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**Texts in Dialogue:  
Domesticating the Past**

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## **Texts in Dialogue: Domesticating the Past**

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### **Abstract**

The rise of neo-Victorian literature can be linked to the growing interest in the dialogue with the past. Dialogue, the concept highlighted by M. M. Bakhtin in his study of the novel, accounts for the emergence of Neo-Victorian literature. Referring to their Victorian counterparts, Neo-Victorian texts show that the 21<sup>st</sup> century reader is still anchored in the reality belonging to the past. As aptly indicated by Philip Davis in his *Why Victorian Literature Still Matters*, Victorian texts are placed “psychologically as well as historically in transition” (qtd. in Brown, 148). Hence, they are never outdated and always topical, both for the past and present readers. Philip Davis refers to a “(...) place in the mind that makes the experience of Victorian literature always matter” (qtd. in Brown, 148). This transitional value of Victorian texts seems to secure the contemporary interest in revising the nineteenth century literature from the modern perspective. Thus, the attempt at introducing Victorian texts into the modern reader’s context can be perceived as an endeavour to (re)define the past by means of the present. The Neo-Victorian novels such as Jean Rhys’ *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) or Syrie James’ *The Secret Diaries of Charlotte Brontë* (2009) highlight the apparent inconclusiveness of the literary past, as well as the necessity to revise it. Thus, in my paper, I would like to examine the issue of negotiating the literary past through revision. Moreover, I would like to argue that understanding the literary past is strictly dependent on the process of “domesticating” it. Based on Bakhtin’s theory of dialogism, I argue that neo-Victorian literature emerges in the perpetual process of retelling the literary Victorian past from various perspectives. Therefore, the *process of retelling* seems to become the paramount, undogmatic force shaping the literary discourse in neo-Victorian works.

**Keywords:** Bakhtin, dialogism, the novel, Victorian literature, neo-Victorian literature

### Neo-Victorian Literature: Revisioning the Past

In her work entitled *Neo-Victorian Fiction and Historical Narrative* Louisa Hadley defines Neo-Victorian fiction as “contemporaneous with but [not] reduced to the category of postmodernism” and she argues that neo-Victorian fiction “is distinguished from postmodernism by its Victorian setting” (60). Importantly, Hadley points to “bi-directionality” of the neo-Victorian works placed “within both [their] contemporary and [their] Victorian context” (15).

Treating neo-Victorian texts as a response to their Victorian counterparts allows one to follow Michael Holquist’s claim based on Bakhtin’s study that “the novel (...) dramatizes the gaps that always exist between what is told and the telling of it, constantly experimenting with social, discursive and narrative asymmetries” (*Dialogic Imagination*, xxvii). Arguing along these lines, Philip Davis observes that Victorian literature is characterized by “an individual appeal and connection with present-day readers” which “keep the Victorian alive as a vital force in our contemporary culture” (qtd. in Brown, “The Autobiography of a neo-Victorian,” 148). Importantly, Davis views Victorian literature as placed “psychologically as well as historically in transition” (148). Hence, it is the literature which is never outdated and always topical, applicable both for the past and present readers. This transitional value of Victorian texts seems to account for the contemporary interest in revisioning the 19<sup>th</sup> century literature from the modern perspective and unleashes the Victorian past from the historical frames, conventionally stretching between the years 1837-1901.

In consequence, numerous modern works echo the themes derived from Victorian novels. According to Andrea Kirchknopf, “feminist, postcolonial and cultural revisions of the term *Victorian* prove crucial for a better understanding of how the postmodern takes issue with the nineteenth-century” (55). These revisions, in the forms of prequels or sequels, often alter the perception of the canonical Victorian works, re-analyzing them from the twenty first century standpoint. For instance, Jean Rhys’ neo-Victorian novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) figures as the prequel to Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847). In Rhys’ novel, however, it is Bertha – the secondary character from *Jane Eyre* rather than the heroine of Brontë’s novel – who gains the major narrative space. Syrie James’ work, *The Secret Diaries of Charlotte Brontë* (2009), in turn, presents the lives of the Brontë sisters in the form of a novelistic narrative based on the biographies including those by Elizabeth Gaskell (1857) or Winifred Gérin (1967).

While Neo-Victorian texts exhibit a deep interest in the nineteenth century, they do not necessarily idealize the Victorian period itself, treating it as the initial point of the story telling. This multi-layered relation between Victorian and neo-Victorian texts can be depicted by means of Bakhtin’s theory of dialogism.

