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**The Neo-Victorian Novel, 1990-2010.**

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## **Abstract**

The final decade of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first witnessed a surge of published novels with direct and indirect connection to the Victorian era, at a time when a focus on the new millennium might have been expected. This proliferation of what came to be termed neo-Victorian novels shows no sign of abating and has now given rise to scholarly research on the subject.

The principal aim of this thesis is to examine the rise of the neo-Victorian novel during the period in question. After an introduction which situates the phenomenon within relevant theoretical and cultural contexts, the following chapter attempts to provide a sense of the thematic range of neo-Victorian novels through an original ‘catalogue’ of more than one hundred neo-Victorian novels, adopting the received neo-Victorian theoretical stance which believes that what neo-Victorian novels write about demonstrates contemporary concerns and contemporary attitudes to the Victorian as much as it attempts an accurate portrayal of a historical period. This is followed by three further chapters which focus on detailed examinations of neo-Victorian novels which adopt different structural forms in presenting ‘Victorian’ material: the pastiche, the split narrative and the re-write versions of the neo-Victorian novel.

A core contention of the thesis is that the comparison of three different novel forms, allied to the examination of thematic areas of interest, exposes the contradictory impulse which lies at the heart of the neo-Victorian enterprise. While the continuing popularity of neo-Victorian fictions indicates a desire for a sense of continuing connection to Victorian forbears, imagined or actual, the insistence on plots which play to modern interests and sensibilities suggests that the Victorians have to ‘fit’ with us rather than the other way round. The various forms that the neo-Victorian novel adopts carry their own postmodern means of undermining the credibility of the Victorian world under construction.

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## **Abbreviations**

Quotations from three key novels will be abbreviated in the text as follows:

Chapter 3:

Matthew Kneale. *English Passengers*, 2000 (London: Penguin, 2001) (*EP*)

Chapter 4:

Graham Swift. *Ever After* (London: Picador, 1992) (*EA*)

Chapter 5:

D.M.Thomas. *Charlotte. The Final Journey of Jane Eyre* (London: Duck Editions, 2000) (*C*)

## **1. Introduction**

The frontiers of a book are never clear-cut: beyond the title, the first lines, and the last full stop, beyond its internal configuration and its autonomous form, it is caught up in a system of references to other books, other texts, other sentences: it is a node within a network.<sup>1</sup>

The neo-Victorian novel is a late twentieth and early twenty-first century literary phenomenon which appropriates Victorian history, Victorian novels and Victorian characters – fictional and actual – for its own ends. Neo-Victorian novels take many forms. Most conjure a setting which is entirely ‘Victorian’; another, smaller group juxtaposes a modern with a ‘Victorian’ narrative in order to emphasise the transition between the two periods. Further novels write from the present with reference to a Victorian ‘ur-text’ on which the present is dependent. Whatever the degree of reliance on the Victorian, neo-Victorian novels almost always simultaneously advertise their modernity in one way or another, creating tensions around issues of authenticity, homage and nostalgia.

This thesis sets out to examine the phenomenon of the neo-Victorian novel from 1990 to 2010 from three standpoints: how the subject matter of neo-Victorian novels necessarily describes a late twentieth-century, early twenty-first century view of the ‘Victorian’ but, at the same time, also discloses contemporary interests and preoccupations which are manifested in the characteristic themes and motifs of the genre; how the various forms of the neo-Victorian novel demonstrate varying degrees of discomfort or unease with regard to the neo-Victorian project and how the neo-Victorian novel, consciously or unconsciously, displays a variety of sometimes

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<sup>1</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969; rpt. London and New York: Routledge, 2005), pp. 25-6.



contradictory positions on the nature of the connection between the present and the Victorian past. Future chapters of the thesis will look in detail at concentrated areas of interest of the neo-Victorian novel (Chapter 2) and three main forms that the neo-Victorian novel adopts (Chapters 3-5), in order to present an argument about the eclectic nature and complexity of the neo-Victorian novel's desire for relationship to the Victorian. The research phase of the thesis included reading well over one hundred novels, many of which have not previously been included in discussions of the genre, in order to be able to characterise the neo-Victorian novel phenomenon in later chapters of the thesis and, additionally, to be able to assess whether emerging neo-Victorian criticism is sufficiently well-read in the basic material of the novels to be useful in its critical analysis of the breadth and scale of the phenomenon.

The neo-Victorian novel presents a particularly complicated example of contemporary literature's inclination towards intertextual writing through its relationship to Victorian novels and novelistic traditions from the novel form's 'golden age'. To borrow from the Foucauldian quotation which heads this chapter, titles, first lines, structural organisation and thematic concerns of neo-Victorian novels work in counterpoint to Victorian novels and Victorian culture and history. The trickle of neo-Victorian novels during the second half of the twentieth-century – though they were not so designated at the time – gave way to a flood by the century's final decade and the first years of the new millennium. This thesis makes reference to, or discusses in greater detail, well over one hundred novels, ranging from the literary, through the middle-brow to the popular, which were published during this twenty year period. The ensuing academic debate about the literary merit of these novels began by considering whether they were essentially conservative – because inevitably backward-looking – or whether by examining

Victorian beliefs and the cultural shifts of the Victorian period from a contemporary perspective, they examine the relation between past and present in broader and more complex terms. This latter is the view which has tended to prevail and is elegantly demonstrated in Penelope Lively's novel *City of the Mind* (1991). Lively's London architect protagonist is acutely aware of his Victorian forbears in the bricks and mortar of the city:

He sees that time is what we live in, but that it is also what we carry within us. Time is then, but it is also our own perpetual now. We bear it in our heads and on our backs; it is our freight, our baggage, our Old Man of the Sea. It grinds us down and buoys us up. We cannot shuffle it off; we would be adrift without it. We both take it with us and leave ourselves behind within it – flies in amber, fossilized admonitions and exemplars.<sup>2</sup>

Neo-Victorian novels contemplate the complex nature of our relationship to the recent past, our apparent inability to leave it behind, despite or because of the simultaneously inhibiting and exhilarating nature of that relationship. Lively's novel, like many neo-Victorian novels, reflects the conviction that:

[T]he present reflects a conjunction of elements inherited from the past and current innovations. In other words, the present bears a burden, a weight that comes from the past, and the task of the present is to bring this burden up to date in order to understand its current ramifications... The past does not repeat itself in the present, but the present is played out, and innovates, utilizing the legacy of the past.<sup>3</sup>

### 1.1 The Critical Context of the Neo-Victorian Novel

Two early twenty-first century commentaries which examine the cultural fascination with the Victorian, foreground through their titles the ways in which the past can be enlisted to support the present. Matthew Sweet's *Inventing the Victorians* (2001), published on the one hundredth anniversary of Victoria's death, challenges contemporary stereotypes about the Victorian period

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<sup>2</sup> Penelope Lively, *City of the Mind* (1991; London: Penguin, 1992), p. 8.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Castel, ' "Problematization" as a Mode of Reading History', in *Foucault and the Writing of History*, ed. Jan Goldstein (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Blackwell, 1994), p. 238.

and emphasises the complicated nature of our relationship with the Victorians, underlining the argument that present-day society has produced a version of the Victorian era which suits our prejudices and predispositions: ‘The Victorians invented us, and we in our turn invented the Victorians’<sup>4</sup>. Sweet blames Bloomsbury for kick-starting an attitude of condescension towards the Victorians and contemporary society for exhibiting a contradictory stance which combines smug superiority about our social progress with the building of faux Victoriana. The neo-Victorian novel certainly revels in descriptions of squalid living conditions, foetid sewers and teeming, foggy streets, and some exhibit a fondness for a seemingly simpler world, ‘uncomplicated by welfare, feminism, multiculturalism.’<sup>5</sup> Sweet’s main thesis is that the Victorians lived lives as complex, rich and difficult as our own and that while we are not them, they built much of our world and helped define our culture.

Simon Joyce in *The Victorians in the Rearview Mirror* (2007) shares some of Sweet’s reflections on contemporary society’s fascination with the Victorians, including how politicians of opposing persuasions have annexed the concept of ‘Victorian values’ for their own ends, leading to a binary position which is overly simplistic: Thatcherite hard work, self-reliance and thrift versus Kinnock’s emphasis on cruelty, squalor and ignorance, for example. The titles of Sweet’s and Joyce’s texts are instructive about current thinking regarding twenty-first century attitudes towards the Victorian age. Sweet points to the – potentially patronising – tendency to imagine into being a version of the Victorian to accommodate modern needs, while Joyce emphasises the inevitability of our oddly angled view of the past, what Mark Llewellyn in a review of Joyce’s book refers to as ‘the fractured interpretations of the Victorian circulating through British culture

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<sup>4</sup> Matthew Sweet, *Inventing the Victorians* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001), p. xii.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 228.

since the turn of the nineteenth-century.<sup>6</sup> Both Sweet's and Joyce's texts take broadly cultural materialist or new historicist approaches to a reassessment of the present's relationship to the Victorian past, as do many neo-Victorian novels. The neo-Victorian novel generally rejects the possibility of a factual verifiable history or any totalising world view. Instead, the neo-Victorian novel offers a cornucopia of factual and fictional 'Victorian' textual traces, most particularly written documents of all kinds, which create new webs of meaning in the present.

*Inventing the Victorians* and *The Victorians in the Rearview Mirror* are both concerned to debunk simplistic or stereotypical attitudes to the Victorian era and are therefore relevant to a discussion of the neo-Victorian novel which has been accused, especially in some of its more commercial manifestations, of playing to superficial or sensational agendas. Female academics and writers have tended to give the neo-Victorian, and specifically the neo-Victorian novel, a warmer reception. Feminist writing on the neo-Victorian novel follows in the tradition set by earlier academics such as Gilbert and Gubar<sup>7</sup> in supporting a tradition of women's writing which exposed the patriarchal in both literature and life, a major theme of the neo-Victorian novel. Jeannette King (*The Victorian Woman Question in Contemporary Feminist Fiction*, 2005) and Diana Wallace (*The Women's Historical Novel*, 2005), for example, explain the popularity of historical writing among women readers as allowing an imaginative space in which to invent inclusive versions of history where women writers in particular could create unrecorded lives of the marginalised or subordinated. Historical fiction attempts an accurate depiction of period and often places the hero(ine) in opposition to the wider political or social situation. King specifically

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<sup>6</sup> Mark Llewellyn, "Shot through with ambiguities": Review of Simon Joyce, *The Victorians in the Rearview Mirror*, *Neo-Victorian Studies*, 1:1 (2008), 191-195, p.191.

<sup>7</sup> Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (Yale: Yale University Press, 1979).

underlines the importance of the neo-Victorian novel in adding to a modern reader's understanding of gender: 'If we are in the middle of another shift in what we know and think about gender, in the "post-feminist" mood that prevails at the beginning of the twenty-first century, we need to know how our beliefs came about, and how much has been excluded or forgotten in what we know.'<sup>8</sup> Wallace points to the cross-dressing girl masquerading as a boy who provides an enabling female fantasy – in Sarah Waters' *Tipping the Velvet* (1998) or Patricia Duncker's *James Miranda Barry* (1999), for example – and to the common theme of spiritualism in the neo-Victorian novel, the female medium a figure akin to the novelist who ventriloquises the voice of the past.

A.S. Byatt is an important figure in discussion of the neo-Victorian because she both writes literary neo-Victorian novels and writes about the connection between the Victorian and the neo-Victorian. Byatt's collection of essays *On Histories and Stories* (2000) makes various points relevant to an exploration of the neo-Victorian novel form. She takes issue with her novelist sister Margaret Drabble's criticism of the historical novel as escapist and nostalgic and counters with the importance of the historical novel in supporting continuity between the past and the present. She quotes extensively from the opening of *A Tale of Two Cities* and the Proem to George Eliot's *Romola*, passages which underline the fundamentals of any human life: 'As one thought follows another in the slow wake of the dawn, we are impressed with the broad sameness of the human lot, which never alters in the main headings of its history – hunger and

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<sup>8</sup> Jeannette King, *The Victorian Woman Question in Contemporary Feminist Fiction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), p. 6.

labour, seed-time and harvest, love and death.’<sup>9</sup> Byatt notes the inclusivity of form of current historical fiction as well as its espousing of the marginalised, forgotten and unrecorded life. Parody, pastiche, faked documents, real documents, mix of past and present jostle together in thrillers, romances and detective stories. Byatt also makes the point that historical fiction at the end of the twentieth century is re-animating a Victorian tradition: ‘the Victorians were not simply Victorian. They read their past and resuscitated it.’<sup>10</sup> The neo-Victorian novel, like all historical fiction, places the short episode of individual lives within ‘the large paradigmatic narratives we inhabit’<sup>11</sup>, Biblical, Darwinian or otherwise. Byatt concentrates on the importance of stories, and in particular historical stories, as a means to tie the individual in to sense of her/his own relevance in the overarching narrative of existence. Her novels note the influence of twentieth-century philosophical discourse, usually to reject it, yet she frequently takes a ‘New Historicist’ approach towards the importance of historical documents of all kinds in making the past meaningful in the present.

