

... history is not only an object we can study and our study of it; it is also and even primarily a certain kind of relationship to the past mediated by a distinctive kind of written discourse.

Hayden White, *Figural Realism: Studies in the Mimesis Effect*

Preface

In 1911 H. G. Wells wondered if a hundred years later anyone would “consent to live in the houses the Victorians built, travel by their roads or railways, value the furnishings they made to live among, or esteem, except for curious or historical reasons, their prevalent art and the clipped limited literature that satisfied their souls” (qtd. in David 2001: 1-2). He was to be proved wrong. While the Victorian age functioned as an important point of reference throughout the twentieth century, the last decades have witnessed a creative engagement with its culture and literature, symptomatic of new, generally more appreciative attitudes. The view of the Victorian period as restrictive, old-fashioned and antithetical to modernity is being revised in recognition of its anticipation of and formative influence on contemporary ideas and problems. Barbara Garlick points out the coexistent qualities of remoteness from and closeness to the present that have modified the nature of the relations between the contemporaries and the Victorians:

Now, in this new century, that interaction may be viewed more comfortably as a dialogue rather than a confrontation. The nineteenth century is no longer within living memory, but its artefacts and cultural treasures are still eminently accessible and will continue to provide us with material for critical and artistic exploitation well into this twenty-first century. (2008: 194)

The first part of my dissertation delineates the scope of the Victorian revival in recent decades, giving examples of how the phenomenon has been instantiated and citing possible reasons for its prevalence. It also attempts to chart the evolution of attitudes to the Victorian age in the past hundred years.

Much of the dialogue with the Victorian past is carried out in the domain of literature. Literature is especially qualified to address the past, which, as modern historiography emphasises, is accessible only in a mediated, primarily textual form. Hence if contemporary novels revive Victorianism, they do so in a self-reflexive fashion, exposing their indebtedness to their Victorian textual antecedents. Drawing on Ansgar Nünning’s definition, Daniel Candel Bormann suggests the following formulation:

a neo-Victorian novel is a fictional text which creates meaning from the background of an awareness of time as flowing and as poised uneasily between *the Victorian* past and the present; which secondly deals predominantly with topics which belong to the field of history, historiography and/or the philosophy of history *in dialogue with a*

Victorian past: and which thirdly can do so at all narrative levels and in any possible discursive form, be it through the narration of action, through static description, argumentative exposition or stream-of-consciousness techniques. (2002: 62)

The term “neo-Victorian” (less frequent but equally reductive prefixes are “retro” or “pseudo”), used to describe recent instances of the revival of the nineteenth century, is widely applied to novels which invoke Victorian life and ideas.¹ However, given the variety of ways in which novelists try to reach back to the past, this denotation appears too narrow and restrictive since it mainly connotes the idea of recreating or imitating the age. Georges Letissier (2004), having recognised the misleading nature of such designations, proposed the term “post-Victorian,”² which, however, poses the same problems as its counterpart “postmodern.” Therefore I have decided to use the term “Victorianist,” coined by Sudha Shastri in her book *Intertextuality and Victorian Studies* (2001). Shastri never provides an explicit definition of the term, but I shall use it to denote broadly all forms of postwar novelistic revival of the Victorian age, whether their setting is the nineteenth or twentieth/twenty-first century, or both, or whether they aim to imitate, parody, transpose, idealise or criticise Victorianism.

While early Victorianist books such as *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) by Jean Rhys, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) by John Fowles and *The Siege of Krishnapur* (1973) by J. G. Farrell were, at the time of their publication, notable but isolated instances of the fictional dialogue with the past, the last few decades, from the eighties onwards, have witnessed an unprecedented proliferation of Victorianist fiction: *Who Was Oswald Fish* (1981) by A. N. Wilson, *The Great Fire of London* (1982) by Peter Ackroyd, *Gentlemen in England* (1983) by A. N. Wilson, *Oscar and Lucinda* (1988) by Peter Carey, *The Quincunx* (1989) by Charles Palliser, *Two Women of London: The Strange Case of Ms Jekyll and Mrs Hyde* (1989) by Emma Tennant, *The Chymical Wedding* (1989) by Lindsay Clarke, *Lady's Maid* (1990) by Margaret Forster, *Possession* (1990) by A. S. Byatt, *Mary Reilly* (1990) by Valerie Martin, *In the Red Kitchen* (1990) by Michèle Roberts, *The Summer of the Royal Visit* (1991) by Isabel Colegate, *Angels and Insects* (1992) by A. S. Byatt, *Heathcliff* (1992) by Lin Haire-Sargeant, *Poor Things* (1992) by Alasdair Gray, *Sweet Thames* (1992) by Matthew Kneale, *Ever After* (1992) by Graham Swift, *The Mist in the*

1 Christian Gutleben uses the term “retro-Victorian” in his extensive study *Nostalgic Postmodernism: The Victorian Tradition and the Contemporary British Novel* (2001), despite his emphasis on the revisionist nature of such fiction; likewise, Daniel Candel Bormann has decided on “neo-Victorian,” notwithstanding his reservations about this term (2002: 61-62). Agnieszka Gołda-Derejczyk alternately employs the terms “retro-Victorian” and “neo-Victorian” in her book “*Through the Looking Glass*”: *The Postmodern Revision of Nineteenth-Century British Culture* (2009).

