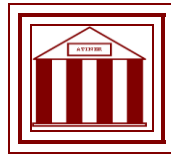


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**Reviving the Victorians in the Twenty-First
Century: Writing about the Present?**

**Aleksandra Tryniecka
PhD Student
Maria Curie-Skłodowska University
Poland**

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Reviving the Victorians in the Twenty-First Century: Writing about the Present?

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Abstract

In his work *Why Read?* Mark Edmundson observes that “[w]e read to assert ourselves, to sharpen our analytical faculties. We read to debunk the myths. We read to know the other (...)” (52). While the reading process does not offer the “final” or “ultimate” truth, it encourages critical reflection both on the past and the present.

In my paper I strive to answer the question: what does it mean to read Neo-Victorian fiction and what does this act signify for the present and for the modern reader? Consequently, I strive to define neo-Victorian fiction. While adopting Louisa Hadley’s notion of ventriloquism, I interpret neo-Victorian texts as literary mediums set in the nineteenth-century past, yet also consciously narrating the present. Furthermore, based on L. Hadley’s, A. Heilmann’s and M. Llewelyn’s works, I analyse the idea of the historical involvement of neo-Victorian fiction against the notions of parody and pastiche. Moreover, I discuss the process of reviving the popular nineteenth-century genres (biography, detective fiction, Bildungsroman) in the modern neo-Victorian framework. Finally, I describe neo-Victorian fiction as a vantage point from which the modern reader approximates the literary past and builds the notion of the postmodern presence. In my paper I analyse such neo-Victorian texts as: Clare Boylan’s *Emma Brown*, Syrie James’ *The Secret Diaries of Charlotte Brontë* or Margaret Forster’s *Lady’s Maid*.

Keywords: Neo-Victorian fiction, Victorian literary revival, literary revision, postmodernism, the modern reader, historical involvement

The only duty we owe history is to rewrite it"
Oscar Wilde (97)

Introduction

In his work *Why Read?* Mark Edmundson observes that “[w]e read to debunk the myths. We read to know the other (...)” (52). Literature offers the only tangible connection with the immaterial past, testifying to its anterior, arcane presence. Currently, the literary Victorian past – perceived as the distant “other” – is constantly rewritten and re-read in the modern vein. The “pluralistic, highly hybrid rewriting of the past corresponds,” according to Christian Gutleben, “to postmodernism's new way of coming to terms with the anxiety of influence” (119). What follows, Gutleben recalls Ihab Hassan's observation that

(...) continuity and discontinuity, high and low culture, mingle not to imitate but *to expand the past in the present*. In the plural present, all styles are dialectically available in an interplay between the Now and the Not Now, the Same and the Other. (*Nostalgic Postmodernism*, 119) [emphasis added].

The literary rewriting of the Victorian past in modern era, Gutleben emphasizes, is a project undertaken exclusively for the modern audience, since it is infested with the “voices correspond[ing] precisely to readerly expectations” (37). Hence, the twenty-first century neo-Victorian novel is destined to mirror and unravel the intricate Victorian past through the prism of the current socio-cultural framework. Louisa Hadley argues in a similar vein, positing that “[n]eo-Victorian fictions also draw attention to the contemporary moment of reading thought the incorporation of twentieth-century attitudes” (156).

Finally, the modern interest in literary revision attests to Oscar Wilde's enduring remark that “[t]he only duty we owe history is to rewrite it” (*The Quotable Oscar Wilde*, 97).