Cora Kaplan’s *Victoriana* (2007) notes these novels’ longing for a past that probably never was, the loss of a historical sense marked by the postmodern and the deliberate emphasis on imagined histories of gender, race, sexuality and empire. Kaplan’s discussion on the continuing influence of Victorian design and artefacts within modern homes is given a literary correlative in her reference to Brian Moore’s novel *The Great Victorian Collection* (1975) with which she begins her introductory chapter. Moore’s ‘hero’ is an academic working in California who dreams into existence a collection of Victorian artefacts, similar to those of the 1851 Great Exhibition. He

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<sup>9</sup> George Eliot, Proem to *Romola* in A.S.Byatt, *On Histories and Stories. Selected Essays* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2000), pp. 36-7.

<sup>10</sup> A.S.Byatt, *On Histories and Stories*, p. 47.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 65.

becomes an overnight celebrity, feted by the media, but the collection begins subtly to decline in quality and its custodianship finally destroys him. The novel raises many complex questions about our relationship to the inanimate objects of the Victorian past: in what sense do we retain them, can they remain intact, how do they show us a version of our contemporary reality? Moore's novel absorbs and plays with ideas relating to real, imaginary and simulated expressions of existence and is evidently influenced by the writings of the French philosopher and cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard. Moore's early example is little known but prescient in its anticipation of how the neo-Victorian novel proper would continue to examine the relevance of Victorian artefacts for and in our own time and also how it would continue to assimilate and exhibit the influences of various strands of late twentieth-century philosophical discourses.

Like Byatt's *On Histories and Stories*, *Victoriana* reads as a collection of related essays. 'Biographilia' considers the popularity of biography in the early twenty-first century, the privileging of individual lives as a potential reaction against the theoretical death of authors and subjects. The Historical Fictions chapter acknowledges John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) as the novel which began the re-invigoration of the historical novel but reserves greatest praise for Sarah Waters' three 'Victorian' novels which avoid what Kaplan sees as the self-conscious narrative strategies of Fowles and Byatt and instead skilfully exploit nineteenth-century fictional forms like the picaresque or the ghost story. The Afterword examines debates about racism and Englishness through discussions of Peter Carey's *Jack Maggs* (1997) and Julian Barnes' *Arthur and George* (2005) among other novels, in what Kaplan sees as an ongoing questioning of 'historical memory and the direction of the political future in which we,

as readers and citizens, do have a voice and a role to play.’<sup>12</sup> In the Introduction to *Victoriana* Kaplan writes: ‘Describing the making and circulation of such objects, histories, stories, adaptations, pastiches and parodies is easier than pinpointing their collective significance.’<sup>13</sup> Neither Byatt’s nor Kaplan’s texts is exclusively about the neo-Victorian, neo-Victorian novels or the neo-Victorian genre. Both are collections of essays of personal observations about storytelling and the continuing importance of the Victorian. The first attempt to pinpoint the significance of the collective importance of the neo-Victorian novel was Christian Gutleben’s *Nostalgic Postmodernism* (2001).

*Nostalgic Postmodernism* sets about an almost forensic examination of the neo-Victorian novel, using the Introduction to foreground one of the key debates of Gutleben’s text, the question of whether the contemporary Victorian novel, ‘set[s] out to rectify certain historical wrongs, to fight against specific prejudice...Or [takes] over a set of themes, of characters and of novelistic devices either because they appear as tokens of an unsurpassed art or because they perpetuate the immense success of the Golden Age of the British novel.’<sup>14</sup> This is the fundamental question for Gutleben because, depending on the answer, the neo-Victorian novel is either subversive and innovative or nostalgic and conservative in its intentions, incidentally raising the question of whether the neo-Victorian novel is one manifestation of an exhausted form. He questions the liberal credentials of the neo-Victorian novel’s espousing of society’s outcasts: ‘This emphasis on the social and sexual harms of the past can be read positively as the expression of a sense of historical injustice, [but] it can also be construed cynically as the compliance with the hegemony

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<sup>12</sup> Cora Kaplan, *Victoriana. Histories, Fictions, Criticism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), p. 162.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>14</sup> Christian Gutleben, *Nostalgic Postmodernism. The Victorian Tradition and the Contemporary British Novel* (Amsterdam- New York: Rodopi, 2001), p. 7.



of the politically correct.<sup>15</sup> Critical of the ‘opportunistic appropriation’<sup>16</sup> of pastiche Victorian novels, with reproductions of Victorian paintings on their covers and the Victorian referents of their titles, Gutleben concludes that the neo-Victorian novel occupies a paradoxical position which involves ‘adding up and amalgamating a plurality of unlike and even contrary possibilities.’<sup>17</sup> One of the strengths of Gutleben’s text is his inclusion of most of the neo-Victorian novels that had been written at the time. He has continued to write on neo-Victorianism as a cultural phenomenon and on specific examples of the neo-Victorian novel, such as Graham Swift’s *Ever After* (1992), a novel which will be discussed in detail in Chapter 4. Gutleben essentially makes an inconclusive, even contradictory, assessment of the neo-Victorian novel but his text has the virtue of beginning a key debate which continues, the need to categorise the politically predictable against the potentially innovative examples of the genre.

In the years since Gutleben’s important text, neo-Victorian novels have become the focus of a range of scholarly research, including a peer-reviewed e-journal, *Neo-Victorian Studies*. Early articles in the journal emphasised the need for a catholic attitude to what constituted a neo-Victorian novel, attempts at defining terms and analyses and reviews of specific novels. Recent editions of *Neo-Victorian Studies* adopt a thematic angle to the neo-Victorian and include a list of just published or about to be published novels, highlighting the near impossibility of taxonomising or characterising such profusion. There is no sign as yet of the stream of neo-Victorian novels drying up. Further texts have concentrated on neo-Victorian novels as examples of the inversion of the traditional hierarchy of history and memory, with the emphasis on less

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<sup>15</sup> Gutleben, *Nostalgic Postmodernism*, p. 66.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 202.

academic forms of the documentation of history<sup>18</sup> or have examined the neo-Victorian through trauma theory.<sup>19</sup> *Neo-Victorian Tropes of Trauma* is the first of a Rodopi series of texts on neo-Victorianism which has been followed by collections of articles on the family and the gothic in neo-Victorianism. A forthcoming title will deal with neo-Victorianism and the city.

The most plausible theoretical framework within which to discuss the neo-Victorian novel has, however, been developed by Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn. Heilmann's and Llewellyn's thesis advances the arguments initiated by Christian Gutleben in *Nostalgic Postmodernism*. In a review of *Victorian Turns, NeoVictorian Returns* (2008)<sup>20</sup> Llewellyn uses a footnote from the editors' introduction, which discusses the potential political inappropriateness or imprecision of the prefix 'neo' in relation to a literary genre, to set out his view that 'just as not all texts published between 1837 and 1901 are Victorian, so all texts post-1901 that happen to have a Victorian setting or re-write a Victorian text or a Victorian character do not have to be neo-Victorian.'<sup>21</sup> Acknowledging the discomfort some commentators still feel about any attempt to categorise what has become labelled, almost *faute de mieux*, as neo-Victorian, Llewellyn picks up from Gutleben's earlier arguments about the conservative nature of some neo-Victorian novels which fail to re-engage critically with the Victorian period. 'This is a significant issue, since the divide between parody and innovation, pastiche and re-interpretation constitutes an important demarcation that separates genres, and, for want of a better term, has to "police" the

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<sup>18</sup> Kate Mitchell, *History and Cultural Memory in Neo-Victorian Fiction. Victorian Afterimages* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

<sup>19</sup> Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben, *Neo-Victorian Tropes of Trauma. The Politics of Bearing After-Witness to Nineteenth-Century Suffering* (Amsterdam-New York: Rodopi, 2010).

<sup>20</sup> Penny Gay, Judith Johnston, Catherine Waters (eds), *Victorian Turns, NeoVictorian Returns: Essays on Fiction and Culture* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2008).

<sup>21</sup> Mark Llewellyn, 'On the Turn: Review of Penny Gay, Judith Johnston, and Catherine Waters (eds), *Victorian Turns, NeoVictorian Returns: Essays on Fiction and Culture*', *Neo-Victorian Studies*, 2:1 (Winter 2008/2009), pp. 153-158.

border between neo-Victorian texts and straightforward historical fiction/romance set in the nineteenth-century.’<sup>22</sup> Here, Gutleben’s thesis has been pinned down to the need for a separation between the conservative and nostalgic on the one hand – with the sub-text that such novels might be excluded from discussion within a neo-Victorian canon – and the ground-breaking and truly innovative on the other, emphasising issues of literary value and historical merit. This attempt at theorising the neo-Victorian novel is the most definitive since Gutleben’s overview, since Llewellyn goes on to say that to become a genre in its own right, the neo-Victorian novel has to do more than play with aspects of form and style in a vague attempt at newness.

Heilmann and Llewellyn return to these arguments in *Introduction to Neo-Victorianism. The Victorians in the Twenty-First Century, 1999-2009* (2010)<sup>23</sup>. *Neo-Victorianism*’s introductory chapter considers difficult issues posed by the neo-Victorian novel, including questions regarding the ethical dimension involved in the inclusion, in many novels, of actual Victorians and their elision with fictional characters, and the potentially problematic divide between more highbrow novels which consider such ethical issues and pastiche novels which play to more populist and commercial agendas. *Neo-Victorianism*’s later chapters cover wide-ranging textual and narrative concerns of the neo-Victorian novel – domestic and postcolonial trauma, the female body, faith and spectrality, magic and trickery and the neo-Victorian novel in the marketplace. One of *Neo-Victorianism*’s primary theses is ‘that the “neo-Victorian” is *more than* historical fiction set in the nineteenth-century. To be part of the neo-Victorianism we discuss in this book, texts (literary, filmic, audio/visual) must in some respect be *self-consciously*

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<sup>22</sup> Llewellyn, ‘On the Turn’, p. 154.

<sup>23</sup> Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn, *Neo-Victorianism. The Victorians in the Twenty-First Century, 1999-2009* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010).

*engaged with the act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision concerning the Victorians.*<sup>24</sup> To qualify as neo-Victorian, using this template, novels need to be self-analytical and to critique our age's obsession with the Victorian past. This is a challenging position to adopt. On the one hand, such a means of cataloguing or characterising neo-Victorian novels could lead to the establishment of a neo-Victorian canon and mark out an academic territory for future research. On the other, such a delineation could prove problematic. It could be argued that any text which re-writes the Victorian, is inevitably and self-evidently involved in reinterpretation, rediscovery and revision and the only debateable issue then would be the extent of the novel's self-consciousness about this process.

## 1.2 The Historical and Theoretical Contexts of the Neo-Victorian Novel

The previous section examined the body of critical writing which has grown up around the neo-Victorian novel genre. This section will provide some information on twentieth-century historical and theoretical debates in dialogue with which the neo-Victorian novel has been written. Critics who discuss the neo-Victorian novel often do so from within an understanding of dominant historical and theoretical discourses. These areas are not discrete but overlap and influence each other. However, the consideration and treatment of historical information specifically is of primary concern to the neo-Victorian novel and represents changing attitudes to what constitutes history and how history should be represented. An examination of how the neo-Victorian novel has evolved from altered perspectives towards historical knowledge, from the Victorian era to the present, is of crucial importance to an understanding of the neo-Victorian

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<sup>24</sup> Heilmann and Llewellyn, *Neo-Victorianism*, p. 4.

novel's political and ethical position on what matters in recollections and representations of the past.