## The Novel as the Dialogic Genre

Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin (1895-1975), the Russian philosopher and literary critic, is primarily acknowledged for his interest in the specific multi-layered character of language. Bakhtin's fundamental claim predicates that dialogue underpins each literary construct, while meaning cannot be "viewed as a finished product" (Haberer, 56). Thus, Bakhtin highlights the importance of the dialogic tradition and traces it back to antiquity and to the Socratic dialogues in particular. In the essay entitled "Epic and Novel," he stresses the relevance of the Socratic dialogues as critical documents paving the way for the modern, perfected dialogic genre – the novel (*Dialogic Imagination*, 24). What fascinates Bakhtin in the Socratic dialogues is their responsiveness and interaction with the real world, as well as their rejection of the *absolute past* built on the tradition of monologism and rhetoric. Thus, Bakhtin unequivocally criticizes the high genres, such as the epic, accusing them of hindering dialogue and evading the reader's zone. The language of the high genres, he remarks, serves as a means of speaking about the dead (20). Thus, the high genres show the literary past that cannot be accessed or verified by the reader. While dialogue embodies "the only true art of politics in pursuit of justice and the other virtues" (Zappen, 14), rhetoric discloses itself as the means of monologic persuasion. According to Bakhtin, the past, uncharted and absolute in its depiction, becomes abstract and thus hostile. The only way to explore the literary past is to enter into a dialogue with it. The novel, as Bakhtin believes, is the only genre capable of undertaking a dialogic task, as it offers an undogmatic plane filled with numerous and diverse voices of the characters, narrators and the author as well. Most importantly, in the novel, all of the voices possess an equal status and lead interrelated discourses.

## Dialogism: Crossing the Borders of Time and Space

Bakhtin's paramount concept of *dialogism*, the term indicating "the characteristic epistemological mode of a world dominated by heteroglossia," arises from the notion of the synchrony of equally privileged voices: "everything (...) is understood as a part of a greater whole – there is a constant interaction between meanings (...)", indicates Bakhtin (*Dialogic Imagination*, 426). What appears as the determinative feature of dialogism is the *addressivity of language* (Allen, 20) and the fact that each utterance gains the meaning only through the interaction among the speaking voices.

*The addressivity of language* triggers, what can be named, "the addressivity of texts". As stressed by Bakhtin, the novel is the only existing literary genre capable of revisioning the past by means of dialogue. Subsequently, it is the only literary genre capable of "crossing the borders" of time and commenting on itself from the temporal distance (as mentioned by Bakhtin in *The Dialogic Imagination*, 6). The modern neo-Victorian revisions of the canonical Victorian texts, such as Syrie James' *The Secret Diaries of*

*Charlotte Brontë* or Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*, illustrate the ongoing process of the novelistic genre engaging into a never-ending dialogue concerning its own nature. According to Bakhtin's vision, the novel "(...) has a completely different relationship to languages from other genres since it constantly experiments with new shapes in order to display the variety and immediacy of speech diversity" (*The Dialogic Imagination*, xxix).

What is more, as stated in the introductory note to *The Dialogic Imagination*, "the novel (...) dramatizes the gaps that always exist between what is told and the telling of it, constantly experimenting with social, discursive and narrative asymmetries" (xxvii). Thus, each novel, while undertaking the same problem, offers a unique vision introduced from a specific and diverse angle, marked not only by the temporal distance but also by the distinct historical and social context.

### **Dialogism: The Process of Negotiation**

In neo-Victorian texts, the past becomes almost tangible – it can be formed anew into a shape never thought of before. Consequently, the author of the neo-Victorian novel molds the past into a shape influenced by the modern context. Such literary endeavour can be perceived as the *appropriation* of the past. Through *appropriation*, the past ceases to appear unfamiliar to the modern reader. The retold and thus appropriated past enters the zone of the author and the reader as well. On the whole, what happens in neo-Victorian fiction is the process of foregrounding of the new aspects of the past (with the past no longer understood as something complete, but rather as a fluid, inconclusive entity endowed with fuzzy boundaries). It seems that one can understand the historical context (hence, the past) by means of glancing at it from the specific perspective of the socio-cultural context that one belongs to. Essentially, understanding the past always requires a point of reference, a comparison. Thus, the past cannot be understood and "domesticated" in isolation.

