

**NEO-VICTORIAN TROPES OF TRAUMA.  
THE POLITICS OF BEARING AFTER-WITNESS  
TO NINETEENTH-CENTURY SUFFERING**

Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben, eds.  
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Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben's *Neo-Victorian Tropes of Trauma. The Politics of Bearing After-Witness to Nineteenth-Century Suffering* represents an illuminating and comprehensive study of trauma and post-traumatic shock discourse in the context of their frequent presence in Neo-Victorian literary works from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The selection of essays in this volume makes for an understanding of the varied forms in which trauma in Neo-Victorian fiction can be re-enacted and, to some extent, re-experienced.

A particularly helpful aspect in *Neo-Victorian Tropes of Trauma* is the inclusion of the introductory section, which provides an informative overview of the chief concepts and ideas to be dealt with in the course of the book. Hence, it emphasizes the double temporal focus of trauma fiction —obviously concerned simultaneously with the moment in the past when the ordeal took place and the point in the present in which its effects continue to reverberate. Kohlke and Gutleben also encourage a consideration of the political implications of bringing back past wounds and they stress —as many of the essays in the volume also do— the often vindictive value of such a decision. Hand in hand with the political finality of historical memory, as the authors note, go the ethical implications this may entail. Inasmuch as it is concerned with dreadful episodes of human suffering: the belated re-enactment of tragedy requires a conscientious approach which, if abandoned, easily verges on sensationalism and morbid zeal. Finally, Kohlke and Gutleben

provide an outline of the main strategies that are identified throughout the different articles in the book in order to represent trauma. They anticipate how Neo-Victorian fiction writers resort to either the objectification of trauma, concentrated on the creation of a work of art or even the reception of it, and occasionally to the mimicking of the very signs and symptoms of the trauma itself.

The main body of *Neo-Victorian Tropes of Trauma* consists of three parts. The essays in Part I, “Poethics and Existential Extremity: Crises of Faith, Identity, and Sexuality”, reflect on how traumatic experiences, fundamentally at an individual level, such as crises of sexual identity or personal definition, or the collapse of personal beliefs, inform so much Neo-Victorian literature. As is cleverly suggested by the pun in the title, Part I is concerned with the discussion of the ethics and the aesthetics of the retrieval of certain traumatic events in the Victorian past. A study by the editors, “Postmodernism Revisited: The Ethical Drive of Postmodern Trauma in Neo-Victorian Fiction”, heads up the section by discussing the conjunction of Postmodernist ideas and Neo-Victorian narratives. In this regard, the position of trauma discourse at the intersection of those artistic tendencies and Victorian literature, and the long-lasting influence of the traumatic effects projected upon literary creations from all of these movements, are proposed by Kohlke and Gutleben as the major hypotheses leading to the presence of trauma in Neo-Victorian literature.

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With those views as a mainframe, the next two chapters analyze the recreation by works of Neo-Victorian fiction of traumas which had originated as a result of the clash between religious and scientific ideas. Accordingly, a common core of Darwinian theories is shared by the works examined in Georges Letissier’s and Catherine Pessa-Miquel’s articles. In the former, “Trauma by Proxy in ‘The Age of Testimony’: Paradoxes of Darwinism in the Neo-Victorian Novel”, Letissier notes how relevant the anxieties and distress provoked by scientific discourses from the Victorian era, in particular, those connected with Darwinian postulates on natural selection or the theory of evolution, continue to be for Neo-Victorian authors. The latter, as Letissier observes, will envision this ideological conflict either as a reality of catastrophic dimensions or as the key to a renewal of our system of values. Pessa-Miquel, in “Apes and Grandfathers: Traumas of Apostasy and Exclusion in John Fowles’ *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* and Graham Swift’s *Ever After*”, insists on the centrality of Darwinian science in Neo-Victorian fiction. In her article, Pessa-Miquel proposes reflecting on how parody or irony in these and other Neo-Victorian novels may serve to create in the reader a feeling of empathy with the traumatic experiences at the core of these fictions. As the author notes, in opposition to Victorian novels, which offered a view of evolution as synonymous with progress and Empire, these stories present, rather, a negative

result of this evolutionary process, which ends up in corruption and decay. From a gender studies perspective, Part I closes with the exploration of another traumatic reality around which Neo-Victorian novels frequently turn, as is the issue of incest. Mark Llewellyn's article, "Perfectly Innocent, Natural, *Playful*: Incest in Neo-Victorian Women's Writing", goes beyond the ideological analysis of how trauma derived from episodes of abuse and incestuous relationships reverberates in works by A.S. Byatt and Sarah Waters to raise questions even about the ethics of our own re-reading of the Victorian past.

The individual focus of the belated re-experiencing of trauma shifts to a collective one in Parts II and III. Even though only explicitly stated in Part III, entitled "Contesting Colonialism: Crises of Nationhood, Empire, and Afterimages", Parts II and III both deal with the effects of tragic events associated somehow with the action of colonialism—a fact which remains slightly imprecise in the case of Part II. Under the title "History's Victims and Victors: Crises of Truth and Memory", Part II gathers articles which reflect on fictional works which reenact the collapse of notions of nation and Empire when these become blurred by the traumatic outcome of imperialistic expansion in the colonies. In this regard, Rostan insists on the pragmatic capacity of literature to elicit a form of solidarity which results in a therapeutic re-experiencing of traumatic feelings. Hence, Dianne F. Sadoff studies the case of two Neo-Victorian re-writings of Dickens' novels—Lloyd Jones' *Mister Pip* and Peter Carey's *Jack Maggs*—to demonstrate how these three authors coincide in their presentation of trauma as an unrepresentable reality. In view of this, as Sadoff argues, their works attest for the need to immerse the reader in a scenario which is still haunted by the anxieties, guilt, and shame of the deferred action of the ordeal.