The neo-Victorian novel debates the ramifications of the inherited past from a contemporary standpoint of one kind or another and therefore has also simultaneously to consider questions about the nature of that past:

History isn't what happened. History is just what historians tell us... One good story leads to another. First it was kings and some archbishops with some offstage divine tinkering, then it was the march of ideas and the movements of masses, then little local events which mean something bigger... The history of the world? Just voices echoing in the dark; images that burn for a few centuries and then fade; stories, old stories... We make up a story to cover the facts we don't know or can't accept; we keep a few true facts and spin a new story round them... we call it history.<sup>25</sup>

This passage from Julian Barnes has been quoted because it exemplifies many of the discourses and contexts against which the neo-Victorian novel has developed and been written. First, the dialogue about what constitutes history: whose history, told to us by whom and with what degree of accuracy, emphasis or bias? Second, and following on from the first, questions about whether history is in any way knowable or retrievable and if it is not, what legacy we are left from the past and how or why it is still of importance in the present. Third, and especially relevant to the neo-Victorian novel project, the merging of facts, history and stories, the seemingly inescapable human need to make connections and fill in gaps. Or in other words: 'when does a fact become a fact; who says it is one, and why; can there be an uninterpreted fact? Do not historians "reproduce" or "write" the past in terms of their own present ideological positioning; and is not

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<sup>25</sup> Julian Barnes, *A History of the World in 10 1/2 Chapters* (1989; rpt. London: Picador, 1990), p. 242.

written history, then, just as *fabricated* as any other discourse?...whose Past is being passed off as *the* Past?’<sup>26</sup>

The neo-Victorian novel revels in these historiographical debates, which it has absorbed from academic discussion among twentieth-century historians. In particular, the question ‘What is history?’ and the consideration of the relative importance of ‘fact’ and theoretical standpoint were expressed by E.H.Carr as ‘a continuous process of interaction between the historian and his facts, an unending dialogue between the present and the past.’<sup>27</sup> The neo-Victorian novel not only expresses an unending dialogue between the ‘Victorian’ and the present, it also moves away from the histories of kings and empires to uncover or imagine ordinary or obscure lives. The historian E.P.Thompson’s ‘history from below’ movement of the 1960s, ‘put itself at the service of politically disenfranchised groups...was therefore closely connected to the...women’s movement...and later ethnic and minority rights campaigns’<sup>28</sup>; many neo-Victorian novels have absorbed this changed historical landscape and taken up the same causes. Some novels deliberately examine the unconventional, particularly the sexually unconventional. Where key historical events are evoked – the Crimean war, for example – it is usually to foreground the effect of momentous change on the lives of the common man and, even more especially, the common woman.

The myriad potential ways of representing, using or abusing history and historical records have been among the subjects of the Marxist academic Fredric Jameson’s oeuvre during the later

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<sup>26</sup> Peter Widdowson, *Literature* (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 134.

<sup>27</sup> E.H.Carr, *What is History?* (1961; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974), p. 30

<sup>28</sup> Peter Mandler, *History and National Life* (London: Profile Books, 2002), p. 112.

decades of the twentieth-century, and commentators on the neo-Victorian novel often frame their arguments in relation to Jameson's thinking. Jameson suggests that the fragmentation of a homogeneous public poses a dilemma for the twentieth-century writer: the near impossibility of writing about public or national experience, including experience or memory of the past. Jameson often makes an analogy to the flickering shadows on the walls of Plato's cave: we no longer grasp reality except through stereotypes. 'Cultural production has been driven back inside the mind...it can no longer look directly out of its eyes at the real world for the referent but must, as in Plato's cave, trace its mental images of the world on its confining walls.'<sup>29</sup> This is the criticism levelled at the neo-Victorian novel by some critics, that it selects easy emblematic subject matter or images – the prostitute, the slum dwelling – and presents it as history when it is merely history 'lite'. Jameson argues further that this modern dilemma inevitably leads to nostalgic pastiche or schizophrenic representations of the past in film and literature, in a society, 'that has become incapable of dealing with time and history.'<sup>30</sup> In *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991), and writing about architecture, Jameson famously refers to the production of culture as, 'the cannibalization of all the styles of the past, the play of random stylistic allusion, and in general...the increasing primacy of the "neo".'<sup>31</sup>

Clearly, this is an accusation of relevance to the neo-Victorian novel, not only because it is now widely referred to as 'neo', but also because its object is to borrow from the past. However, whereas Jameson views the practice of cultural cannibalisation in entirely negative terms, the

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<sup>29</sup> Fredric Jameson, 'Postmodernism and Consumer Society', in *Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (London: Pluto Press, 1985), p. 118.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 117.

<sup>31</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London, New York: Verso, 1991), p. 18.

neo-Victorian novel is playful and knowing in its borrowing, including in its borrowing from theorists of history like Jameson. Jameson's accusations about the meretricious ransacking of history need also to be viewed as a consequence of his own ideological position. In this context, Foucault has raised the question, 'what does the historian do to the past when he or she traces its continuity and assigns it causes?'<sup>32</sup> Foucault argues that all historians, of whatever political persuasion, recreate the past as a means of controlling and domesticating it, in order to justify a certain version of the present. He, by contrast, emphasises the strangeness of the past in order to undermine any sense of continuity between past and present. The neo-Victorian novel expresses, through its subject matter and various forms, a full range of responses to these essential and fundamental arguments: some neo-Victorian novels attempt to align the present with the past, others stress the difference between them; some neo-Victorian novels try to control or domesticate the past, others highlight difference. It is not uncommon for any one neo-Victorian novel to assimilate a combination of these positions. It is common for the neo-Victorian novel to explore contemporary issues through a 'Victorian' setting but it is equally common to find that the same novel will undercut this comparison through an incompatibility or misalignment between thematic concerns and structural paradigms. In Julian Barnes *Arthur and George*, for example, the themes of racism and spiritualist belief, one of still pressing importance, the other of more historical interest, are highlighted and brought into juxtaposition through the alternating narratives of the novel's two main players.

The ongoing importance of Jameson's critique of postmodern historiography is represented in various contributions to Sadoff and Kucich's *Victorian Afterlife: Postmodern Culture rewrites*

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<sup>32</sup> Mark Poster, *Foucault, Marxism and History. Mode of Production Versus Mode of Information* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1984), p. 75.



*the Nineteenth-century* (2000): ‘In this debate, half the contributors have argued that post-Victorianism is, in various ways, a collective misinterpretation not simply of “history itself,” but of the very nature of historical knowledge... The other half of the contributors, however, have argued that the post-Victorian can reread history in socially and politically progressive ways.’<sup>33</sup> Dana Shiller too, in her widely quoted article ‘The Redemptive Past in the Neo-Victorian novel’, takes issue with what she perceives to be Jameson’s criticisms of postmodern representations of the past, specifically their tendency to subsume the political in order to focus on the aesthetic and their emphasis on creating links between the past and the present rather than on actually representing the events of the past. ‘[W]e have the historical novel as postmodern artifact, a monument to the waning of content and the primacy of the image. Again, Jameson’s concern is that ... we have deprived the past of its capacity to transform our collective future.’<sup>34</sup> In a discussion of novels by Peter Ackroyd and A.S. Byatt, Shiller counters and complicates Jameson’s arguments, asserting that new versions of past lives and past texts mean we bring the past with us into our present and future, creating, ‘a sense of community and continuity.’<sup>35</sup> For Shiller, postmodern historical fiction offers alternative versions of past stories, reminding us that written documented history could also always have taken other routes. All of these concerns which converge within the philosophical remit of the neo-Victorian novel are part of the larger debate between Marxism on the one hand and postmodernism on the other. The neo-Victorian novel almost invariably rejects the authority of totalising narratives, including Marxism, or the possibility of a wholeness of interpretation of events and instead celebrates plurality, fragmentation and the local, thereby demonstrating its postmodern theoretical alignment.

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<sup>33</sup> Dianne F. Sadoff and John Kucich (eds), *Victorian Afterlife: Postmodern Culture Rewrites the Nineteenth-Century* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), p. xxv.

<sup>34</sup> Dana Shiller, ‘The Redemptive Past in the Neo-Victorian Novel’, *Studies in the Novel*, 29: 4 (1997), 538-560, p. 539.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 558.

In just the same way that the neo-Victorian novel taps into diverse theoretical attitudes regarding the use of historical material and texts, so it also absorbs and exploits twentieth-century discourses on sexuality, feminism and gender studies. If the neo-Victorian novel tends to reject Jameson, it equally tends to absorb Foucault. Foucault famously asserted that the conventional belief in Victorian sexual repression is inaccurate and, instead, highlights the proliferation of discourses dealing with sexual activity during this period. Different emphases on sexual behaviour applied to different classes. For the aristocracy, the purity of the bloodline was of paramount importance; the bourgeoisie needed to deploy sexuality in order to ensure the strength and endurance of their class and the proletariat had middle class sexual mores imposed upon it in order to ensure a sufficient workforce in the face of cramped living conditions or outbreaks of cholera. Foucault iterates the figures sexualised by nineteenth-century medical and psychological discourses: the homosexual, the precocious child, the hysterical or idle woman, the frigid wife, the indifferent or murderous woman, the sadistic husband. Institutions – the family, the mental asylum – with their hierarchies, spatial arrangements and surveillance systems were also worthy of examination for the interplay between power and pleasure. The importance of Foucauldian ideas about Victorian sexuality in the writing of neo-Victorian novels is overwhelmingly apparent. These are novels which examine relations between the sexes; between classes; prison, hospital, school institutions; the medicalisation of women's bodies and especially, female sexuality in all its manifestations.

Sally Shuttleworth<sup>36</sup> has used Foucault's work to research the importance of the maternal body in Victorian society and its occasionally contradictory manifestations: the sacred homemaker, uterine hysteria and conflicting demands of husband and children. These overlapping female designations provide the subject matter for a majority of neo-Victorian novels: women's dependency on fathers, brothers and male doctors; the perceived inappropriateness of work for middle class women; the stultifying home life of the bourgeois woman; the squalid home and working conditions of working class women. Further novels, heavily influenced by Judith Butler's writings, explore different aspects of gender identity, gender performance and anatomical sexuality: 'Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being.'<sup>37</sup> Theories such as these about the constraints of a reinforced biological sexuality at odds with a fluidity of emotional or psychological sexuality feed into novels about music-hall artistes, prostitutes, cross-dressers, photographic models and sexual adventurers, men and women away from the mainstream who live against the grain of normative gender relations.

Butler's work is just one example of how the neo-Victorian novel allies itself with theoretical discourses which disavow patriarchal, monolithic or binary standpoints and instead suggest plurality and, with regard to expressions of the past, a reassessment of previously or conventionally accepted frameworks of analysis. In her essay 'When we Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision' (1971) the lesbian feminist poet Adrienne Rich defines 're-vision' as, 'the act of

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<sup>36</sup> Sally Shuttleworth, 'Demonic Mothers: ideologies of bourgeois motherhood in the mid-Victorian era' in *Rewriting the Victorians: Theory, History, and the Politics of Gender*, ed. Linda M. Shires (London: Routledge, 1992).

<sup>37</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 33.

looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction'.<sup>38</sup>

Rich's arguments about the need for women to change the concept of sexual identity as a necessary means of survival, by refusing to allow the old political order to reassert itself, is taken up by Peter Widdowson in his text *Literature* (1999). Widdowson sees re-visionary writing as focusing on the formative narratives which have supported a white male version of history. Re-visionary writing rewrites canonic texts in such a way as to expose the originating texts' outmoded discourses, impose a new way of seeing and simultaneously maintain parallels or contrasts between the two. Re-visions invariably, 'have a clear cultural-political thrust, especially on behalf of those exploited, marginalized and silenced by dominant ideologies, in demanding that the political inscription and cultural complicity in oppression of past texts be revised and re-visioned as part of the process of restoring a voice, a history or an identity to the erstwhile oppressed.'<sup>39</sup> For Linda Anderson, re-visioning history in contemporary literature is not only about adding in women's unacknowledged accounts to the historical record but also to do with accepting that 'there is no closure...no point of completeness and understanding to be reached. Memory is open and what is not passed on, may have another existence in the future. Re-imagining history has to be a process without end.'<sup>40</sup> Anderson develops her argument alongside Julia Kristeva's theories about women's conception of time as cyclical – concerned with motherhood and reproduction, repetition and eternity – rather than linear – concerned with project, teleology and arrival. The neo-Victorian novel demonstrates its indebtedness to these underlying theoretical positions through its examination of the minutiae of women's experience

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<sup>38</sup> Adrienne Rich, 'When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision', in *Feminisms. A Reader*, ed. Maggie Humm (New York, London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), p. 369.

<sup>39</sup> Widdowson, *Literature*, p. 166.

<sup>40</sup> Linda Anderson, 'The Re-Imagining of History in Contemporary Women's Fiction', in *Plotting Change: Contemporary Women's Fiction*, ed. Linda Anderson (New York: Edward Arnold, 1990), p. 141.

of the world and especially the tensions between the materiality of the female body and the external world of men, work and society.

