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THE VICTORIAN AND THE HISTORICAL IN POST-VICTORIAN FICTION

. . . the past today comes in two flavors: Victorian and then some obscure, undifferentiated far past beyond the Victorian, a time when people lived in castles (or was it caves?) and knights in armor tilted at dinosaurs.

John McGowan, "Modernity and Culture" (2000)

So I began to demand of history an Explanation. Only to uncover in this dedicated search more mysteries, more fantasticalities, more wonders and more grounds for astonishment than I started with, only to conclude forty years later . . . that history is a yarn.

Graham Swift, *Waterland* (1983)

Comparing history to silt collected at the bottom of riverbeds, Tom Crick, the protagonist of Graham Swift's *Waterland*, expresses the necessity of "scooping up from the depths this remorseless stuff that time leaves behind" (299). As a history teacher, he regards the past as "a mountain of baggage" (118) which human beings must accept and confront. Crick is, however, a very postmodern historian who sees little difference between officially recorded versions of history on the one hand and legends, myths and yarns on the other. He is not so much interested in history as a repository of factual, scientific data, but rather in the processes by which individual people remember events of the past and weave them into stories.

Tom Crick's preoccupations are shared not only by Graham Swift, who declares himself as "a writer especially interested in history" (Bernard, Menegaldo 13) but also by a number of other contemporary novelists whose works keep returning to the past. In the 1980s and the 1990s some of the most prominent writers, including John Fowles, Julian Barnes, D. M. Thomas, Salman Rushdie, Angela Carter, Jeanette Winterson, A. S. Byatt, Peter Ackroyd and Barry Unsworth, directed their gaze towards history. Retrospective fiction proliferated to such a degree that writing on the contemporary British novel, Malcolm Bradbury remarked that "the

return to the past began to assume near-epidemic proportions" (404) and Linda Hutcheon recognised "a new desire to think historically" (88) as the dominant characteristic of recent fiction.

Contemporary novels clearly do not avoid what Tom Crick describes as "the grand repertoire of history" (34). Many of them are set against the watersheds of British, European and World History. For instance, Winterson's *Sexing the Cherry* (1989) deals with the English Civil War, Ackroyd's *Hawksmoor* (1985) takes place during and after the Great Plague of London, Winterson's *The Passion* (1987) is presented against the background of the Napoleonic wars, and Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) takes as its point of departure the day when India gained independence. Simultaneously, a great number of historical personages parade over the pages of the books: Thomas Chatterton, George Meredith, Vivien Meredith and Henry Wallis in Ackroyd's *Chatterton* (1987), Napoleon and Marie Antoinette in Winterson's *The Passion*, Alfred Tennyson, Emily Jesse née Tennyson and Arthur Hallam in Byatt's "The Conjugal Angel" (1992), Karl Marx, George Gissing and Dan Leno in Ackroyd's *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* (1994).

In spite of this heavy reliance on historical background, most of the texts can hardly be classified as traditional historical novels. Instead of the pseudo-objectivity of third-person narration, with its minute reconstruction of historical detail, they make use of postmodernist narrative modes, distinctly relishing not only such ploys as multiple points of view, unreliable narrators, double endings, or unresolved contradictions in plot or theme (Hansson 105) but also the overall atmosphere of uncertainty and confusion which they provoke. As a result, no monolithic vision of History emerges, but rather a number of subjective, private histories frequently at odds with one another. Quite deliberately, the novels also employ a number of metafictional procedures, which serve to emphasise the status of those texts as linguistic constructs. Such procedures are splendidly encapsulated in the provocative words "I'm telling you stories. Trust me" which the two narrators of Jeanette Winterson's *The Passion* repeat so often that they begin to reverberate through the novel like a leitmotif. With the help of such practices, the novels display their own fictionality, facing the reader with the world that is factual and fictional at the same time. In her *Poetics of Postmodernism* (1996), Linda Hutcheon labelled this type of "new" historical novel as historiographic metafiction and defined it as encompassing "those well-known and popular novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages" (5).

Within the general category of historiographic metafiction, a great number of novels written in the 1980s and the 1990s deal with the Victorian Age. As Malcolm Bradbury aptly put it:

In a time when Mrs Thatcher sought to restore "Victorian values," and Charles Dickens and Victorian classics enjoyed a striking publishing revival, a good number of writers – encouraged, perhaps, by John Fowles' art of self-conscious retrospect – took to revisiting the era when individualism seemed stronger, the social realities clearer, and our modern history was shaping, frequently pastiching past novels or writers in this recuperative process (404).

