (there is no long introduction) sketches out the overall project for the volume, tracing the roots of neo-Liberalism to Bentham's thought and to Victorian political economists, which is not to be disputed, although arguably there are just as strong (and deeper) roots in Adam Smith or Mandeville. The emphasis on the present-day "denial of historical process" on the other hand, is hardly to be discerned in the contributions to the volume; and if Foucault does show up occasionally among the contributors' theoretical apparatus, the editor's assertion about Gramsci's relevance for the collection as a whole is unwarranted, since the analysis of the dialectics between hegemonic and counterhegemonic discourses that is arguably present in several of the essays cannot be confined (or even traced back) to a Gramscian approach.

Kirill O. Thompson's "Thorstein Veblen: Gadfly of the Gilded Age" is one of the best things in the book—a pity, perhaps, that Veblen cannot be included among the actual "Victorians"—but the book takes both a narrower and a wider outlook than the title might suggest, since the American Gilded Age, arguably America's own Victorianism, is included among the aspects of the mid or late nineteenth century addressed in the papers. Thompson's is one of the papers which most explicitly engage the volume's project to show, in Caporale's words, that "the heritage of Victorian thought is still alive in the formation of contemporary neo-liberal philosophy" (16). He shows too how Veblen's analyses are still relevant to present-day leftist critiques of laissez-faire capitalism (and of formalist and providentialist theories generally, I would add, since Veblen infused his socioeconomic analyses with a salutary skeptical emphasis on holism and contingency). Thompson's approach, too, is holistic, weaving together an analysis of the Socratic "gadfly" theme, an overview of Veblen's social and biographical background and intellectual context, the contentious response to his work, to contemporary offshoots and analogies (e.g. in polemical asides against today's apologists of capitalism like Dinesh d'Souza, or in the tracing of contemporary developments of Veblenian thought). An excellent, well-documented and daring paper which should help secure Veblen's status as a major critic of the ideology of progress, mass production and consumerism as they acquired world dominance in the Gilded Age. "A very few rare people, like Veblen," says Thompson, "had the wisdom and foresight to see that these ideas could become indifferent and brutal in the hands of rising powers—justified by their presumed advancement and differentiation, their self-conceived distinctiveness—as they imposed their march of progress on others" (45). Sounds familiar?

Another good paper, Andrew Blake's "The Construction of a Liberal Response to Drug Use in India," draws from the author's previously published material in its analysis of the debate on the legal limits to the use of drugs. The approach is, on the whole, inflected by the influence of Foucault's theories of control and Said's *Orientalism*. The documentary

history provided by Blake is fascinating, and in keeping with the avowed aim of the collection, he also suggests analogies and contrasts with the present debates around the legalization of drugs. Actually, the most questionable aspect of the paper is its explicit plea for present-day legalization and toleration of drugs in the West, as the paper fails to provide a convincing analysis of the social consequences of such a proposal, and seems to simply assume that the 19th-century politics of toleration (or indeed, of official promotion) of drugs in India and China can be usefully transposed to the present situation in the West, a situation which in my opinion is vastly different in spite of any analogies which may be detected. As far as this article is concerned, then, Blake's call for politicians "to end the futile 'war against drugs'" (70) rests on preconceptions rather than analysis.

Tim Marshall's "Organs for the Body: The Victorian Anatomy Legacy" contends that "Today's organ transplant world, dating from the 1960s, is a legacy from Victorian medicine and the central place in it of anatomical research" (72)—and draws a number of disquieting parallels between the social (especially social class) context of both practices. The paper combines analysis of changes in legislation and social attitudes, case studies surrounding Bentham, Martineau and other key figures in the anatomy debates, and also commentary of novels which approach the issue in its Victorian context (*Middlemarch*, *Waterland*). Marshall sees an exemplary analogy in the case of Southwood Smith, whose 1824 article "The Use of the Dead to the Living" opened the way to the use of the bodies of the poor for dissection, on the basis of their "presumed consent." "Smith's later word on the subject in 1832 holds the essential lesson for today. He said, courageously, that his original assumption that the consent of the poor could be presumed upon was unethical and therefore was not in the long-term interests of science" (86). As can be seen, this article too has an explicit political point, in its rejection of the medical doctrine of "necessary inhumanity" (87) or medical utilitarianism, and in its plea for a tighter control on physicians' practices in searching for donors, which, according to Marshall, often results in donors and their families being deprived of the right to an informed decision on donation—or in their being downright hoodwinked into donation. What the paper leaves out of its scope, deliberately but perhaps questionably, is the perspective of the receivers of transplanted organs. Still, this is an excellent and thought-provoking paper on the many dimensions of a contentious and fascinating subject.