Hutcheon has written extensively about postmodern representations of the past. Starting from a postmodern foundation and assuming that both history and literature are discourses constituting systems of signification by which audiences make sense of the past, she also emphasises the changing nature of signs, which are themselves historically determined. Hutcheon disagrees with Jameson's and Terry Eagleton's views that postmodern historical novels reproduce the past as nostalgia and argues instead that postmodern fiction reveals the past as ideologically constructed: 'Of course, the problematised histories of postmodernism have little to do with the single totalising History of Marxism, but they cannot be accused of neglecting or refusing engagement with the issues of historical representation and knowledge.'<sup>41</sup> Coining the term 'historiographic metafiction', Hutcheon sets out a thesis which suggests that the West's twentieth-century loss of faith in grand narratives – including Marxism – which once offered a reading of existence, has been replaced by narrative representations which acknowledge their own artifice. These representations too will inevitably be ideological because every representation is ideological, even while the aim might be to produce a piece of work which is transhistorical and transcultural.

Hutcheon emphasises the democratic effect of historiographic metafiction which prevents the reader from privileging or legitimising certain kinds of knowledge and instead asks the reader to

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<sup>41</sup> Linda Hutcheon, 'Telling Stories: Fiction and History', in *Modernism/Postmodernism*, ed. Peter Brooker (Harlow, Essex: Pearson Education Limited, 1992), p. 238.

question the ways in which we construct our version of reality within our own particular culture at any particular time in history. Hutcheon additionally allies adaptation theory to her discussion of contemporary renditions of the past. Stressing the Victorians' own predilection for re-working past texts<sup>42</sup> and for translating them from one medium to another, she suggests that the denigration of adaptation and adaptors is a hangover from the Romantic period's valuing of individual genius and the original created work: 'Yet this negative view is actually a late addition to western culture's long and happy history of borrowing and stealing, or, more accurately, sharing stories.'<sup>43</sup> Hutcheon outlines the many positive and pleasurable characteristics of the adapted text: repetition and variation, ritual and surprise, creation and interpretation; the known pattern and the desire to escape it.

Neo-Victorian novels can be seen as an amalgam of the many influences outlined above: a desire to represent a different kind of history which concentrates on the small or hidden life while simultaneously acknowledging the inevitable artificiality of any attempt at representing the past, an acceptance that such representations are partial and just as ideologically driven in their own time as earlier texts were in theirs. The historical and theoretical contexts examined in this section suggest some of the foundational discourses which provided a platform for the emergence of the neo-Victorian novel. The next section will discuss three acclaimed twentieth-century novels which were pioneers of the neo-Victorian genre and which created an appetite for an examination of the relationship between the Victorian and the neo-Victorian in the plethora of neo-Victorian novels which followed them.

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<sup>42</sup> As A.S.Byatt has noted; see footnote 10 above.

<sup>43</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* (New York and London: Routledge, 2006), p.4.

### 1.3 The Genre Context of the Neo-Victorian Novel – Forerunner Neo-Victorian Novels.

John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969), A.S.Byatt's *Possession* (1990) and Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) are widely recognised as being key twentieth-century novels which, in their different ways, encouraged the late twentieth-century interest in re-imagining and engaging with the Victorian. These three novels also represent three different methods of fabricating Victorian plotlines and organising Victorian material so that repetition, ritual, creation and known patterns are jostled alongside variation, surprise, creation and disintegration in a variety of ways. Between them therefore, they illustrate a range of ways of responding to Victorian contexts, characters and novels which later neo-Victorian novels could, and do, emulate or develop. A brief assessment of their thematic concerns and structural forms provides a baseline against which to place the rush of neo-Victorian novels that are the concern of this thesis, especially since *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, *Possession* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* adopt three different methods of dealing with Victorian material – pastiche, split-narrative and re-write of an Ur-text – that are central to the discussion in later chapters.

*The French Lieutenant's Woman* creates its own Victorian world, crammed with class tensions, expositions of the complex social mores of the time and discussions about Darwin, female emancipation and the pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. At the same time, Fowles famously breaks the total hold of this imagined world by introducing an interfering twentieth-century narrator and twentieth-century issues regarding the writing of novels and the author's control over his own creation. Most notoriously in Chapter 13, Fowles interrupts the narrative to explain to the reader that he does not know what his characters are going to do next: 'But I live in the age of Alain Robbe-Grillet and Roland Barthes; if this is a novel, it cannot be a novel in the modern sense of

the word.’<sup>44</sup> The reference to an avant garde French novelist and a French theoretician, the epigraphs which precede each chapter and the check in the storytelling to expose the novelist’s apparent lack of control over his own text emphasise that this is a ‘Victorian’ novel written with overt reference to twentieth-century literary and philosophical thought and in a knowing and often parodic vein. Tatjana Jukić argues that Fowles, writing in the 1960s and setting his novel in the 1860s, is using the elapsed century to highlight cultural shifts in both eras. In the 1960s modernism is giving way to new ways of thinking; in 1867, Darwin’s writings were causing a crisis for traditional religious belief and Marx was in London writing *Das Kapital*. ‘In each case a perplexing *fin-de-siècle* is being adumbrated. The two worlds, of 1867 and 1967 respectively, their ideological balance showing the first signs of decline and confusion, could, if compared, bring about a fuller understanding of both history and the present, possibly even restore them.’<sup>45</sup> This idea that by creating a fiction around times of crisis for the Victorians, modern concerns are highlighted, would become one *raison d’être* for later neo-Victorian novels and is more fully addressed in the following chapter. In Fowles’s novel the constant inter-play between the Victorian storyline and twentieth-century interjections leads to the reader having to choose between two opposing endings, one conventionally romantic in the manner of the traditional perception of the Victorian novel, the other much more in tune with a twentieth-century sensibility. Interestingly, the very successful film of the novel achieves these two endings by wrapping a film set version of the Victorian plot around with a twentieth-century ‘realist’ plot concerning an off-screen affair between the two central characters. In this way the film

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<sup>44</sup> John Fowles, *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* (1969; rpt. St. Albans: Panther, 1976), p. 85.

<sup>45</sup> Tatjana Jukić, ‘From Worlds to Words and the other Way Round: The Victorian Inheritance in the Postmodern British Novel’, in *Theme Parks, Rainforests and Sprouting Wastelands*, eds. Richard Todd and Luisa Flora (Amsterdam-Atlanta: Rodopi, G.A., 2000), p. 79.



anticipates the structure of a further group of neo-Victorian novels, split-narratives, which juxtapose Victorian and contemporary storylines in order to set up a dialogue between the two.

*The French Lieutenant's Woman* foregrounds two of the key themes which later Victorian historical novels deal with in a multiplicity of ways: sex and the question of religious versus scientific belief. To take sex first, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* opposes the overwhelming and contemporaneously 'inappropriate' attraction between two of the novel's protagonists with the semi-arranged marriage between members of the old landed gentry and the upcoming commercial classes. Apart from the one central sex scene there is little overt sexuality in the novel but plenty of sexual tension. Later neo-Victorian novels are often more shocking and graphic in their depiction of sexual relations. Fowles has openly expressed a kind of nostalgia for what he perceives to be the more restrained attitude of the Victorians to sexual matters: 'we have, in destroying so much of the mystery, the difficulty, the aura of the forbidden, destroyed also a good deal of the pleasure.'<sup>46</sup> There is some confusion here: Fowles, who appears to be reacting against the overtly libertarian attitudes of the 1960s, also goes into meticulous detail in the novel about the widespread use of prostitutes by Victorian men. Fowles espouses and integrates contemporary theoretical and philosophical ideas into the novel. His unwillingness to take complete control over his characters or supply a definitive ending suggest he has been influenced by French existentialist thought but equally, he adopts a stereotypical attitude to Victorian repressive sexual mores which would a few years later be opposed by Michel Foucault's argument that 'procedures of confession and scientific discursivity'<sup>47</sup> produced an

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<sup>46</sup> John Fowles, *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, p.234.

<sup>47</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge. The History of Sexuality. Volume 1*, 1976 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1998), p. 64.

excess rather than a deficiency of sexual discourse during the nineteenth century. Either way, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* indicates an engagement with contemporaneous philosophical and literary discourses which would be replicated in later neo-Victorian novels.

The clash between religious versus scientific belief underpins characterisation and plot development in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and includes examination of the tension between orthodox conformity to traditional religious observance and the advent of Darwinian thought. These have become staple and recurrent themes in later neo-Victorian novels. Western societies are currently having to come to terms with how to accommodate and attempt to integrate citizens, often first or second generation immigrants, with fervently held, evangelical Christian or radical Islamic beliefs:

Thirty years ago, we might have been able to convince ourselves that contemporary religious apocalyptic thought was a harmless remnant of a more credulous, superstitious, pre-scientific age, now safely behind us. But today prophecy belief, particularly within the Christian and Islamic traditions, is a force in our contemporary history, a medieval engine driving our moral, geopolitical, and military concerns.<sup>48</sup>

Novels which deal with conflicting belief systems, as many of the neo-Victorian novels do, offer a critique of how a former age struggled with a comparable situation. Dogmatic belief is satirised in the novels and the preacher or parson is frequently a pathetic or misguided figure. In *The French Lieutenant's Woman* a range of characters express diverse reactions to Darwin's theories, from crude rejection of any possibility of a relationship between humans and apes, through a strict and hypocritical adherence to the teachings of The Bible, at least for the servants, to an enthusiastic if naïve espousal of Darwin's ideas. 'For the Victorians there was a decisive crisis of

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<sup>48</sup> Ian McEwan, 'The day of judgment', *The Guardian*, Review section, 31/05/2008.

faith, a sense that the world was shaking under them, an ecstatic agony of indecision.’<sup>49</sup> Just as Fowles expresses nostalgia for a lost sexual innocence, Sally Shuttleworth suggests that Fowles’s novel also expresses a nostalgia for a crisis of faith which some modern readers can only experience at second hand. ‘For the postmodern era no such form of crisis seems possible, for there are no fixed boundaries of belief.’<sup>50</sup> Many, in the west at least, exist without fixed points of faith against which to define themselves and can only look back with longing at a period undergoing such intellectual upheaval, missing the personal intensity of the experience and at the same time being forced to acknowledge national and international repercussions of the rise of the Islamic faith. The suggestion that neo-Victorian novels offer their readers nostalgia for a safely managed past, including representations of Victorian, intellectual soul searching is one that has been frequently made, particularly by critics of the genre. It would be just as feasible, however, to argue that the neo-Victorian novel which deals with past events and crises but presents them in a pastiche or parodic form allows readers to bridge the gap between then and now and, in so doing, shows us something of who we are now.

Fowles’s novel uses the Darwinian revolution as underpinning to exhibit characters’ behaviour and motivations but he also makes it clear that his characters are unknown quantities both to him and to themselves. In so doing, his novel moves away from the authoritative portrayals of character of the Victorian novel and the centrality of the individual self in the modernist novel towards something much more uncertain and slippery: ‘postmodern writers are returning to historical fiction because the idea of writing about the Self is felt to be worked out, or precarious, or because these writers are attracted by the idea that perhaps we have no such thing as an

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<sup>49</sup> Sally Shuttleworth, ‘Demonic Mothers’, p. 260.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p260.

organic, discoverable, single Self.’<sup>51</sup> Many of the neo-Victorian novels which follow Fowles, and particularly the ‘Darwin novels’, some of which will be discussed later, use Victorian belief systems to interrogate current ways of thinking even if this exposes a contemporary lack of belief in anything very much at all. *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* also prefigures later neo-Victorian historical novels in its literary devices: the use of epigraphs as chapter headings to indicate links with the past, the foregrounding of the outcast as central character, the use of parody and pastiche. As many later twentieth and twenty-first century neo-Victorian novelists would do, Fowles uses literary techniques of the traditional Victorian novel and then subverts them in order to add a contemporary commentary to the original Victorian artefact. He uses epigraphs, for example, in a traditional manner, by quoting conventionally appropriate verses of poetry from Hardy or Tennyson, but will intersperse these with quotations from dissenting Victorian voices or from Marx on the exploitation of the working class and another on the death of President Kennedy. These deliberately clashing references introduce the Victorian world of the fiction to the reader while simultaneously undercutting it; homage is paid to the Victorian text at the same time as criticism is made of a possible Victorian smugness and certainty about the inevitability of human progress. This parodic use of epigraphs is typical of the novel as a whole: the traditional opening with scene setting and exposition of character is shattered when Fowles refuses to continue in omniscient vein; the double ending prevents the reader enjoying the novel as a total world. ‘Fowles found a new, positive way of assimilating tradition in a playful, pluralistic, parodic art – which moreover reflected the increasingly multifarious and kaleidoscopic nature of its cultural environment.’<sup>52</sup> With varying degrees of success, parody and pastiche inevitably become dominant stylistic devices in later neo-Victorian novels. *The French Lieutenant’s*

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<sup>51</sup> Byatt, *On Histories and Stories*, p. 31.

