Voices from the Past: Rethinking the Ventriloquial Metaphor

In his book entitled *The Culture of the Copy*, Hillel Schwartz discusses the distribution of power in the relationship between ventriloquist and dummy: ‘The dummy’s destiny is finally determined from above, but in the meantime it makes one articulate gesture after another in the direction of free will. Together, ventriloquist and dummy allude to power and powerlessness through stand-up comedies of insolence’ (Schwartz, 1996, p. 136). Why, in a study focusing on ‘the culture of the copy’, does Hillel Schwartz offer ventriloquism as an example? What is the connection between ventriloquism and ‘copying’, or repetition? My Introduction’s discussion of extant uses of the ventriloquial metaphor in neo-Victorian scholarship highlighted a dearth of engagement with what ‘ventriloquism’ might actually signify. Despite this inclination to let ventriloquism speak for itself, there is still a recurring association between ventriloquism and ‘copying’ in the context of neo-Victorianism. For instance, Catherine Bernard argues that the ‘pervading presence’ of ventriloquism in contemporary fiction suggests: ‘The very concept of creativeness seems to have become depleted and replaced with a weaker version of invention that equates writing with the mere reactivation of past idioms, with a form of clever if exhausted mimicry’ (Bernard, 2003, p. 11). Put another way, ‘ventriloquism’ represents the lack of an independent authorial voice; neo-Victorian fiction can only produce inferior ‘copies’ of the Victorian ‘original’. In a similar vein, Christian Gutleben proposes the mythical figure of Echo as a fitting allegory for neo-Victorian authorship: ‘Is contemporary fiction [...] like Echo, doomed to have no voice of its own and to repeat the words of others?’ (Gutleben, 2001, p. 16) Ventriloquial authorship is again deemed derivative, imitative, condemned to repetition as opposed to originality.
In the above quotation Schwartz makes explicit the image that is only hinted at in Bernard’s and Gutleben’s commentaries. The ‘dummy’ is symbolic of repetition in several ways. The ventriloquist’s puppet is often a simulacrum (or ‘copy’) of a human being but, more importantly, the dummy is compelled to recite a script authored by another. As Schwartz’s gloss suggests, the dummy might appear to ‘talk back’ to its master – therein lies the comedy of the dummy/ventriloquist performance – yet its fate is sealed; ‘the dummy’s destiny is finally determined from above’. For in the specific context of the dummy/vent performance, ventriloquism is an illusion of abnegated autonomy on the part of the ventriloquist as s/he orchestrates her/his own lack of control. The audience also engages in a willing self-deception as, although the personality of the dummy is often captivating, we still know that it is just a puppet animated by the hand and voice of the ventriloquist.\(^1\) The ‘origin’ of voice is never seriously in doubt. As a metaphor for articulating the relationship between Victorian ‘originals’ and neo-Victorian ‘copies’, this understanding of ventriloquism is disappointing and limited. A fixed hierarchy is constructed between ‘original’/'copied’ voice and no matter how dazzling the ostensible ‘dialogue’ between texts we are ultimately left with neo-Victorian dummy-authors, belatedly speaking in voices which can be sourced to the nineteenth century.

There is another way in which the ventriloquial metaphor is deployed in relation to neo-Victorianism and this is also relevant to the dummy/vent exchange outlined by Schwartz: the stark division between ‘power and powerlessness’. As C. B. Davis has remarked in his commentary on uses of the ventriloquial metaphor in critical theory, ventriloquism operates as ‘a general term for any variety of speaking for and through a represented Other [...] By analogy the represented Other is the implicitly mute puppet or “dummy” of an authorial voice or Western “master discourses”’ (Davis, 1998, p. 133). As I discussed in the Introduction, ‘voice’ and social subjectivity have important conceptual links and in the above quotation, Davis highlights the metaphorical link between ‘voice’ and agency. His assessment of the generally negative connotations of the ventriloquial metaphor in relation to identity politics and lack of agency is exemplified in neo-Victorian criticism by Christine Ferguson’s article on the after-life of the Jack the Ripper story in the film version of Alan Moore’s graphic novel From Hell (2001). She condemns the Hughes Brothers, the directors of the film, for ‘ventriloquizing the suffering of a victim of brutal sexual homicide’ (Ferguson, 2009, p. 45). Ferguson’s distaste for this re-voicing is palpable. The most vicious silencing of the female murder victims is further perpetrated by patriarchal, misogynist