As the point of reference changes simultaneously with the passing époques, one is confronted with varying representations of the past in literature as well. The authors of Victorian-inspired novels work with the blend of the nineteenth-century past and the twenty first-century present, enabling one to discover new qualities in the neo-Victorian discourse. Essentially, using Bakhtinian terms, the Victorian past is not factual, as it remains remote from the one who strives to investigate its boundaries. While there is no immediate contact with the Victorian past, the descriptions of the bygone in neo-Victorian texts appear rather speculative or normative. Thus, the only comprehensive way of investigating the literary past lies in entering with it into a dialogue of possibilities and interpretations (without seeking the *ultimate truth*). While there are diverse literary interpretations of the Victorian past, it is hard to mark out the "facts" concerning that period. Thus, I argue that the alternative way to

explore this temporally and historically remote zone lies in Bakhtinian dialogue.

### **Dialogism and Literature: Syrie James' Novel and Charlotte Brontë's Biographies**

Syrie James' novel *The Secret Diaries of Charlotte Brontë* (2009) – the novelistic reworking of the Brontës' biographies – provides an engaging example of approximating and appropriating the Victorian past. In James' novel, the characters and the reader seem to operate within the same emotional plane. As Bakhtin argues:

in place of our tedious lives we are offered (...) the surrogate of a fascinating and brilliant life. We can experience (...) adventures, identify with (...) heroes; such novels almost become a substitute for our own lives. Nothing of the sort is possible in the epic and other distanced genres. And here we encounter the specific danger inherent in the novelistic zone of contact: we ourselves may actually enter the novel (...). It follows that we might substitute for our own life an obsessive reading of novels, or dreams based on novelistic models (...), the real-life appearance of fashionable heroes taken from novels (...). Other genres are capable of generating such phenomena only after having been novelized, that is, after having been transported to the novelistic zone of contact (...) (*Dialogic Imagination*, 32-33).

Syrie James' neo-Victorian work provides a tempting opportunity to submerge oneself in the world narrated by fictitious Charlotte Brontë and to “substitute for our own life an obsessive reading” (*Dialogic imagination*, 32). While James offers a biographical work seemingly narrated by Charlotte Brontë herself, she simultaneously reduces the distance between the reader and the past. The story of Charlotte Brontë's life, told in the first person narration on the pages of a fictional diary, appears irresistibly veritable and emotional. While the readers are confronted with a biography structured as a novel, the illusion of reading Brontë's actual diary remains persistent. The beginning of *The Secret Diaries* (...) invites the readers to step into the fictional world and make believe that they bear witness to Brontë's first-hand thoughts:

I have received a proposal of marriage. Diary, this offer, which came some months past, has thrown my entire household – nay, the entire village – into an uproar. Who is this man who has dared to ask for my hand? Why is my father so dead set against him? (...) Since the moment of his offer, I have lain awake night after night, pondering the multitude of events which have led up to this conflagration. How on earth, I wonder, did things get so out of hand? (3).

The narrative strategies involved by James in the above-presented passage include not only the first person point of view, but also the direct reference to the diary that originally figures as the primal and, supposedly, the sole audience receiving Charlotte's thoughts. In Syrie's text, Charlotte Brontë becomes an active participant in the narrated events and she is placed in the centre of the described world. The language of *The Secret Diaries (...)* is stylized on Brontë's original mode of writing and the plot adheres to the Victorian convention of writing dairies. David Amigoni, in his *Life Writing and Victorian Culture*, argues that "individual [Victorian] dairies had a tendency to move backwards and forwards between different modes" (29), which is discernible in James' work as well (*The Secret Diaries (...)*, 189).

Importantly, Brontë's narration is distorted by questions and filled with informal expressions ("nay," "how on earth"). The emphasis on the "self" is also highlighted when Charlotte asks questions accentuated by the "I wonder" expression. The questions indicate an endeavour to comprehend the events of the heroine's life by means of describing them in the diary.

The fictional record of Brontë's thoughts appears even more veritable when one recognizes the importance of writing in Charlotte's "real" life. "The faculty of imagination lifted me when I was sinking (...); its active exercise has kept my head above water (...)", indicated Brontë in a letter to a publisher, describing the beneficial effects of writing and inventiveness on her life (Gaskell, 383). In James' novelistic biography, Charlotte Brontë – as a fictional character – stresses the relevance of imagination in a similar vein: "There is one place," said the voice in my head, 'where you have always found consolation and refuge in times of need: your imagination" (235-236).