<sup>52</sup> Gutleben, *Nostalgic Postmodernism*, p. 120.

*Woman* additionally paves the way for later neo-Victorian novels in its use of hybrid forms: the use of letters and extracts from journals; the mix of bodice ripping, purple prose and discussion of highbrow concepts from the art of the Renaissance to Rousseau's Noble Savage. This mix of registers and form is developed even further in the second novel to be discussed in this context, A.S. Byatt's *Possession*.

If *The French Lieutenant's Woman* pastiches the Victorian novel, A.S. Byatt's *Possession* provides a second model for later neo-Victorian novels to emulate, the split-narrative. Here, a complex intertwining of nineteenth and twentieth-century plots is used to cast light on historical secrets, both personal and professional, and in so doing assists the main twentieth-century protagonists to determine their own futures. The impetus for the twentieth-century plot is the quest by a varied group of English and American academics to unearth the secret, extra-marital relationship between two nineteenth-century poets, thereby providing Byatt with myriad opportunities for exploring the connections between the two centuries, the varied motives of the searchers and, importantly, the question of just how much of the past, or whose version of the truth of the past, can be known. The novel makes it clear that no one character, or set of characters, has a full understanding of the events of the Victorian past. As Georges Letissier has it, 'subjectivity is no longer suspected of being a potential pitfall in the (writer's) attempt to make sense of the past.'<sup>53</sup> Byatt is aware that knowledge of the past is necessarily fragmentary: essential documents have been hidden, wives and lovers go to the grave with secrets intact and the modern day academic sleuths have their own baggage, including the potentially limiting

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<sup>53</sup> Georges Letissier, 'Passion and Possession as Alternatives to 'Cosmic Masculinity'', in 'Herstorical Romances', in *Metafiction and Metahistory in Contemporary Women's Writing*, eds. Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 117.

frameworks of twentieth-century literary discourses, which may prevent them from a full appreciation of the evidence at their disposal.

'*Possession*'s narrative technique emphasizes the individualized viewpoints to the detriment of generalized, universal ideas. It consists in gradually bringing to the fore a perspective that had been either obfuscated or plainly obliterated and, as a result, in reaching the past through untrodden paths.'<sup>54</sup> Byatt does appear to be casting a jaundiced eye at fashionable, late twentieth-century theoretical stances, suggesting instead: 'I think those of us who write about modern writing have a duty to keep the discussion open and fluent and very broad-based... We need to keep thinking of new – even deliberately provisional – ways to read and to compare what we have read.'<sup>55</sup> One of the narrative techniques which Byatt employs to emphasise the essentially individual nature of her characters, especially her 'Victorian' characters, and in order also to poke fun at what she views as the reductionist methods of twentieth-century critical analysis, is to invent pastiche Victorian documents in various registers and forms, most especially the poetry of her key Victorian characters, the poets Randolph Ash and Christabel LaMotte. In so doing, she sets the bar high for later neo-Victorian authors who attempt to a greater or lesser extent, and with varying degrees of success to reproduce 'authentic' Victorian documents, whether letters, diaries or journals. These issues of the authenticity or credibility of Victorian documents take on particular significance in split-narrative novels where there is a need to establish contrasting registers and tone between the 'Victorian' and the present day.

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p. 119-120.

<sup>55</sup> Byatt, *On Histories and Stories*, p. 3.

If Byatt's novel suggests the impossibility of a complete understanding of the past – her various academics each has a biased or partial understanding – this does not prevent her from emphasising the importance of individual or collective history and the value of trying to investigate what can be investigated in order to preserve links to our forbears, often through their artefacts. *Possession* especially privileges the literary and familial aspects of the search for past knowledge. In writing about *Possession* Byatt has stated that the novel 'is about... ventriloquism, love for the dead, the presence of literary texts as the voices of persistent ghosts or spirits.'<sup>56</sup> *Possession* is a novel full of echoes of the voices of the dead through their letters, poetry and belongings and the importance of the dead to the living is made abundantly clear through the various quests of the twentieth-century academics seeking intellectual one-upmanship, financial gain or self knowledge. In discovering that her interest in the Victorian poets LaMotte and Ash is not only academic but about family and lineage, Maud Bailey 'simultaneously historicizes herself and incarnates history.'<sup>57</sup> However, Maud Bailey's is probably the happiest of the personal quests represented within split-narrative neo-Victorian novels; others, like Graham Swift's *Ever After* tend to emphasise gaps in understanding and the potential for misunderstanding historical material in the present.

The structure of *Possession* is complex. Not only do the nineteenth and twentieth-century plots constantly weave around each other in a non-linear fashion, the text is also littered with passages from journal entries, poems and letters, setting a structural precedent which many later neo-Victorian novels would follow. This mix and juxtaposition of different timescales and narrative forms suggests an alternative view of the past from a realist, linear narrative which offers a

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p. 45.

<sup>57</sup> Jukić, 'From Worlds to Words', p. 84

teleological interpretation of historical events. In other words: ‘side by side with the well-known explanations of mainstream history, there is room for re-vision, and thus...a centrifugal conception of history, allowing different angles to coexist.’<sup>58</sup> *Possession* mixes first and third person narrations, parody and pastiche and a variety of genres including romance, gothic, detective and campus novel forms. As Christian Gutleben expresses it, ‘The most striking structural feature is heterogeneity, multiformity...an amazing plurality of discursive forms.’<sup>59</sup> Later neo-Victorian novels emphasise this need for the revision of conventional historical attitudes, especially through the foregrounding of the lives of the traditionally marginal in society: the lower classes, women and sexual and ethnic minorities. However, where *Possession*’s dénouement suggests a somewhat conventional reliance on heterosexual pairings, later neo-Victorian novels tend to be more daring and subversive with regard to the domestic arrangements of their protagonists. Later novels would also be less concerned nostalgically to pay homage to Victorian forbears whether actual personalities, or textual forms and references.

The third precursor neo-Victorian novel, Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea*, takes as its starting point Charlotte Brontë’s canonical novel *Jane Eyre* and provides, in 1966, a prequel to Brontë’s 1847 text. The original text provides the impetus for the prequel and characters and some scenes from the Brontë novel reappear or are revisited in Rhys’s novel but here the similarities between the two texts largely cease. *Jane Eyre* is a retrospective, first person, highly shaped narration telling the story of the eponymous heroine’s struggle for self-fulfilment and happiness with her eventual husband, Edward Rochester. *Wide Sargasso Sea* on the other hand tells the story of the courtship and marriage between Rochester and his first wife Antoinette Cosway, a West Indian

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<sup>58</sup> Letissier, ‘Passion and Possession’, p. 120.

<sup>59</sup> Gutleben, *Nostalgic Postmodernism*, p. 79.



creole. The mad woman in the attic in *Jane Eyre* is given her own life story in *Wide Sargasso Sea* but the narrative technique in Rhys's novel is far from straightforward: here, several unnamed narrators' stories cut across each other in a jumble of conflicting accounts of the failure of the marriage and Antoinette's subsequent mental instability. What is clear however in *Wide Sargasso Sea* is that Rhys is challenging the accepted norms of Brontë's novel, especially the prevailing, if covert, Victorian attitude towards the sexually incontinent, racially impure and mentally deranged creole woman. Antoinette's madness, 'is shown to be largely Rochester's own construction. It is the product of a patriarchal and imperialist ideology which identifies his wife's sexuality as a sign of degeneracy always liable to slide into insanity, and furthermore associates it with the colonised 'Other' she represents.'<sup>60</sup> In making this challenge, Rhys seeks to 'open up the silent spaces' of a classic literary text, 'to give voices to women, or the racially oppressed who have been denied a place in history.'<sup>61</sup> If the reader of *Jane Eyre* is directed towards a vision of earthly happiness which depends on Christian marriage and on finding a balance between duty and desire, *Wide Sargasso Sea* shows that Jane's and Rochester's contentment hides a backstory of slavery, cruelty and personal instability. Jean Rhys writes as a woman of creole descent in order to reveal the effects of colonialism and white, male domination. The novel makes clear that the same events and characters can be considered from various points of view, and expressed in different ways, particularly in a new century when issues of race and gender are coming under political and theoretical scrutiny.

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<sup>60</sup> Jeannette King, *The Victorian Woman Question in Contemporary Feminist Fiction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 2.

<sup>61</sup> Sally Shuttleworth, 'Natural History: The Retro-Victorian Novel', in *The Third Culture: Literature and Science*, ed. Elinor S. Shaffer (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1998), p. 256.

For Christian Gutleben, ‘Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) may be said to have started the literary movement of Victorian postmodernism, where the heroes embody the forgotten of nineteenth-century fiction...it is likely to be accused of playing with and usurping some of the aura of the Victorian masterpiece.’<sup>62</sup> Cora Kaplan rates the novel as, ‘A vanguard piece of Victoriana, spawning imitations of its own.’<sup>63</sup> These assessments are accurate. Neo-Victorian novels frequently foreground the Victorian marginalised, play with, imitate and debunk original texts and often do so while integrating aspects of theoretical discourse of the time of writing. *Wide Sargasso Sea* embraces, late in the day perhaps, many of the motifs of literary modernism: an emphasis on the conscious and subconscious aspects of an individual psyche and a rejection of both the moral assumptions and literary forms of the Victorian era. It also looks forward to the postmodern in its use of multiple narrative voices and fractured structure. The rejection of an establishment view of history, the stories of the downtrodden and marginalised and a lack of inhibition in describing sexual acts, all features of Rhys’s novel, would come to be staples of the neo-Victorian novels of the 1990s to the present day. Rhys is, however, less interested in the Victorian period itself, than in rewriting one particular Victorian text. ‘Accordingly, the Victorians as Rhys sees them are not a formative attribute of a new possible world...Her novel centres on an intertextual play of several points of view, not on a dialogue of two different historical entities.’<sup>64</sup> Jukić argues convincingly that Rhys’s concerns are with the psychology and motivations of her characters and that the avoidance of pastiche and irony mark *Wide Sargasso Sea* as a largely modernist rather than postmodern text. Rhys’s novel returns to a text rather than a time and creates a re-assessment, a new way of looking, that is about survival and the rights of the underdog and the disenfranchised to a hearing. The interest in the Victorian for its own sake

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<sup>62</sup> Gutleben, *Nostalgic Postmodernism*, p. 35.

<sup>63</sup> Kaplan, *Victoriana*, p. 154.

<sup>64</sup> Jukić, ‘From Worlds to Words’, p. 78

and the dialogue between the Victorian and the present is explored more deliberately in John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and A.S. Byatt's *Possession*.

The three novels discussed here demonstrate many of the themes, concerns and structural forms of the neo-Victorian novels which were to follow them at the end of the twentieth-century and into the twenty-first. Structurally they provide three models which later novels would imitate or adapt. John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* provides the most prolific variant for later writers of neo-Victorian fiction, pastiche Victoriana. This sub-genre provides enormous scope for the writer of the neo-Victorian novel but what all pastiche neo-Victorian novels have in common is the attempted construction of a credible Victorian world even though, simultaneously, the fabricated nature of that world is often made apparent to the reader, as it is in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. The pastiche neo-Victorian novel of the last twenty years has dealt especially with social issues – crime, poverty, family life, the growth of London, disease and the place of women in society – education, sexuality, work. Frequently too, the pastiche neo-Victorian novel appropriates a well known fictional or actual Victorian personality and usually undermines or subverts the reader's knowledge of that character or personality. James Wilson's *The Dark Clue* (2001) brings together fictional characters from Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* (1860) to write a biography of the painter Turner. Louis Bayard's *Mr Timothy* (2003) recreates Dickens' Tiny Tim as a young man, disenchanted with his lot, particularly with the burden of his angelic, long-suffering childhood persona. Both novels figure scenes of dredging the Thames for the bodies of young girls who have served their purpose. Childhood prostitution is a frequent topic in many novels, with members of the aristocracy or the well connected, Turner included, as consumers. The most successful of the pastiche neo-Victorian novels are those

which introduce surprising subject matter or unexpected juxtapositions into the created Victorian world. Many novelists take the opportunity to explore aspects of Victorian life which would have been impossible for novelists of the time, leading to a plethora of novels which revel in the squalor of London slums, the underworld of the sewers and particularly, the link between crime and sexuality.

A.S.Byatt's use of split-narration forces the twentieth-century plot to continuously interrogate the nineteenth, in an attempt to provide information for the twentieth-century protagonists. Texts which fall into this category usually have a specific agenda for setting up a dialogue across the centuries which could be political, philosophical or literary. As in *Possession*, heredity, family secrets and inherited family artefacts play an important part in making connections over time and space. Graham Swift's *Ever After* and Liz Jensen's *Ark Baby* (1998) examine the influence of Darwin's ideas on his contemporaries and their continuing effect on familial descendants at the end of the twentieth-century. Ahdaf Soueif's *The Map of Love* (1999) mirrors a late nineteenth-century love affair between an English woman and an Egyptian nationalist with a late twentieth-century relationship between their descendants. The continuing relevance of England's colonial past for late twentieth-century east-west relations is emphasised and is shown still to cast a shadow over modern relationships.