The Victorian Revival: Beyond Historical Fiction

Although determined to re-narrate the past, neo-Victorian fiction reaches beyond the notion of historical narrative. “The neo-Victorian,” as stipulated by Heilmann and Llewellyn, “is *more than* historical fiction set in the nineteenth century. To be part of the neo-Victorianism (...) must in some respect be *self-consciously engaged with the act of (re)interpretation, (re-discovery and (re)vision concerning the Victorians*” (4). Such definition entails the belief in bridging the gap between the past and the present by means of an experimental narrative. Hence, neo-Victorian literary genre escapes the label of “historical fiction,” as it introduces the Bakhtinian dialogue of equally privileged voices

offering the "proposals" of the past. As already mentioned, Christian Gutleben argues that "(...) public Victorian voices differ radically from their private improper voices and the truth of their stories is never known by their Victorian counterparts: only the twentieth-century reader hears these voices, as if the addressee of such a discourse were necessarily modern" (37). While filling its pages with the public and private voices directed towards the modern audience, neo-Victorian literature offers a binary approach towards the historical "truth" and thus proves that not every neo-Victorian text can be labelled precisely as "historical fiction."

In Louisa Hadley's view, neo-Victorian fiction "is not only concerned with reinserting the Victorians into historical narrative, but also with exploring the ways in which historical narratives affect responses to the past" (6). Accordingly, narratives serve as tools propounding new cultural approaches towards the bygone. The notion of the constantly "re-moulded" literary past can be linked with Linda Hutcheon's concept of "historiographic metafiction" defined in *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988). Historiographic metafiction, Hutcheon states,

is a characteristic genre of postmodern literature, not only because of its proliferation but also because it encapsulates the very contradictions at work in postmodern itself. (...) The metafictional aspects of neo-Victorian texts are inflected with a self-conscious questioning of the possibilities of narrating the past, read in relation to Victorian forms of historical narrative. (Hadley, 18, 19)

Perceived as historiographic metafiction, neo-Victorian works re-stage the past in its "unofficial" version, accommodating the so-far marginalized narratives and unheard voices within the pages of contemporary works. The introduction of the *a priori* omitted voices into the literary discourse enhances the possibility that Victorians were, at least to some extent, "like us."

The inventive approach towards the literary past induces Mark Llewellyn to state that "[n]eo-Victorianism (...) blurs the distinctions between criticism and creativity, with each becoming a reflection of self and other" (170). Likewise, Llewellyn acknowledges that it is "the desire to reach beyond," "write back" and to "refresh and re-vitalise the importance of that earlier text to here and now" that prompts the current Victorian resurrection (170-171). Referring to the notion of palimpsest – a document on which the initial writing was replaced with a new record – Llewellyn discusses neo-Victorian fiction as "palimpsestuous" – occupied with "the obscured and the unseen" (171). At the same time, he recognizes that neo-Victorian fiction serves as a proposal rather than historical evidence. Therefore, its function is primarily emphatic, directed towards the atemporal and emotional responsiveness towards the past. Consequently, neo-Victorian literature inscribes itself into the model of the "new history" which relies on one's "ability to understand and connect with the past" (Hadley, 26).

Parody, Pastiche or Ventriloquism?

While engaging into a dialogue with their nineteenth-century predecessors, neo-Victorian texts purposefully explore numerous narrative possibilities, reaching beyond the notions of parody and pastiche. As pointed out by Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn,

[i]t would be false to suggest that texts which merely rewrite Victorian novels in contemporary ways are doing anything other than a straightforward pastiche: meeting a market demand but not necessarily adding anything new to our understanding of how fiction works, what that fiction can do, or possibly what it cannot do. (23)

Arguing along similar lines, Louisa Hadley observes that pastiche allows for the reconstruction of Victorian literary forms devoid of the historical involvement:

adopting pastiche as a literary technique, neo-Victorian authors are in fact reviving a Victorian literary form. (...) pastiche is parody dislocated from any political or satirical intent, leaving only a 'linguistic mask' that is divorced from its historical referent. (160)

The task of the neo-Victorian genre reaches beyond the revival of the literary form: in "rewriting," neo-Victorian texts merge the nineteenth-century context with the contemporary perspectivism. Such approach allows for the acknowledgment and *domestication* of the literary past in the current historical moment. This act of emphatic recollection is equally relevant for the perception of the past and the present. According to Hadley, neo-Victorian fiction exhibits a form of ventriloquism which incorporates "both 'speaking like' and 'speaking as' a Victorian" (160). I discern ventriloquism as a self-conscious voice hiding in the Victorian past, yet offering a narrative that links the past with the present.