However, it is not only Charlotte's imagination that gains prominent importance in James' novel. James painstakingly draws on the previous biographical sources concerning Brontë's life in order to create as "truthful" narrative as possible. For instance, in James' novel, one can detect traces of Winifred Gérin's work devoted to Brontë's life. In her biography entitled *Charlotte Brontë: the Evolution of Genius* (1967), Gérin describes the publisher's reaction on receiving the draft of *Jane Eyre*:

*Jane Eyre* was no sooner read by the firm's reader, William Smith Williams, than the rarity of its quality was recognized; it was devoured on his recommendation by Mr. Smith in the course of a Sunday. Beginning it after breakfast, he interrupted his reading merely by a sandwich and a glass of wine for lunch, cancelled an afternoon engagement with a friend to go riding into the country, bolted his dinner, and did not go to bed till he had finished the book (338).

Interestingly enough, forty two years later, Syrie James uses this slightly modified quotation in her novel, turning the excerpt into the first person narration:



It was not until some years later, after I had met and become friends with my publisher, that I blushinglly learned of the circumstances surrounding the acceptance of my novel. (...) Mr. Smith (...) devoured the entire novel on a single Sunday, beginning after breakfast, cancelling an appointment to go riding with a friend into the country, bolting his dinner, and unable to retire for the night until he had finished the book (259-260).

While both of the above-quoted passages contain univocal information, the reader is inclined to establish the emotional link with the second excerpt presented in the form of a diary. The confidential and private overtone of the second passage evokes the reader's interest and involvement with the text. Thus, the diary-like passage "transports" the reader to the heroine's fictional world.

"What is a diary?", asks Philippe Lejeune in his work devoted to the analysis of this genre (*On Diary*, 168). Furthermore, he analyzes the issue of "approach[ing] the diary in terms of *reading* it" (169). Lejeune focuses on the possibility of

[u]s[ing] the *novel in diary form* as a tool for observing the personal diary, insofar as it tries to reach a *compromise* between the characteristics of the diary (immediacy, contingency, no control over time, no attempt at literary communication) and of the novel (reconstruction, meaning, communication) (169).

Similarly, in "Epic and Novel," Bakhtin argues that "in later stages of its development the novel makes wide and substantial use of letters, diaries, confessions (...)" (*Dialogic Imagination*, 33). What follows, Bakhtin explicates the idea of constructing the novel based on the historical sources: "(...) the boundaries between fiction and nonfiction, between literature and nonliterature and so forth are not laid up in heaven. Every specific situation is historical," he remarks (33). Thus, James' fictional diary remains "truthful" in a sense that it is built on the previously written texts.

According to Bakhtin, only the novel possesses the characteristic "impulse to continue", which confirms the inconclusive status of this genre (32). Thus, Syrie James' biographical narrative is an attempt to retell the same story anew – not only from the historical distance, but also from an innovative literary angle, combining the novelistic discourse with the confessional mode of writing.

Weaving the captivating story based on the previous biographies concerning the Brontë sisters' lives not only enables James to retell the past by means of the storyline, but also allows her to introduce new qualities into the text. For instance, James creates a highly individualized image of Charlotte Brontë as a speaker with whom the reader can identify and sympathize. In James' text Charlotte Brontë ceases to exist as a flat character, as she turns into an ordinary woman who seeks emotional and intellectual fulfillment.

Interestingly enough, Charlotte Brontë – as the heroine of James’ novel – emerges constructed from the previous texts, including biographies and novels. Thus, James’ heroine is not an inventive idea of the authoress. Rather than that, the eponymous heroine of *The Secret Diaries* springs from the intertextual dialogue with Brontë’s biographies and her own novels, including *Jane Eyre* (1847), *Shirley* (1849) or *The Professor* (1857).

Consequently, in *The Secret Diaries* (...), the dialogue with the past is a multi-layered construct. In James’ novel, it is not only Charlotte Brontë that emerges as a dialogical creation but also the heroine’s life is destined towards the Victorian “happy ending”. While James’ novel ends with Brontë’s happy marriage to Mr. Nicholls, it simultaneously provides the desired Victorian dénouement. Thus, the ending depicts Charlotte Brontë “melt[ing] into [Mr. Nicholls] embrace” (449).