Rhys's novel adopts a different approach, taking an existing canonical text and completely re-shaping it. She writes the prequel to *Jane Eyre* but splits the narrative voice between various characters without making clear the relation of one to the other. In *Jane Eyre* Jane tells her story retrospectively, in a highly constructed narrative, thereby controlling to a degree the reader's

reception of the story. Rhys, however, not only fragments the narrative, but her storytellers are shown not to be in full control of the facts or even of their own faculties. The reader is left, much more than in the original text, to try and construct some understanding of events. Rhys's novel has been imitated in later neo-Victorian novels in a variety of ways: the continuing re-visiting of Brontë texts, *Jane Eyre* in particular, and the use of mixed, contrasting narratives. Rhys's novel places the narrative of Rochester's and Antoinette Cosway's courtship against a backdrop of the abolition of slavery and the attitudes of the white colonial power to the mixed race creoles. As with Rhys's novel, the focus of later re-writing of pre-existing texts is often applied to a specific political era or contemporary sexual and social concerns. D.M. Thomas's *Charlotte. The Final Journey of Jane Eyre* (2000) combines character and plot from *Jane Eyre* with setting and story telling techniques from *Wide Sargasso Sea* to provide a critique of turn of the millenium sexual mores and colonial attitudes. Will Self's *Dorian* (2002) moves Oscar Wilde's *Dorian Gray* (1890) to the Thatcher and Diana years of celebrity culture, AIDS and conspicuous consumption. The success of these novels depends, in part at least, on their ability to graft the old and the new. The original text, or texts in the case of *Charlotte. The Final Journey of Jane Eyre*, is always present to the reader but never overwhelms or diminishes the contemporary reality of the later text. *Charlotte. The Final Journey of Jane Eyre* not only re-writes *Jane Eyre* but entangles alongside Jane's new narrative the story of the self-styled Madame Brontë, her literary and sexual adventures on Martinique and her quasi-paedophilic relationship with her father. This complicated inter-connectedness of the plots of *Jane Eyre*, *Wide Sargasso Sea* and a modern narrative challenges the reader's historical relationship with the two originating texts and prompts a re-examination of attitudes, both to canonical texts and to current values.

*The French Lieutenant's Woman*, *Possession* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* have both thematically and structurally influenced later neo-Victorian novels. The Victorian pastiche *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, the split-narrative *Possession* and the canonical re-write *Wide Sargasso Sea* provide three structural models that late twentieth and early twenty-first century neo-Victorian novels have re-worked. The multifarious ways in which these three novels express a relationship with the Victorian past – through reference to Victorian texts and personalities, by comparing spiritual or cultural crises then and now or by inserting contemporary attitudes into Victorian settings – are exploited by later neo-Victorian novels. Later chapters of this thesis examine in detail three neo-Victorian novels which have adopted similar structural forms to the three forerunner texts discussed above. They are Matthew Kneale's *English Passengers* (2000), Graham Swift's *Ever After* and D.M. Thomas's *Charlotte. The Final Journey of Jane Eyre*.

### Summative Comments

The preceding sections of this Introduction outline some of the contexts against and within which the neo-Victorian novel has been written and, more latterly, examined. These are novels which are written and read alongside changing historical perspectives of the Victorian period and which absorb and express twentieth-century cultural and literary theories. Neo-Victorian authors have come of age, and in some cases taken university degrees, during the heyday of theoretical discourse, and feminist, postcolonial and new historicist intellectual affiliations particularly are foregrounded both in the novels' areas of topical interest and in the equivocal manner in which ideas are presented. Most novels are at pains to present their versions of historical events, characters and even story-telling itself as potentially arbitrary and overtly constructed.

Most critical work on the neo-Victorian novel has concentrated on how the thematic material of the novels elucidates not only current attitudes towards the Victorian but also present-day anxieties and has, additionally, teased out the often overlapping theoretical influences in a particular novel or individual writer's work. However, what few commentators on the neo-Victorian novel consider, and then only glancingly, is the question, '[W]hy this continued and perpetual return to the fictional realms of the Victorian, as both readers and writers? Can the relationship be understood, in the words of Kaplan, as based in the very fact of aesthetic, ethic, and cultural difference and similarity?'<sup>65</sup> Undoubtedly, the fact that the Victorian period is only just outside living memory yet also feels remote or 'other' has something to do with a perceived need to make connection, yet this does not go far enough in explaining why that need exists and is expressed in so many neo-Victorian novels, in so many ways. Eckart Voigts-Virchow explains this attempt at connection in the neo-Victorian novel as, 'the distancing of "us" vs. "them"...the fusion and amalgamation of "us" and "them"...the emergence of the modern and the traditional at the same time...'<sup>66</sup> This does get nearer the heart of the matter, for in playing down any sense of separation from the Victorians and in playing up our similarities, the potential for unbroken connection is established. However, Voigts-Virchow continues, while 'contemporary readers encounter in the neo-Victorian novel not only the Victorians, but also their own culture' and while 'the novels contribute to exploding harmonious and homogeneous views of Victorianism' they undermine, knowingly or unknowingly, their own project by providing 'a concept for analyzing historical difference and otherness.'<sup>67</sup> This is the anomalous position of the neo-Victorian novel, that in attempting rapprochement – often through subject matter which places

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<sup>65</sup> Heilmann and Llewellyn, *Neo-Victorianism*, p. 24.

<sup>66</sup> Eckart Voigts-Virchow, 'In-Yer-Victorian-Face: A Subcultural Hermeneutics of Neo-Victorianism', *Literature Interpretation Theory*, 20: 108-125 (2009), p.120.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 108, 120, 108.

contemporary issues in a ‘Victorian’ context – what is achieved is distance and it is the various forms of the neo-Victorian novel which, taken collectively, emphasise that distance. The neo-Victorian novel exists, therefore, in a skewed, even contradictory, relation to its source material, creating a tension which is often playfully exhibited, because it cannot be resolved. The form that each novel takes is a critical choice in this relationship of tension because the continuum from the pastiche Victorian novel to the novel of acute structural fragmentation brings with it another spectrum, one which begins with collusion and sleight of hand and moves through to acceptance of disintegration of meaning in relation to the past.

The position of this thesis is that this need, expressed by the neo-Victorian novel, to represent, to honour, and sometimes dishonour, the Victorian dead, their texts and their culture is a means to re-connect us with them in order to suggest, or at least examine the potential for, a direct and unbroken line of descent and a sense of the continuity rather than discontinuity of history. In all its contradictory representations, from bonnets and clogs pastiche through to the literary highbrow, and from fawning admiration through to patronising satire, the neo-Victorian novel explores the nature of contemporary connection to the Victorian and the Victorians, in the hope of establishing a line of communication and a sense of completeness rather than fracture:

Continuous history is the indispensable correlative of the founding function of the subject: the guarantee that everything that has eluded him may be restored to him; the certainty that time will disperse nothing without restoring it in a reconstituted unity; the promise that one day the subject - in the form of historical consciousness - will once again be able to appropriate, to bring back under his sway, all those things that are kept at a distance by difference, and find in them what might be called his abode.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, p. 13.



Foucault's statement about the subject's desire for a sense of continuous history which will restore, unify and give her/him a guarantee of control and belonging, provides a convincing explanation for the allure and power of the neo-Victorian novel which attempts to do all these things, and does so by choosing subject matter which is of interest and even concern to a contemporary readership, but additionally has a link to the Victorian. However, the project is bound to be conceived by both author and reader – consciously or unconsciously – as a schizophrenic endeavour on one level or another. This disjunction is expressed through paratextual material including prologues, epilogues and bibliographies; anachronistic references; inappropriate language registers; varying typefaces and most especially through the various deliberately jarring or oppositional structural forms of the neo-Victorian novel, some of which will be discussed later in detail. The neo-Victorian novel elaborates what Foucault suggests is the shift between the old historical questions of links, causes, continuity, significance and connections and the new questions about hierarchy, dominance and stratification. Many novels do try to establish links and connections but instead often become testaments to the struggle for dominance between one power centre or another – male/female, God/Darwin, colonising/colonised – either within a 'Victorian' context, a modern one or both.

Central to all these debates about the shift away from a totalising history which charts linear sequence and progression to more vertically organised sets of series of association, is the significance of the document. Foucault claims that the document is no longer only used as a means to put into the historical record the voice of those reduced to silence and distanced by time in order to plug a gap in historical knowledge, that instead 'history now organizes the document,

divides it up, distributes it, orders it...distinguishes between what is relevant and what is not.’<sup>69</sup>

A common denominator of very many neo-Victorian novels is the use of documents, real and invented, which strive to perform a complex variety of functions including adding authenticity by referencing other texts, fictional and factual and emphasising the literary nature of the neo-Victorian novel through the multiplicity of written forms embedded in the narratives – diaries, letters or journals. Neo-Victorian novelists have claimed that the inclusion of, usually fictional, documents of the marginalised do add these voices to the historical record but, of course these documents have either been created for the purpose or culled from the archive and re-appropriated to serve a new purpose. In other words, the use of the document in the neo-Victorian novel straddles Foucault’s definition of the old and new uses of the document in historical writing: it both restores the voices of the silenced but, at the same time, establishes a new set of ‘unities, totalities, series, relations.’<sup>70</sup> What all these neo-Victorian documents achieve, in their attempt at authentication and gravitas, is an emphasis on the constructed nature of the neo-Victorian enterprise. In using documents to add weight, the neo-Victorian novel stresses its own biases and its own particular slant on the idea of or potential for historical continuity.

### Thesis Organisation

This introductory chapter has placed the phenomenon of the neo-Victorian novel against historical, critical and theoretical contexts of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, before drawing on Foucauldian analysis to support the key areas of interest of the thesis. Chapter 2 examines the main concerns of the neo-Victorian novel – what does it write about? – because

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., p.7.

an answer to this question gives insight into areas of common concern which link the Victorian and the contemporary period. In a Foucauldian gesture of organising material into vertical series, the chapter assesses six thematic areas of the neo-Victorian novel: varieties of sexual experience, the female protagonist, crime and the London experience, colonialism and race, fictional biographies and systems of belief.

Chapters 3, 4 and 5 analyse various forms of the neo-Victorian novel through a discussion of three key novels, since structural choices about how to present ‘Victorian’ material necessarily indicate greater or lesser confidence about the ability to, or the desirability of, constructing a ‘Victorian’ world in the present. Chapter 3 discusses a novel set entirely in the nineteenth-century but with a nodding awareness of the twentieth, Matthew Kneale’s *English Passengers*. Chapter 4 considers a split-narrative, one ‘Victorian’, one contemporary, Graham Swift’s *Ever After*. Chapter 5 deals with the most fragmented of the three forms represented, in D.M. Thomas’ re-write of Charlotte Brontë’s ur-text *Jane Eyre*, *Charlotte. The Final Journey of Jane Eyre*. In choosing texts to represent these three structural forms the object was to select three particularly extreme examples in each category, novels which were not especially well known or not their authors’ most famous work and novels which avoided the more predictable or popular thematic neo-Victorian material, including what might be referred to as ‘women’s issues’. The three structural forms of the neo-Victorian novel represented by these three texts demonstrate key options neo-Victorian novelists have in presenting their material but also illustrate, by a variety of means, the ways by which connection to the ‘Victorian’ source material, factual or fictional, is undercut and fractured. Neo-Victorian criticism to date has not focused in detail on these choices in structural presentation of material; this thesis aims to do so in order to illustrate the conflicting

and sometimes contradictory aims of the neo-Victorian enterprise. In the concluding chapter the discussions about the subject matter of the neo-Victorian novel and how it presents 'Victorian' material will support the thesis' arguments concerning what the neo-Victorian novel reveals about the contemporary engagement with the 'Victorian'.