2 Cf. Georges Letissier, “Dickens and Post-Victorian Fiction” (2004).

Mirror (1992) by Susan Hill, *Tess* (1993) by Emma Tennant, *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* (1994) by Peter Ackroyd, *Electricity* (1995) by Victoria Glendinning, *Tennyson's Gift* (1996) by Lynne Truss, *Master Georgie* (1997) by Beryl Bainbridge, *Jack Maggs* (1997) by Peter Carey, *Confinement* (1998) by Katherine McMahon, *Tipping the Velvet* (1998) and *Affinity* (1999) by Sarah Waters, *The Dress Lodger* (2000) by Sheri Holman, *Charlotte: The Final Journey of Jane Eyre* (2000) by D. M. Thomas, *English Passengers* (2000) by Matthew Kneale, *The Crimson Petal and the White* (2002) by Michael Faber, *Fingersmith* (2002) by Sarah Waters, *The Mistressclass* (2003) by Michèle Roberts, *The Sweetest Thing* (2003) by Fiona Shaw, *Heathcliff's Tale* (2005) by Emma Tennant, *Tattycoram* (2005) by Audrey Thomas, *Arthur and George* (2005) by Julian Barnes, *The Brontë Project* (2005) by Jennifer Vandever, *The French Dancer's Bastard* (2006) by Emma Tennant, *The Realm of Shells* (2006) by Sonia Overall, *The Meaning of Night: A Confession* (2006) by Michael Cox, *Drood* (2009) by Dan Simmons, *The Last Dickens* (2009) by Matthew Pearl and *The Taste of Sorrow* (2009) by Jude Morgan.

The aim of this dissertation is to analyse the phenomenon of Victorianist novels with a view to mapping this broad area and finding suitable categories to describe various specimens of Victorianist fiction. While it can be argued that any novel which sets its action a hundred years back is predicated on a dialogue with the past, the novels selected for analysis here are those that make this dialogue the underlying principle of their composition and exhibit self-consciousness about their dual perspective. Several of these novels engage with Victorian classics, rewriting them from a different point of view, providing alternative versions or filling in blanks in the original texts. Some of them additionally offer metafictional and, typically, subversive speculation on the genesis of a given classic. Another group is comprised of novels which enter into dialogue with the genre of the Victorian novel itself, understood both formally and thematically. There are also numerous novels where the links between past and present are justified by the open coexistence of two plots and two time levels, and are typically legitimised by the motif of textual research. The range of uses to which Victorianism is put in contemporary fiction certainly calls for systematisation, and my analysis aims to offer a viable schema capable of encompassing the majority of existing specimens of Victorianist fiction, while also accommodating forms the genre may take in the future.

The Bakhtinian concept of dialogism is particularly applicable in the Victorianist novel, where the underlying principle is duality of voices, perspectives and temporalities, as well as textual hybridity. The novels chosen here do not use a Victorian setting as a mere background to the action, but reflect on Victorianism from a contemporary point of view, reflecting back on contemporaneity in the process. Simon Joyce employs the metaphor of a

rearview mirror in discussing today's interpretations and representations of Victorianism:

we never really encounter "the Victorians" themselves, but instead a mediated image like the one we get when we glance into our rearview mirrors while driving. The image usefully condenses the paradoxical sense of looking forward to see what's behind us [...]. It also suggests something of the inevitable distortion that accompanies any mirror image; thus, the warning that "objects in the mirror are closer than they appear" nicely expresses a feeling we may have about the Victorians themselves, a recognition of a surprising (and perhaps frightening) closeness to our past that occurred at different times and to different people throughout the twentieth century. (2002: 3)

This metaphor (Joyce's explication of which is slightly reductive) accommodates the concepts of mirroring and distorting, reflecting on others and self-reflection, duality of perspectives, the act of looking backward and forward, distance and proximity – all of which are detectable in Victorianist fiction. Above all, the metaphor stresses the necessarily mediated character of the image of the Victorians. The allusion to Lewis Carroll's book in the title of Agnieszka Gołda-Derejczyk's study *"Through the Looking Glass": The Postmodern Revision of Nineteenth-Century Culture* indicates the premise on which her analysis of neo-Victorianism is predicated: "The looking glass connotes the ideas of mirroring, reflecting, and constructing the reflected image (both self-image and the image of the other) on the one hand, and transgressing, going beyond the one-dimensionality of mirror reflection, on the other" (2009: 9).

Interestingly, Georges Letissier has also used an optical metaphor to describe the relations between Victorian hypotexts and their contemporary hypertexts:

Etymologically, refraction [...] is used in physics to designate the phenomenon by which a ray of light, or an electromagnetic wave is deflected from its previous course in passing out of one medium into another of different density. When metaphorically applied to literature, it would imply that a source-text – the composite, Victorian corpus – has been passed on, through reading, to a contemporary filtering consciousness, which in its turn, produces its own mediated version of the original. (2004: 112)

Authors of Victorianist novels typically recognise that engagement with the past must take the form of a dialogue between texts. Therefore, my argument here is that the theory of intertextuality supplies a suitable key to the reading of Victorianist novels. The second part of my work outlines the main tendencies in the study of intertextuality, distinguishing those concepts and terms that in my opinion can be fruitfully applied to the selected novels. There already exist a few scholarly studies where a similar attempt has been made to take an overall view

of Victorianist fiction. These are briefly presented and assessed in this chapter. Finally, I propose here my own schema according to which Victorianist novels may be classified and analysed – a task performed in Part Three of the dissertation. The classification is derived from a selection of intertextual concepts.

Part Three forms the core of my study, and presents detailed analyses of particular novels. The analyses combine examination of the intertextual aspect of a given text with a discussion of the thematic implications of the text's contemporary engagement with Victorianism.