Syrie James, in her “Author’s Foreword,” justifies the reworking of the Brontës’ biographies. In doing so, she recalls the famous expression associated with Charlotte’s writing, and, especially, with *Jane Eyre* (“Dear Reader”). This loanword allows James to approach Charlotte Brontë’s personal zone:

Dear Reader, imagine, if you will, that a great discovery has been made, which has sparked enormous excitement in the literary world: a series of journals (...) have been officially authenticated as the private diaries of Charlotte Brontë. What would those diaries reveal? (...) Seeking the answers to these questions, I began a meticulous study of Charlotte’s life. (...) The story you are about to read is true. Charlotte’s life story is so fascinating, that I was able to spin the tale based almost entirely on fact, conjecturing only where I deemed necessary to enhance dramatic conflict or to fill in gaps in the history, and adding selected comments and footnotes for clarification ( xv-xvi).

Just as James’ “secret diary,” the Victorian past can be *rediscovered* and *reanalyzed* anew in the light of neo-Victorian works.

Importantly, Syrie James persuades the readers into believing that her novel tells a true story. If one perceives the past in the spirit of Bakhtinian dialogism – as a number of perspectives represented by numerous voices from various viewpoints – each of these perspectives will appear to be equally true. While remembering that the direct access to the past (and, thus, the direct access to the *ultimate truth* concerning this past) remains unattainable, it is still possible to perceive James’ novel as a proposal – a possible interpretation of the past. Thus, Syrie James’ retelling of the Brontës’ lives in an original, highly subjective way does not make her interpretation false but, at the same time, does not come closer to the ultimate truth. It is an option, a proposal, a perspective of the past offered to the reader who analyses the text in a highly personal way. By introducing the novelistic form of writing, James strives to approximate the past. Through the narrative, she “domesticates” the past and brings it closer to the reader’s zone. Charlotte Brontë, as a person writing a

secret diary and speaking on its pages about her daily life, presents to the reader a “more trustworthy picture” than if described in a biographical work by means of the third person narration. Speaking “for herself,” Charlotte “enters” contemporaneity and becomes less remote from the reader as a semi-real, sympathetic figure. In effect, Charlotte turns into an ordinary person fighting with everyday fears and apprehensions. Simultaneously, Brontë’s past becomes “domesticated” and adopted to the modern framework of interpretation.

## Conclusion

Dialogism, in the literary context, can be perceived as the mode of analyzing one text in the interaction with another. Dialogism points to the fact that each narrated story is never one or two dimensional, but, instead, can be interpreted from numerous angles. In this sense, each work can be compared to a proposal chosen from the plurality of voices.

Moreover, the elements derived either from Victorian or neo-Victorian texts remain in the interaction with the greater “whole” created by the texts analyzed in the interaction with each other. As indicated in the glossary to *The Dialogic Imagination*,

[e]verything means, is understood, as a part of a greater whole – there is a constant interaction between meanings, all of which have the potential of conditioning others. Which will affect the other, how it will do so and in what degree is what is actually settled at the moment of utterance (426).

The above-presented definition justifies Bakhtin’s choice of the novel as the superior genre. The novel appears to constitute the perfect habitat for the sustenance of dialogue. What is more, the novel, an ever-developing genre, remains open-ended and, thus, receives a responsive quality. It is not guided by the idea of a central, authoritarian discourse. Rather than that, the novel introduces a series of varying and equally important perspectives. Consequently, the novel successfully escapes the strict scientific classification. The day in which the novel as a genre became ultimately classified and described would definitely mean the day when the novel is no more. However, for the sake of scientific clarity, it is impossible to deal with the task of describing the novel without introducing the basic normative concepts of the genre. For instance, Andrea Kirchknopf enumerates the features of Victorian and neo-Victorian novels and points out such verifiable qualities as: “the bulky 500 pages,” divisions into chapters or the Bildungsroman genre (54).

On the other hand, neo-Victorian texts, as the new phenomenon on the modern literary scene, figure as explicit examples illustrating the process of change that the novel constantly undergoes. As highlighted in *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature*,

[i]n his insistence on the novel's dynamism, Bakhtin teaches us a great deal about its history and its future. As he observes, although the novel has existed since ancient times, its full potential was not developed until after the Renaissance. A major factor was the development of a sense of linear time, past, present, and especially the future, moving away from the cyclical time of ancient epochs. Whereas the epic lives in cyclical time, the novel is oriented to contemporary reality (305-306).

Thus, Bakhtin arrives at the conclusion that the perfection of the novel lies, paradoxically, in its incompleteness as a genre. Therefore, the *act of retelling* seems to become the dominant, undogmatic force shaping the modern literary discourse. Thus, the novel emerges as an ever-developing, self-criticising genre that constantly strives to retell the past anew.

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