Biography, Bildungsroman and Detective Fiction Revived

The most commonly revived nineteenth-century genres entail biography, *Bildungsroman* and detective fiction. For instance, Syrie James's novel, *The Secret Diaries of Charlotte Brontë* (2009), engages both with a biographical and detective plot. James's novel offers a fictionalized biography of the nineteenth-century writer who speaks in the first person from the pages of her mysterious diary. The fictional discovery of Brontë's diary triggers the disclosure of her (possible) private reflections on life. The confessional mode of the diary approximates Charlotte Brontë as a character to the "contemporary reader's zone," yet it also highlights her emotional responsiveness to the

nineteenth-century world. Importantly, James' novel faithfully relies on the previous biographical sources devoted to Charlotte Brontë, including Elizabeth Gaskell's *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857), Winifred Gérin's *Charlotte Brontë: The Evolution of Genius* (1967) or Rebecca Fraser's *Charlotte Brontë: A Writer's Life* (2003).

Louisa Hadley argues that neo-Victorian fiction “engages in the process of historical recovery” (60). As Hadley explicates, the plot of the detective fiction follows the pattern of neo-Victorian “reconstruction:” “[l]ike the crime story, the past is characterized by an ‘absence’; it can never wholly be recovered in the present” (61). Nevertheless, according to Hadley, “a confident assertion to knowledge is only possible in a fictional world; in the real world, knowledge has its limits” (78). The fictional discovery of Brontë's diary fills in the “absence” in the fictional world and allows for the emphatic engagement with the past on the pages of James' novel.

Clare Boylan's *Emma Brown* (2003) also replicates the pattern of the Victorian detective novel as it depicts an enigmatic case of an orphaned child. While the eponymous Emma embarks on the quest for her identity, she simultaneously develops in the text as a self-conscious individual. The notion of the quest and the *Bildungsroman* inscribed in the plot allow to regard Boylan's work as the “postmodern romance” (Hansson, 3). “An important problem which is shared by many writers of fiction today is how to make it possible to create meaning when there are neither common value systems nor common cultural beliefs to lean on,” Hansson postulates,

[t]here is an urgent need for both writers and readers to find common ground, otherwise communication through literature runs the risk of becoming impossible and obsolete. Postmodern romances capitalize on the popularity and familiarity of the romance to create this common ground, which means that the works have to be recognisable as romances. Like medieval and Renaissance romances, postmodern ones frequently bring in a miraculous dimension, like the historical ones they are acutely aware of the importance of the past, and like women's popular romances they tell love stories. Intertextual references establish the connections. (3)

Emma's quest, the “miraculous dimension” and the intertextual references to Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* compose the story that strives to narrate the past and account for the gaps in the historical recollection. The themes of loss and obliteration and the quest for Emma's integrity employ the idea of the revived romance. The qualifier “postmodern” asserts the self-reflexive nature of the text. Thus, even though Boylan's heroine is merged in the Victorian environment, her journey towards self-discovery is essentially postmodern as it challenges the nineteenth-century *Bildungsroman* narratives. Although Emma's metamorphosis from an orphaned girl to a self-aware woman relies, to some extent, on miraculous coincidences, nevertheless it challenges Brontë's “Cinderella pattern” from *Jane Eyre*. What Jane entirely owes to her unwavering virtue, Emma attains mostly by effort and an exceedingly hard

work. As a child, Emma is confronted with the bleak prospects of homelessness. Unlike Jane Eyre who looks after a doll, Emma responsibly nurtures an abandoned child. Boylan's heroine dons the premature role of an adult and struggles with financial difficulties in the Victorian, yet strikingly postmodern world. In this sense, Boylan's novel fills the gaps in the historical narrative, offering a story where Emma's voice asserts that it is not only the virtue that dominates the Victorian world, but also the economic struggle and inequality.