## **2. The Rise of the Neo-Victorian Novel**

### **2.1 Introduction**

The neo-Victorian novel is a particular phenomenon of the last twenty or so years though, of course, novelists have used the Victorian period as a setting for their novels prior to 1990. One of the most notable and one of the earliest is Michael Sadleir's *Fanny by Gaslight* (1940) which pre-empted later neo-Victorian novels in its racy subject matter, use of multiple narrators and varying time perspectives. A Victorian specialist, Sadleir's emphasis on historical accuracy echoes the same concerns in the neo-Victorian writing of A.S. Byatt or Michel Faber for example, though his novel places greater stress on romance and melodrama than late twentieth and early twenty-first century neo-Victorian novels do. Equally, Sadleir's novel does not exhibit the knowing self-aware metafictionality that would become the hallmark of the neo-Victorian novel proper. The publication of an occasional novel set during the Victorian period became, during the last decade of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first, a proliferation of such novels, in huge variety, from straightforward linear narrative to experiments in content and form. This section of the thesis will examine the range of novels published during this twenty year period. As such, it covers a longer and broader history than those of Christian Gutleben and Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn; Gutleben's text was published in 2001 and Heilmann and Llewellyn's covers the decade 1999-2009. This survey constitutes the 'what' question with regard to the neo-Victorian novel: what do they write about and why do they write about these issues? It has become an accepted 'truth' that the neo-Victorian novel uses the Victorian period to place contemporary concerns within a relatively recent historical context in order to allow consideration and possible illumination of such concerns. By organising novels

into thematic categories, it is the intention of this thesis to highlight how the neo-Victorian novel displays some of contemporary society's values and standpoints.

Novels are set at every stage of 'the long nineteenth century'.<sup>1</sup> Some modern historical studies of Victoria's reign no longer confine the Victorian period to the years 1837-1901, arguing that late Victorian Britain had more in common with the twentieth century than with the nineteenth.

[H]istorians depict the 1870s and 1880s as a watershed, an interpretation that could arguably provide champions of Victorian studies with ammunition for their argument for the centrality of the Victorian era as the historical period that encompassed both the persistence of an old regime and the emergence of a new modernity. Arguing, that is, that the Victorian era was pivotal – rather than arguing that it was seamless or historically coherent.<sup>2</sup>

Finn's thesis has a resonance for the range of historical decades portrayed by neo-Victorian novels and also raises important considerations for the neo-Victorian novel with regard to the seamless or coherent nature of the Victorian era. Many novels utilise the 1860s, 70s and 80s, often with the intention of highlighting the beginnings of change in the role of women in society. A few novels are set earlier in the century, bridge the years preceding Victoria's accession, and especially in the case of Jane Rogers' *Mr Wroe's Virgins* (1991), for example, hint at the move away from work on the land to work in the factories and the effect of the Industrial Revolution. A few others, often biographical novels, look at real lives which negotiate the shift from Victorian to Edwardian England.<sup>3</sup> Many neo-Victorian novels are thematically exercised by the changes forced onto society through the historical shifts and collisions between the old regime and newer power centres; the neo-Victorian novel questions the coherence or incoherence of

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<sup>1</sup> Margot Finn, 'When Was the Nineteenth-Century? Where? Whither Victorian Studies?', *19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth-Century*, 2 (2006), p.2 ([www.19.bbk.ac.uk](http://www.19.bbk.ac.uk)).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> For example: Julian Barnes, *Arthur and George* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2005), Colm Tóibín, *The Master* (2004: rpt. London: Picador, 2005).

Victorian society as a means of comparison with similar conditions in the twenty first. Novels which overlap with the strictly pre-Victorian or post-Victorian have been included in the thematic analyses which follow because they are novels which raise questions of change and continuity on from the Victorian period. Bio-fiction novels in particular underscore a change in attitude to the great men and women of the Victorian age, a change which began in the early twentieth century, a movement away from hagiography and towards exposing feet of clay, a movement which continues today.

The majority of these novels are set either entirely within a 'Victorian' time period or use a split time-frame, with a 'Victorian' narrative contrasting a modern narrative. A minority of novels include several narratives, each set within a different time period. Probably the most chronologically and narratively diverse of these is David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* (2004) which ranges from the nineteenth century into a post-apocalyptic future and back again. A further few are set in the present and have a narrative which is entirely dependent on a Victorian text or on events which happened in a 'Victorian' past. Dan Waddell's crime novel *The Blood Detective* (2008) is a modern day murder mystery whose plot depends on a miscarriage of justice from 1879. One of the novel's key characters in matching Victorian and contemporary family trees in order to decode events is a genealogist. Dan Waddell himself was an advisor on the recent BBC television series *Who Do You Think You Are?* which unearths and investigates the family secrets or missing bloodlines of well-known personalities. A link can be made between some examples of the neo-Victorian novel and the heritage industry, including the late twentieth and early twenty-first century craze for genealogy. Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace* (2000) makes the same point on an epic scale in following the fortunes of a family group across three generations

and several far eastern countries to explore the ramifications of the deposing of King Thebaw of Burma, by the British, in 1885. Citing these two novels alone illustrates the diversity of subject and form of the neo-Victorian novel. Both novels are concerned with the relation of the Victorian to contemporary lives and events but approach these matters from completely different perspectives of scope and literary pretension.

The majority of neo-Victorian novels are set in England and concentrate on domestic, social and work-related issues but the classification system also includes novels set partly or wholly abroad. Discussing novels set in America or former colonies under a neo-Victorian heading could appear inappropriate or problematic. However, because these novels grapple with post-colonial themes, the clash between differing cultures and the opportunities offered to emigrants from the old world, they offer a broader or contrasting perspective to novels set entirely in an English context. As Simon Joyce argues, 'It is evident that we can identify a powerful twentieth century hangover in postcolonial states that have struggled, in ways that seem very different from the British experience...to break free from the legacies of Victorian imperialism.'<sup>4</sup> Joyce's argument above is reiterated by Marie-Luise Kohlke and specifically in relation to the neo-Victorian novel. Kohlke makes the point that Victorian Britain always defined itself against former colonies and political rivals or economic trading partners, so that 'neo-Victorian'...may be better employed – at least provisionally – as a generic umbrella term for historical fiction of any denomination, regardless of setting or provenance, as long as it engages self-critically with the nineteenth

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<sup>4</sup> Simon Joyce, *The Victorians in the Rearview Mirror* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2007), p. 169.



century from a latter-day perspective.’<sup>5</sup> The following classification system will adopt such an inclusive stance.

Presenting a catalogue of neo-Victorian novels written during the last twenty years and, as indicated above, including novels written in a variety of temporal modes and by native British and overseas authors is fraught with pitfalls and difficulties. A decade ago, Robin Gilmour (1999) offered his inventory of the ways Victorian history and fiction may be used by contemporary novelists: the historical novel written from a modern perspective and in a modern idiom; pastiche and parody; the inversion of Victorian ideology; the subversion of Victorian fictional forms; the modern reworking of a Victorian classic and the research novel. These categories are still relevant and useful, though the examples Gilmour gives for each could now be replaced or added to from the multitude of novels written in the intervening years and it is the subject matter of these later novels especially which gives an indication of the concerns of contemporary society. A more ironic, tongue-in-cheek approach to cataloguing the genre is given in The Little Professor’s (2006) website ‘Rules for Writing Neo-Victorian Novels’: ‘All middle- and upper-class Victorian wives are Sexually Frustrated, Emotionally Unfulfilled, and possibly Physically Abused...they may find Fulfillment with a) a man not their husband, b) a man not their husband and of the Laboring Classes, c) a man not their husband and of Another Race, or d) a woman not their, er, husband.’<sup>6</sup> This is the first of eleven rules. Other rules deal with Christians, Evangelicals, Egalitarians, Oppressed Populations, Prostitutes, Sexual Abuse of

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<sup>5</sup> Marie-Luise Kohlke, ‘Ghosts of Many Shades and Shadings: Review of Mariadele Boccardi, *The Contemporary British Historical Novel*; Tatiana Kontou, *Spiritualism and Women’s Writing*; and Rosario Arias and Patricia Pulham (eds), *Haunting and Spectrality in Neo-Victorian Fiction*’, *Neo-Victorian Studies*, 2:2 (Winter 2009-2010), p. 255.

<sup>6</sup> Little Professor, *Things Victorian and Academic, Rules for Writing neo-Victorian Novels*, <http://arb0rv1tae.typepad.com/bookworm/2006/03/rules> for writi.html.

children, Wretched Slums, Period slang and, in marketing the novels, the reliance on the word ‘Dickensian’. The deliberate overuse of capitals and generally hyperbolic tone indicate this is a list of rules to be taken with a pinch of salt. Even so, it does cover many of the interests of the neo-Victorian novel, notably its emphasis on the lives of women. Like any list however, serious or facetious, it omits and gives undue emphasis. Commenting on the Little Professor’s *Rules for Writing Neo-Victorian Novels* Mark Llewellyn rightly suggests that, ‘While the list is stereotypical in its portrayal of the kinds of character and plot lines used in neo-Victorian fictions, this is echoed in the fact that so much of neo-Victorian fiction is stereotypical in arguing against long-established clichés about the ideas and fixations of the Victorians themselves.’<sup>7</sup>

An awareness of these possible stereotypes has assisted in the formulation of the following catalogue: an emphasis on sexuality and the related field of female lives; crime and the capital; the postcolonial debate; the interest in the individual life, actual or literary and the debate between faith and science. However, this awareness extends to an understanding that any form of taxonomy contains its own limitations. As Gillian Beer has noted, ‘Darwin himself saw that taxonomies always cause trouble with boundaries, that they draw on prior assumptions, that their values tend to form an evidential circle about what matters for categorisation.’<sup>8</sup> Beer’s comments on Darwin’s opinions about taxonomies are particularly pertinent to the following system of classification where boundaries are fluid and often overlap, where there is, inevitably perhaps, a tendency to look for expected subject content and where any attempt at grouping may confer an exaggerated emphasis. A catalogue of the themes of the neo-Victorian novel is also constantly in

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<sup>7</sup> Mark Llewellyn, ‘Neo-Victorianism: On the Ethics and Aesthetics of Appropriation’, *Literature Interpretation Theory*, 20 (2009), 27-44, p. 28.

<sup>8</sup> Gillian Beer, *Darwin’s Plots* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. xxx.

danger of becoming outdated since this is a form which quickly assimilates new societal interests and influences, including, more recently, debate about environmental degradation. Despite its limitations however, classifying the subject material of such a large and growing group of novels will contribute an understanding of what the neo-Victorian novel is saying about who we are now.

The following classification will concentrate on cataloguing the themes, interests and issues foregrounded by the neo-Victorian novel. Self-evidently such an analysis will highlight the concerns that late twentieth and early twenty-first-century writers have wished to impose into a 'Victorian' historical period and will demonstrate how 'Victorian' settings or references are manipulated to accommodate a twenty-first-century sensibility. The following groupings of neo-Victorian novels into a classification system covers the thematic discourses of Varieties of Sexual Experience, the Female Protagonist, Crime and the London Experience, Fictional Biographies, Colonialism and Race and Belief Systems and represents a range of power relations which are continuing sites of negotiation in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. By deploying these areas of concern within a Victorian timeframe, an attempt is being made to render them simultaneously remote and close at hand, manageable because remote and relevant because close at hand.

## 2.2 Varieties of Sexual Experience

Any cursory reading of just a handful of neo-Victorian novels is likely to suggest to a reader that the neo-Victorian novel is very focused on sex and is particularly interested in non-mainstream,

exotic and illegal sexual practices. As Heilmann and Llewellyn have it, ‘Victorian sexuality and the way we re-imagine it, its contradictions, excesses, dissimilarities from or correspondences with our diversity of experience holds an irresistible appeal for the neo-Victorian imagination. The nature of our interest in the Victorian body arguably reveals less about the Victorians and more about our own preoccupations.’<sup>9</sup> Our interest in the Victorian body and what we impose upon it or invent for it certainly represents our age’s obsession with the uses to which the contemporary body is put. These preoccupations include contemporary attitudes about perceived repressive, bigoted or hypocritical Victorian attitudes towards sexuality through to sexual activity which is still currently illegal or taboo, constituting a complicated nexus of attraction: the vicarious thrill of imposing racy subject matter within a dressing-up scenario of bonnets and crinolines at the least sophisticated end of the spectrum through to disturbing representation of sexual fantasy and the continuing violation of the body at the other. In their totality, these multifarious evocations of ‘Victorian’ sexuality project a complex set of possible interactions between the Victorian and neo-Victorian: the project of imagining the counter-histories of the Victorian sexually dispossessed – the hidden history of same sex relationships, for example; the binary logic of contemporary self-definition – the Victorians as repressed and unenlightened compared to contemporary liberality in sexual matters and, potentially contrarily, a site for the projection of our own repressed or taboo desires.