Karen Sayer's chapter on "The Cottage Homes of England" sets Victorian and post-Victorian representations of the "domestic pastoral" (96) in the wider social context of class conflicts and Empire-building, also drawing on previous work by the author, to show how "the search for a 'real' (by which we normally mean 'ideal') cottage home" (114) and the consequent pseudoization of rural picturesqueness for bourgeois consumption have deep-set Victorian roots. This is a good paper which nonetheless could do with some shortening, much like A. Loudermilk's chapter on sentimental poet and humourist Eugene Field—yet another paper which brings some Victorian attitudes too strangely near. Field's black humour involving children's injury or death is set here in the context of nineteenth-century statistics for child mortality; he is also placed on the one hand among contemporary jolly proto-absurdist like Mark Twain or Lewis Carroll (one might add Edward Lear in this line), while, on the other, he harks forward to the destructive humour of *The Simpsons* and *South Park*. The article's speculations about Field's sexuality or psychology, though, read like aimless wonderings.

There is also a critical paper by P. Aaron Potter on the development of “genre” (i.e. “Western,” “Romance,” or “most tellingly, ‘Classics’” (140) as a marketing strategy for popular fiction from the times of Victoria. An interesting paper, but debatable insofar as Potter’s approach seems to put on a level all kinds of genres, with intelligent and cultured fiction being one more genre with no special claims to the reader’s interest. (Which reader? Not this one, to be sure.) Another chapter is an informative study by Alexis Weedon on technological and business developments in book publishing and journalism 1855–1885. This paper, by the way, is neither Foucauldian nor ‘retrospective’ apart from its claim that this period “was, arguably, the beginnings of the globalisation of the media” (120). And I should warn that the data for titles published worldwide refer exclusively to books *in English*, something taken for granted by the author but perhaps not so evident to all readers. Another literary chapter/paper, by Agnieszka Golda, addresses postmodern historical fiction (or “historiographic metafiction”) in a vein deriving from Linda Hutcheon; hardly Foucauldian, again, but this may be of interest to students of Fowles, Byatt and Graham Swift, and other postmodernist novelists who “postmodernize the Victorian in their struggle to revise and reread the Victorian milieu by employing some fashionable postmodern ploys; textual fragmentation, incorporation of variety of styles and genres” (167). The focus here is once again on retrospective effects—“In re-reading the records of the past events [in a text] one cannot avoid setting it against the contemporary context” (156). Precisely so, and that is why it is by no means clear to me that “nostalgically as contemporary fiction depicts Victorian science, it also strives to establish an atemporal, ahistorical bridge, between the twentieth century and nineteenth century minds” (164). The bridge is there all right, but it is anything but ahistorical, as history itself provides the foundations for the contrasts depicted in these books. The novelists Golda discusses are much aware of the historical processes they depict, and of their effects on ideology and discourse. It is that awareness that is the source of their use of stylistic variety and perspectival fragmentation.

And the volume closes with another paper on “rewriting” by Ana Moya, this time on Alberto Cuarón’s film adaptation of *Great Expectations*—a book to reread, but not a film that I would spend much time on. Anyway, the paper, which might do with some rewriting itself, is not concerned with the film’s quality as a film or as an adaptation, but mainly with the silencing of Estella in the novel and her visual objectification in the film. All of which is perhaps a pity, but then Bidley’s grandmother and Wemmick’s Aged Parent are not given much of a voice, or much of a hearing, either. One might dispute, too, whether it can be coherently argued that “Cuarón . . . explores a discourse of gender that locks women in their role as sexual objects of male desire” (207; my italics), or whether he simply indulges in it—seeing that “Estella is silenced now again by a camera that makes of her merely a commodity” (207).

The volume is, to my knowledge, quite free of factual errors, though some of the critical views may be disagreed with. It is moderately free of typos, too—actually, most of the typos in the book are to be found in the editorial preface, presumably the only section that did not get the benefit of a second person’s proof-reading. (I take it that as a rule there is not much in-house style editing in Spanish university presses—and there is still not much provision for books being published in English; see, for example, the URL below.) The book does not have an index, a circumstance which is common enough in Spanish books, but which is nonetheless to be missed, especially since it is wholly written in English, and

is intended to be used by a readership which expects academic books to contain an index. There is no unified bibliography, possibly a good option in this case, but no uniform system of referencing either, which must be accounted a minor shortcoming. A blurb and table of contents can be accessed at the publisher's website <<http://publicaciones.ua.es/Castellano/VerLibro.asp?ISBN=84-7908-765-x>>, which theoretically also enables you to order the book online, although the link failed to work on my computer—better try a surface mail order. The book, however, is well worth buying if you are into the 19th century—it will show you that you are, indeed, “in.”

Works Cited

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