Significantly, the neo-Victorian *Bildungsroman* reveals a growing interest in human personality. The process of "psychologizing" neo-Victorian fiction reflects the modern interest in one's inner life and echoes Victorian preoccupation with human nature. In *Emma Brown* (2003), the eponymous heroine dons several alternative personalities and it is the reader's task to discover Emma's "true face." Similarly, in Margaret Forster's *Lady's Maid* (1990), the complex insight into Elizabeth Barret Browning's mind disturbs the claim that personality can be consistent or one-dimensional. In *Lady's Maid*, Forster emphasizes the problem of one's changing role in the society. While portraying Wilson, the eponymous lady's maid, Forster not only presents a "background" character but also dwells on the complex relations between Wilson and her lady – Elizabeth Barret Browning. In the final chapter of the novel Wilson decides to free herself from a confining role and its limiting influence:

[n]ever again would she tie her life to another person in quite that way but would seek to stand on her own more truly than had ever been possible. (...) Her days as a lady's maid, which even when they were actually over she had refused to accept as finished, had died with her lady [Elizabeth Barret Browning]. Now, she could be herself and not poison what was left of her life with regrets and resentments. The yoke was lifted, and what she had been required to do and be, under it, should have no relevance to her future. She was a lady's maid no longer. (534)

A seemingly modern act of physical and mental detachment of the character can be traced back to the nineteenth-century fiction, where such heroines as Brontë's Caroline Helstone or Lucy Snowe strive to attain personal integrity and mental resistance. The concept of social roles and performativity dominates the Victorian literary discourse, often uniting such paradoxical notions as "authenticity" and "theatricality" (as in the case of Becky Sharp in Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, whose theatricality becomes authentic).

Hence, neo-Victorian fiction is filled with topics that are equally pending and valid in the Victorian literary discussion. Among these, one can find such issues as: social hierarchy, social transitions, family values, double standards, false morality, the issue of marriage, the aforementioned performativity, personality, disguise, industrialism, money, crisis, disbelief, insecurity, the status of men among other species and spiritualism. According to Donald

Brown, these are the “human universals” that create the nexus between the individuals in various historical and cultural contexts (Pinker, 435-439).

Conclusion: Looking in the Mirror, Seeing the Victorians

Undeniably, while mirroring the Victorian past, neo-Victorian texts reflect on the modern era, drawing on the "universals" which dominate the multifaceted human experience. Literary revisioning becomes doubly significant, not only as the process commemorating the past, but also celebrating the present and acknowledging historical consequentialism. Neo-Victorian fiction provides a sense of reassurance that modern society is not historically isolated, but rather still merged in the Victorian dilemmas. In this sense, neo-Victorian fiction can be perceived as a vantage point from which the modern reader approximates the literary past and builds the notion of the postmodern presence.

Christian Gutleben argues in his *Nostalgic Postmodernism* that the modern revisions of the nineteenth-century texts are unique, since they are created in the process of co-structuring rather than as a result of resistance to the previous creations. He accentuates

the development of a new cultural and aesthetic landscape where the artistic projects are not defined in opposition to the previous traditions anymore but by a process of incorporation and where the new aesthetic practices are achieved by recombining the aesthetic practices of the past. Such syncretism can be antiquarian and innovative, nostalgic and subversive at the same time since it blends the conventions of the most unlike schools of thought. (223)

In this way, the reading of neo-Victorian fiction turns into the process of "piecing together" the past and present literary experiences of humankind. *Reading* neo-Victorian fiction no longer entails a counteraction but, rather, an emphatic understanding of the bygone and the conscious affirmation of the present historical stance. Therefore, it appears to me that being a neo-Victorian reader implies the awareness of "the cultural situation of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries" (Hadley, 164) which are still merged in the nineteenth-century problematiqueness. What motivates the neo-Victorian reader is also the awareness that historical narratives can be preserved and understood through revisions and that memory is the only possession that guarantees the modern artistic engagement.

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