The list of the novels which fit the description is rather extensive; the most notable examples include: A. S. Byatt's *Possession* (1990), Graham Swift's *Ever After* (1992), Peter Ackroyd's *Chatterton*, Lindsay Clarke's *The Chymical Wedding* (1989), Emma Tennant's *Tess* (1993), Peter Carey's *Jack Maggs* (1997) and Charles Palliser's *The Quincunx* (1989). With *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) as their unquestionable predecessor, these novels combine themes and strategies typical of both contemporary and Victorian literatures. Set at least partly in the nineteenth century, they look back to the Victorian Age in an attempt to bridge the gap between the two eras and their representative philosophical, cultural and literary approaches.

To describe these novels, Dana Shiller coined the term "neo-Victorian novel" (538). In the present article, however, I will refer to this new phenomenon as "post-Victorian," convinced by the argumentation used in *Victorian Afterlife*, a recently published anthology of essays which explores various ways in which postmodernism privileges the Victorian as its cultural predecessor. In the introduction to the collection, its editors, Dianne F. Sadoff and John Kucich, maintain:

... given the centrality of historical emergence that contemporary culture locates in the nineteenth century – as our collection seeks to demonstrate – aspects of late-century postmodernism could more appropriately be called "postVictorian," a term that conveys the paradoxes of historical continuity and disruption (xiii).

In *Victorian Afterlife* the term "post-Victorian" is offered as an alternative to some of the possible uses of the term "post-modern." Due to different interpretations of the prefix "post-," the "post-modern" has at least two possible meanings. On the one hand, it defines postmodernism as an immediate chronological successor of modernism; on the other, it implies a strong relationship between the two. Whether the relationship is understood as a renunciation or a continuation, the term "post-modern" designates modernism as the source of late twentieth-century culture. Understandably, critics who see certain aspects of postmodernism as an extension of the Victorian rather than modernist culture believe that when describing the Victorian-related contemporary phenomena the term "post-Victorian" should rather be used. Although (as a result of the duality inherent in the prefix "post-") the same term is sometimes applied to the cultural and literary phenomena of the years immediately succeeding the Victorian Age, critics

increasingly use it to bring to the fore complex relationships between the contemporary and Victorian cultures.

The ambiguous character of post-Victorian fictions, which allows them to combine the Victorian and the postmodern, the historical and the literary, brings to mind Bakhtin's notions of dialogism and heteroglossia. According to Bakhtin, these two qualities can be viewed as quintessentially novelistic since they allow the genre to incorporate extrinsic elements into its fabric and thus renew itself. In post-Victorian novels these dialogic qualities result in a mutually enriching interchange between the past and the present in which different attitudes, literary modes and theoretical approaches are juxtaposed, balanced and replenished.

But although post-Victorian novels invariably introduce some form of dialogue, in each of them this dialogue assumes a slightly different shape. Emma Tennant's *Tess* follows Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) in the practice of rewriting prominent Victorian novels (Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* and Charlotte Brönte's *Jane Eyre*, respectively). A. S. Byatt's *Possession* provokes a polemical confrontation between nineteenth- and twentieth-century beliefs by interweaving two plot lines, one of which is set in contemporary times, the other in the Victorian Age. Peter Ackroyd's *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* (1983) chooses the form of pastiche by disguising itself as a private diary of the controversial writer and brilliantly recreating both his witty style and his flamboyant personality.

All these forms of dialogue with the nineteenth-century past can be seen as an unmistakable sign of appreciation which postmodern literature demonstrates for its Victorian predecessor. It also serves as a means by which contemporary culture rejects the modernist heritage of anti-Victorianism and leaves behind the prejudices manifest in Lytton Strachey's *Eminent Victorians* (1918), debunking biographical sketches on such Victorian icons as Cardinal Manning, Florence Nightingale, Thomas Arnold and General Charles George Gordon, or in Virginia Woolf's essays "Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown" (1923) and "Modern Fiction" (1925), which express her denunciation of the realist method and outlook of such Victorian epigones as Arnold Bennett or John Galsworthy.

The emergence of the post-Victorian novel, however, is only one of many manifestations of the postmodernist obsession with the nineteenth century. As essays collected in *Victorian Afterlife* demonstrate, the phenomenon of Victorian revivalism has penetrated virtually every sphere of contemporary culture. Film adaptations of Victorian classics, theatrical performances based on Victorian themes, exhibitions of Victorian photographs and manuscripts, critical inquiries into the implications of nineteenth-century literature, philosophy or politics, and the enormous popularity of collecting Victorian bric-a-brac are some of the other symptoms of this Victorian frenzy.