The volume continues to discuss the issue of the (un)representability of trauma, which takes an interesting turn when considering the graphical presentation of the traumatic event itself. In this regard, Vanessa Guignery's article "Photography, Trauma, and the Politics of War in Beryl Bainbridge's *Master Georgie*", engages in a debate about the reliability of war photographs distributed by the media in the Victorian period. This idea, central in Bainbridge's novel, leads Guignery to distrust our apprehension of traumas from the past and our propensity to be manipulated by central authorities. The ethical dimension of trauma, although with a focus on the postcolonial after-reminders of its effects, is also at the core of Celia Wallhead and Marie-Luise Kohlke's essay "The Neo-Victorian Frame of Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas*: Temporal and Traumatic Reverberations". The discussion here fittingly links Guignery's study of the untrustworthiness of our after-perceptions of tragedy, insofar as Wallhead and Kohlke's analysis brings to the fore a contemporary fictional attempt to subvert that kind of centralized manipulation.

On this occasion, the authors highlight Mitchell's novel's attempt to make the reader approach the reality of trauma by destroying our traditional Western-based views and taking us closer to the Other's position.

From a almost opposite perspective, although with a similar purpose of attaining the reader's empathy with the post-suffering of the dire consequences of war, Kate Mitchell's "Australia's 'Other' History Wars: Trauma and the Work of Cultural Memory in Kate Grenville's *The Secret River*" examines the involvement of this novel in the ethical project of retrieving past traumas for contemporary readers. Mitchell thus stresses the value of subjectivity and the action of emotional engagement in historical fiction as a means of communing with an audience that is likewise impelled by emotional forces. In connection with this, Rostan has also insisted on the advantages of representing collective trauma in Neo-Victorian fiction, where, despite the difficulties it entails, "it simultaneously bombards the everyday with the grave magnitude of the extraordinary and, paradoxically, converts this extraordinary experience to a generalizable phenomenon across a collective" (Rostan 2006: 176).

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In its last section —Part III— the volume offers a series of studies with the postcolonial as a common background. Nevertheless, as was mentioned before, it perhaps lacks some further subdivisions or specifications, as the first two essays included in this part are evidently concerned with the politics of gender within the umbrella of the postcolonial. Hence, in "Famine, Femininity, Family: Rememory and Reconciliation in Nuala O'Faolain's *My Dream of You*", Ann Heilmann examines how the suffering caused by the Irish Famine in the 1850s, aggravated by the constraints of being a woman in this period, is presented as an open wound whose pain reverberates in the life of Kathleen, the protagonist of O'Faolain's novel. For Heilmann, the remembrance of trauma on this occasion sets in motion a form of remediation by prompting the reader towards "empathic unsettlement", a sensitivity that entails "being responsive to the traumatic experience of others". (LaCapra 2001: 41-42).

After approaching trauma from a feminist postcolonial perspective, the volume brilliantly leads us to a discussion that challenges some of the main tenets of the previous analysis. Elisabeth Wesselin's article —"Unmanninng Exoticism: The Breakdown of Christian Manliness in *The Book of the Heathen*"— revises the treatment of trauma in Robert Edric's novel focusing on its conception of masculinity. What she finds is a harsh critique of manliness —frequently associated with the Christian duties of the evangelisation and control of the colonies. Simultaneously, the attack on Victorian beliefs concerning the superiority of the white man —as she observes— defies the traditional notion of "empathic settlement" from the previous discussion to unravel the reality of

a shared post-suffering of trauma marked by the different power position of its participants.

The inscriptive or commemorative value of mourning as the belated experience of trauma within the Canadian context is the centre of the article by Elodie Rousselot, “Turmoil, Trauma, and Mourning in Jane Urquhart’s *The Whirlpool*”. Rousselot revises the use of postmodern techniques in the novel in order to debunk the biased presentation of traumatic events in Victorian literature. In particular, the saturation and excess in the employment of some of those traditional resources in *The Whirlpool* are examples of this, while at the same time they allow mourning to act as a centripetal force whereby a necessary sense of community may be achieved for the Canadian nation.<sup>1</sup> The perils of a partial, Western-based approach to postcolonial trauma are also at the core of the last article in the book, “Tipoo’s Tiger on the Loose: Neo-Victorian Witness-Bearing and the Trauma of the Indian Mutiny”. Here, Marie-Luise Kohlke examines how fictions on the Indian Mutiny have reiteratively, both in Victorian and Neo-Victorian literature, served as an alibi for reasserting Otherness and the socio-political hierarchy between the colonies and the metropolis.

This excellent compilation of essays on the politics of trauma in Neo-Victorian fiction would have gained a lot had it been completed by a concluding chapter. The multiplicity of concepts and ideas handled throughout the various essays in the book requires a recapitulation. Nonetheless, the volume is outstanding and undoubtedly represents a landmark for the study of Neo-Victorian fiction.

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<sup>1</sup>. In this regard, Judith Butler, as Rousselot very conveniently observes, has noted that marking that loss “becomes condition and necessity for that certain sense of belonging” (Butler 2003: 467).

## Works cited

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