The ensuing question of why postmodernism gives preference to the Victorian defies an unequivocal answer. Still, Malcolm Bradbury's already quoted words in which he describes the Victorian Age as "the era when . . . our modern history was shaping" (404) provide a good starting point for possible considerations. The transitory nature of the nineteenth century, which straddled the gap between the rural past and the industrial future, allows postmodernism to recognise in the Victorian Age what it loves most: paradoxical self-contradictoriness. That, in turn, makes the textualised Victorian past into a flexible mass which can be moulded so as to substantiate a variety of theoretical approaches. Those who want to stress the similarity between the two eras may follow in the footsteps of the theorists who:

. . . claim to have found in the nineteenth century the origins of contemporary consumerism (Baudrillard), sexual science (Foucault), gay culture (Sedgwick at al.), and gender identity (Gilbert and Gubar, Showalter, Armstrong). Ethnography, economics, science studies, the history of medicine, and other popular areas of scholarly inquiry have focused on the nineteenth-century materials that they view as anchoring their respective disciplinary paradigms (Kucich, Sadoff, xiii-xiv).

Those who would rather emphasise the difference may obviously try to prove the opposite by underlining insurmountable conflicts between realist and postmodernist literary approaches, Victorian patriarchy and contemporary feminism, their sexual repression and our sexual freedom, or – to reverse the biased order of binary oppositions – between their moral stature and our frivolity, their insistence on individualism and our cultural homogenisation.

Oscillating between these contradictory hypotheses, post-Victorian novels continually compare and contrast various aspects of "now" and "then". As a result, they can be seen as hybrids, merging different styles, genres, narrative modes and literary approaches. I see this hybridity as central to any discussion of post-Victorian fiction and therefore as a characteristic which should be accounted for when attempting to classify the phenomenon. In my view, this hybrid quality may provide a clearly defined organising principle, without which all cataloguing endeavours have little merit, as exemplified by Dana Shiller's classification.

In her article on post-Victorian fictions (or neo-Victorian novels, as she chooses to name them), Schiller divides the texts into three categories and specifies their respective representatives:

. . . this capacious umbrella [of neo-Victorian novels] includes texts that revise specific Victorian precursors, texts that imagine new adventures for familiar Victorian characters, and "new" Victorian fictions that imitate nineteenth-century literary conventions. . . . Valerie Martin's *Mary Reilly* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1990) epitomizes the first category, while I would place in the second group Peter Ackroyd's *Chatterton* (New York: Grove

Press, 1987) and A. S. Byatt's novella "The Conjugal Angel" (in *Angels and Insects*, New York: Random House, 1990). Byatt's *Possession* (New York: Random House, 1990) and Charles Palliser's *The Quincunx* (London: Canongate, 1989) are two of the best-known exemplars of the final class of neo-Victorian novels (558).

This classification, however, does not have a definite basis, which becomes apparent when comparing three of the works that Shiller provides as her examples: Ackroyd's *Chatterton* and Byatt's *Possession* and "The Conjugal Angel." Although *Chatterton* and *Possession* are placed in two distinct categories, they share a number of characteristics. Both employ multiple plots placed at different temporal planes. Both feature characters probing into the past to unearth a hidden secret. Both display metafictional self-reflexivity. Finally, both question the possibility of discovering the complete truth about the past. In contrast, *Chatterton* and "The Conjugal Angel," though dealing with historical personages and as such classified by Shiller within the same group, have little else in common. Unlike *Chatterton* (or *Possession*), "The Conjugal Angel" functions as a pseudo-traditional Victorian narrative: it has one central plot with no visible twentieth-century perspective. It also makes no use of metafictional strategies.

Shiller's classification also allows for a considerable degree of overlap between its three categories. When it is applied to other post-Victorian texts, it turns out that they fit into two, or even all three, categories at the same time. A good example might be Peter Carey's *Jack Maggs*, which revises Dickens's *Great Expectations* and "imagines new adventures" for Charles Dickens who is portrayed in the novel as Tobias Oates and also "imitates nineteenth-century literary conventions." A similar ambiguity arises in relation to such texts as Ackroyd's *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* or even his *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* because what precludes novels in which "real" Victorians appear from imitating nineteenth-century conventions?

Such problems in the classification of post-Victorian texts can be avoided by taking into consideration the hybridity which accounts for various tensions that characterise this type of fiction. The tensions pertain to both the form and content of the novels: they may result from the clashing ideas and beliefs of two different generations; just as well, however, they may exist between distinct literary conventions that rift the integrity of those half-postmodern half-Victorian novels. Depending on the character of these tensions, it is possible to classify post-Victorian novels into three subgroups: texts that rewrite specific Victorian precedents, texts that flaunt their hybrid nature by deliberately interweaving postmodernism and Victorianism, and texts that try to recapture the Victorian literary conventions but prove unable to ignore the contemporary perspective.

The first group includes novels such as Valerie Martin's *Mary Reilly*, Peter Carey's *Jack Maggs*, Sue Roe's *Estella: Her Expectations* (1982), Emma Tennant's *Tess* or her *Two Women of London: The Strange Case of Ms Jekyll and Mrs Hyde* (1989). All these novels deliberately attach themselves to earlier works and, as Steven Connor suggested, "engage with the history of beliefs and attitudes to which their originals have belonged and which they have helped to shape" (167). Most typically, these novels are feminist or postcolonial rewritings, representing the "other" in its battle against the Victorian novel as a stronghold of the white, European, bourgeois culture. When the reader considers the novels in isolation, their hybridity seems non-existent. However, it comes clearly into view as soon as the texts are set against their Victorian counterparts.

The second group embraces such novels as A. S. Byatt's *Possession*, Graham Swift's *Ever After*, Peter Ackroyd's *Chatterton* or Lindsay Clarke's *The Chymical Wedding*. With the exception of *Chatterton*, which moves between three temporal planes, each of the novels uses a double narrative structure, alternating between Victorian and contemporary settings. As the hybridised nineteenth- and twentieth-century narratives develop, contemporary characters find themselves in circumstances similar to those of their Victorian counterparts. In *The Chymical Wedding*, Laura, a sensible young woman with mystic powers, envisions and then reenacts certain events from the life of Luisa Agnew, the mysterious Victorian lady whose secret she wants to unearth. In *Possession*, Roland Michell and Maud Bailey, contemporary scholars delving into the romantic relationship of two mid-Victorian poets, fall in love only to discover that all along they "were being driven by a plot or fate that seemed, at least possibly, to be not their plot but that of those others" (421). In *Ever After*, a novel about "two different ways to have the world fall apart" (Bernard, Menegaldo 1991, 12), Bill Unwin, devastated after the death of his beloved wife, finds his personal values at odds with the convictions of Matthew Pearce, his nineteenth-century ancestor who abandoned his own family after his hitherto peaceful life had been shattered by a crisis of belief.

Such texts as Peter Carey's *Oscar and Lucinda* (1988), Peter Ackroyd's *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem*, Charles Palliser's *The Quincunx*, or the two novellas included in A. S. Byatt's *Angels and Insects* fall into the third group of post-Victorian fiction. All these books follow Victorian literary conventions, luring inattentive readers into believing that they are confronted with realistic nineteenth-century narratives. Here and there, however, the books contain inconsistent elements which hint at the tricky nature of these Victorian impostors. Discussing the "hidden narrative" interwoven into *The Quincunx*, Charles Palliser admits the impulse to subvert the conventions of the Victorian fiction:

I wanted to writ[e] a book that could – at first sight – be read as a Victorian novel but in which the suppressed issues that are only just pushed out of sight keep threatening to break loose and disrupt the unruffled and seamless surface that Victorian public ideology – like any ideology – tries to present (1204).

The hybrid nature of such novels as *The Quincunx* results from the tension between their superficial Victorianism and the postmodern strategies by means of which they try to undermine the conventions of nineteenth-century realism.

Polemical dialogues with Victorian philosophy, ideology or literary modes undoubtedly show that in post-Victorian fiction the nineteenth century functions as a benchmark against which contemporary culture tries to define itself. On a deeper level, they are also manifestations of the characteristically postmodern interest in history. As a subset of historiographic metafiction, post-Victorian novels display an unorthodox attitude towards the past, which some critics condemn as incompatible with “genuine historicity.” In *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Fredric Jameson juxtaposes a prime example of historiographic metafiction, E. L. Doctorow’s *Ragtime*, with the “real” historical novel of the nineteenth century and finds the former wanting since:

. . . it can no longer gaze directly on some putative real world, at some reconstruction of a past history which was once itself a present; rather, as in Plato’s cave, it must trace our mental images of that past upon its confining walls . . . in which we are condemned to seek History by way of our own pop images and simulacra of that history, which itself remains forever out of reach (25).

Jameson’s quixotic search for History (“the old monadic subject” as he calls it) would certainly astonish a great number of contemporary historians who grow more and more sceptical about its existence. Postmodern historiographers like Hayden White and Frank Ankersmit condemn earlier attempts at “reduc[ing] history to a single, massive monolith that left no room for dissonant voices” (Pieters, 21–22) and replace the concept of History with that of multiple, contesting histories. They also recognise the act of historical writing as a process by which real events are ranked, selected and then recorded in such a way as to display the coherence of a story, with a chronologically sequenced, beginning-middle-end structure. Real events, however, do not offer themselves to us in such a form, it is the historiographer that places them within the narrative framework of a historical account and certifies them as historical facts.

As human constructs, historical documents cannot help supplementing or reworking “reality” so as to present specific political agendas. Since historiographers are never free from bias, their beliefs must permeate their writings, implicating historical accounts in ideology and depriving history

of the status of "a mythological locus for some prediscursive image of 'reality'" (LaCapra 10). Consequently, postmodern historiographers are most distrustful of the documentary-like, pseudo-objective third-person narration, where no reference to the external, discursive situation is ever made and events are presented as if they narrated themselves. Such a model allows historical texts to mask what is in fact yet another mechanism of control under the pretence of an objective, scientific recounting of events. While political, moral and ideological bias is not at all absent from these narratives, they abuse the rhetoric of the truth by camouflaging themselves as trustworthy, impartial accounts.

All in all, postmodern historiography shows that history makes use of the narrative conventions that are traditionally associated with the realm of literary fiction. As "a form of fabulation" (Gąsiorek 149), history shares with fiction a number of characteristics. Both are discursive systems, reliant on verisimilitude, teleology, selection (and exclusion) of material, temporal organisation and emplotment. Both employ central subjects and identifiable narrative voices. Finally, both history and fiction have behind them passionate affairs with nineteenth-century realism, which presented them as capable of representing the world in an objective manner and involved them in the positivistic project of improving society.

The problem is, however, that although literature and history have always stood shoulder to shoulder, since the end of the nineteenth century they have clearly not been on speaking terms. With the approach of a new century, literature wheeled forward into modernism where it found itself under the influence of the New Criticism, which insisted on the intrinsic value of a literary text as a separate and self-contained entity and opposed the critical practices of examining literature from historical or biographical perspectives. At the same time, traditional historians' fascination with the scientific model of investigation, based on systematic data collection, meticulous analysis of facts and extreme documentary objectivism, fixed history in nineteenth-century conventions. Unsurprisingly, hermetic literary practice and scientific historiography felt ill at ease in each other's company.

Now that both disciplines have been exposed as reliant on identical discursive strategies, postmodern literary critics and philosophers of history become increasingly interested in each other's works. Historians admit the need for an alternative approach to literature, which would envision "both a different understanding of literary texts and a different relationship between historiography and literary criticism" (LaCapra 127); while literary critics confess to being influenced by this new historiography. They all stress the necessity of bringing literature and history into dialogue. Judging from the proliferation of historiographic metafiction, however, the dialogue may already be well under way.

As a subgenre of historiographic metafiction, the post-Victorian novel can be seen as a manifestation of the revived interest in historical retrospection. Obviously, the changes in the approach to history evident in the works of Hayden White or Dominick LaCapra must have influenced these novels, resulting in what Marguerite Alexander calls "experimental approaches to history" (125). Contesting versions of history, double endings, unreliable narrators, multiple points of view, hidden narratives or unresolved contradictions in plots are only some of the stratagems used by contemporary retrospective fiction to evoke the climate of uncertainty as regards historical knowledge. But even though all these ploys serve to convince the reader that neither fictional nor factual narratives are completely trustworthy, and that the truth about the past can never be completely recovered, the novels insist on the validity of all historical inquiries, working on the assumption that knowledge of the past, even when fractured or embroidered, provides the key to the understanding of the present.

The central aspect of all post-Victorian novels resides in their hybrid nature, by means of which they weave together the Victorian and the postmodern, the historical and the literary. Such practices as the creative replenishment of seemingly used-up Victorian conventions, or the novelistic assimilation of recent developments in the theory of history result in a beneficial interchange between different perspectives and voices. They also serve as "rejuvenating" strategies demonstrating that the hybridity of post-Victorian fiction can be understood as a manifestation of the dialogic nature of the novelistic genre and as a stage in the process of its continual renewal. It may only be a paradox (but after all postmodernism revels in paradoxes) that this process of regeneration is enacted by striking a dialogue with the past and forging an alliance with a discipline which literature seems to have divorced over a century ago.

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