The frankness with which the neo-Victorian novel tackles situations of colourful or aberrant sexuality comes in the wake of Steven Marcus’s seminal study of Victorian sexuality and pornography in the mid-nineteenth century, *The Other Victorians* (1964). Marcus’s text ranges

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<sup>9</sup> Heilmann and Llewellyn, *Neo-Victorianism*, p. 107.

over the medical writings of the Victorian physician William Acton, the works of the bibliographer of sexual and pornographic literature Henry Spencer Ashbee, the sexual autobiography 'My Secret Life', an analysis of four pornographic novels of the period and a discussion of the vast literature on flagellation. The neo-Victorian novel frequently includes material that mainstream Victorian novelists could only hint at whereas neo-Victorian novelists have been at pains to bring the hidden to light and to place hidden lives centre-stage, a novelistic expression of the Foucauldian notion that that which is secret is also always that which is talked about. What *The Other Victorians* makes clear is that this archival material is evidence of lived Victorian lives. Thus the neo-Victorian sympathy for the prostitute is an echo of William Acton's emphasis on prostitution as a direct result of poverty. Sarah Waters (*Fingersmith*, 2002) and Belinda Starling (*The Journal of Dora Damage*, 2006) both make use of, acknowledge and fictionalise the writings of Henry Spencer Ashbee and both concentrate on the obsessive nature of his enterprise and the dangers for women drawn into its orbit. The neo-Victorian novel selects salacious material from Victorian texts and moulds it around a cast of characters and a plot which usually assumes a reciprocal empathy from the reader for the downtrodden, the poor and the female. A contemporary readership might expect a 'Victorian' plot to include scenes of abject poverty or the abasement of women as part of an assumption about the social and sexual progress made over the last century and a half and one criticism levelled at neo-Victorian novels is that some do allow easy or self-congratulatory conclusions about the liberality of early twenty-first-century attitudes towards sexual and social equality. As Taylor and Wolff express it, '[T]he Victorians have been made and remade throughout the twentieth century, as successive generations have used the Victorian past in order to locate themselves in the present.'<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Miles Taylor and Michael Wolff (eds), *The Victorians Since 1901. Histories, Representations and Revisions* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), p. 2.

There are numerous instances of lesbian engagement in the neo-Victorian novel, as if to emphasise the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries' freedom and willingness to imagine such relationships into being against a backdrop of Victorian prudery. Katharine McMahon's *The Rose of Sebastopol* (2007) hints at the lesbian orientation of Rosa as a plot device to explain her devotion to her more prosaic cousin Mariella. The bulk of the novel is an exercise in female emancipation, including a portrayal of intense female friendship: 'I ration myself five minutes a night only, when I am allowed to think of you at Fosse House. I ache so much to see you, to touch you, for the scent of you, the sound of your voice.'<sup>11</sup> Towards the end of *Supping with Panthers* (1996), Tom Holland introduces a lesbian vampiric episode into the mix of male vampirism, the Whitechapel murders and appearances by Bram Stoker and Sherlock Holmes, to add to an already lurid narrative: 'For several seconds, as we all stood there, this woman continued as we had discovered her – pressing herself close against Lucy's naked flesh and drinking from her bloodied bosom...and as she arched back her neck she licked her lips with an almost sensual delight.'<sup>12</sup> Given that the narrator has just declared himself unwilling to pollute his narrative with a description of what Lucy and her attacker are doing, the reader can only surmise that Tom Holland is being deliberately tongue-in-cheek. The vampiric lesbian incident provides a spurious frisson as the already melodramatic novel draws to a close.

Further neo-Victorian novels examine the issue of the incarceration of 'troublesome' women in mental asylums, a topic which will be examined in more detail later in this chapter. Fiona Shaw's *The Sweetest Thing* (2003) touches on this subject when a Quaker family puts its difficult

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<sup>11</sup> Katharine McMahon, *The Rose of Sebastopol* (London: Phoenix, 2007), p. 172.

<sup>12</sup> Tom Holland, *Supping with Panthers* (1996; rpt. London: Abacus, 2000), p. 407.

daughter Grace into 'The Haven' in order to prevent her setting up home with a female friend. The fact that the two young women are found together reading the poetry of Christina Rossetti clinches the decision. Jane Harris's *The Observations* (2006) is another novel which combines an interest in female friendship and commitment to a mental asylum: Arabella Reid's affection for her maids, especially the dead Nora, leads to her breakdown and committal. *James Miranda Barry* by Patricia Duncker, based on the true story of a woman who passed as a man in order to be able to train as a doctor, treats the subject of her protagonist's sexuality with delicacy throughout but emphasises the lengths Barry has to go to disguise her physical body, another form of incarceration. Duncker invents for Barry a lifelong infatuation with a flamboyant and successful actress, the two of them living together for the last years of Barry's life. This fictive lesbian relationship adds to the strangeness, but not necessarily the accuracy, of an already bizarre life-story: 'As to the inner reality of James Miranda Barry's life, here we can only guess at the truth, for there is very little evidence. And it is here that the novelist will always have the edge over the historian.'<sup>13</sup> Duncker suggests that one of the pleasures for the historical novelist is the freedom to exercise the imagination; where there is no record, invention is permissible, even admirable, in order to bring to life events and people from the past. What all these novels have in common is implicit Foucauldian referencing to a variety of discourses of power using 'observation' as a means of control imposed by individuals or institutions or society itself.

However, it is Sarah Waters' three neo-Victorian novels which place lesbian relationships centrally, each treating same sex female relationships from a different angle and with very different consequences for the characters involved. *Tipping the Velvet* is the first published of the

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<sup>13</sup>Patricia Duncker, *James Miranda Barry* (1999; rpt. London: Picador, 2000), p. 375 (Afterword).

three and the sunniest from the point of view of its outcome. The heroine is shown negotiating various social milieux from 1890s music hall through an aristocratic demi-mondaine to happiness in a working class socialist household. *Affinity* (1999), set in the 1870s, deals with repressed lesbian feelings in a middle class family, spiritualism and various forms of incarceration. It ends with the probable suicide of the main character. Finally, *Fingersmith* explores the development of intimacy between two young women, Sue Trinder and Maud Lilley, via a convoluted plot involving switched identities, a madhouse and a library of pornographic literature. Waters has been open about her agenda in writing lesbian fiction: 'I'm still very much aware that the past is absolutely teeming with untold gay stories.'<sup>14</sup> She is on record as stating that she sees her fiction as filling some of the gaps left because there is no continuous lesbian history or storytelling and that she, by placing lesbian characters within a historical context, gives voice to forgotten or sidelined lesbian experience. 'The suppression or absence of lesbian activity from the historical record...has limited the constituency across which a lesbian genealogy might be traced, and made it difficult for women to imagine themselves as participants in an unbroken tradition of same-sex love.'<sup>15</sup> There is a parallel here with the voice of the 'subaltern' in postcolonial writing, for in both lesbian and subaltern narratives in neo-Victorian novels, the emphasis is on imagining into being the stories of those who have traditionally been silenced. Contemporary considerations about lesbian community are placed within a Victorian context to attempt to create an unbroken line of descent and a sense of continuity and belonging. Sarah Waters' three neo-Victorian novels have won both popular and critical acclaim and have helped to establish the neo-Victorian genre. Tightly plotted and with a

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<sup>14</sup> Sarah Waters, *Interview with Sarah Waters* (CWWN Conference, University of Wales, Bangor), 22/04/ 2006.

<sup>15</sup> Laura Doan and Sarah Waters, 'Making up Lost Time: Contemporary Lesbian Writing and the Invention of History', in *Territories of Desire in Queer Culture. Refiguring Contemporary Boundaries*, ed. David Alderson and Linda Anderson (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000).



cast of memorable characters they hark back to Victorian classic texts and are skilled in their use of Victorian genres, including the gothic and the sensation novel. At the same time, the insistence on the centrality of lesbian experience and an engagement with twentieth-century political and literary theory emphasises that these novels are more than pastiche Victoriana.

Cora Kaplan writes of Sarah Waters' novels:

They are underwritten by the postwar social and cultural history of nineteenth-century London in particular, with its emphasis on gender, on the poor, on popular culture and on the pseudo-sciences, especially spiritualism. The novels fold these historical accounts back into nineteenth-century fictional forms: the picaresque, melodrama and ghost story of Victorian fiction.<sup>16</sup>

Pastiche neo-Victorian novels which attempt an 'authentic' Victorian setting often treat male homosexuality with bewilderment or as an abhorrence, in order to emulate the assumed prevailing attitudes of the time; in so doing these novels may play to an attitude of self-satisfied acceptance of homosexuality in the present. Charles Palliser's unreliable and pompous narrator in *The Unburied* (1999) is one of the bewildered: 'Of course, as a man of the world and one who has spent his entire adult life in the University, I have heard of such things.'<sup>17</sup> As it transpires, the homosexual character does turn out to be one of the schemers with which the novel abounds. Worse, in John MacLachlan Gray's *The Fiend in Human* (2003), the latent homosexual Sewell murders prostitutes in order to rid the world of the women his friend enjoys: 'Sewell remained pure in body, even while his friend spent into available women, almost at random.'<sup>18</sup> Dora Damage, the eponymous heroine of *The Journal of Dora Damage* reflects transitional attitudes to homosexuality, and attempts to create a bridge between the Victorian plot and the reader's present: 'Mary-Annes, all of them. Mandrakes. Inverts. Bin-dogs. Sodomites. [paragraph break]

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<sup>16</sup> Kaplan, *Victoriana*, p. 111.

<sup>17</sup> Charles Palliser, *The Unburied* (1999; rpt. London: Phoenix, 2004), p. 297.

<sup>18</sup> John MacLachlan Gray, *The Fiend in Human* (2003; rpt. London: Arrow Books, 2004), p. 273.

Was I disgusted? A year I ago [sic] I might have been.’<sup>19</sup> *Pity* (1997), a novel which revels in transgressional sexuality of various kinds, treats homosexual acts in terms of obligation, dependency and utterly without warmth: ‘Over his heaving shoulder I saw London move past. The assault did not last long before Giles pushed me away.’<sup>20</sup> These examples of the treatment of male homosexuality in the pastiche neo-Victorian novel exhibit some of the potential problems for the genre, the need to express apparently accurate descriptions of Victorian attitudes to homosexuality while at the same time engaging with an ‘enlightened’ modern readership. This tension in pastiche novels – the inherent problem of rendering an accurate history while engaging a postmodern audience – is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3.

Fictional biographies deal with homosexuality in widely differing ways, dependent on the nature and standing of the subject, the literary style of the author and whether the novel is an attempt at an authentic Victorian voice or by metafictional means, hints at an overlaid modernity. Henry James’ sexual orientation is glanced at obliquely and with discretion in Colm Tóibín’s *The Master*. In A.S.Byatt’s novella *The Conjugal Angel* (1992), the relationship between Tennyson and Arthur Hallam is explored at length, alongside frequent references to Tennyson’s *In Memoriam*, his elegy for his dead friend: ‘They were like David and Jonathan, whose love to each other was wonderful, passing the love of women.’<sup>21</sup> Byatt’s angle on this intense male bond is that it disenfranchised Emily, Tennyson’s sister and Arthur’s fiancée, not just during Arthur’s lifetime but for years after his death. However, the most outrageous and flamboyant treatment of homosexuality in the neo-Victorian novel is Will Self’s *Dorian*, which retells Oscar Wilde’s *The*

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<sup>19</sup> Belinda Starling, *The Journal of Dora Damage* (2006; rpt. London: Bloomsbury, 2007), p. 311.

<sup>20</sup> James Buxton, *Pity* (1997; rpt. London: Orion, 1998), p. 104.

<sup>21</sup> A.S.Byatt, *The Conjugal Angel* in *Angels and Insects* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1992), p. 260.

*Picture of Dorian Gray*, siting the action in 1980s and 90s Britain alongside AIDS, drugs and the media obsession with Princess Diana. '[T]heir puréed bodies mingled with the grime and muck and the shit to concoct an ultimate fix: the filthy past injected into the vein of the present to create a deathly future.'<sup>22</sup> The connection between homosexuality, disease, crime and a fin-de-siècle hopelessness is made abundantly clear throughout the novel. This examination of exploitation and homophobia explores cultural attitudes at the end of the twentieth century through the lens of a Victorian text and is able to do this so remorselessly and deliberately because it is written from the perspective of the recent past rather than the Victorian past.

In post-colonial treatments, homosexuality is used to emphasise or ridicule the arrogance of the mother country or its representatives. Miranda, the dubious protagonist of D.M. Thomas's *Charlotte. The Final Journey of Jane Eyre* is so convinced of her persuasive sexual charm that she fails to read blatant clues and insists on sex with a homosexual native of Martinique while attending a Brontë conference on the island. She later goes on to abandon him to homophobic thugs after a road accident, piqued once she realises that he has had sex with her because she is a guest on his island and she seemed to want it so much. The gentleness and charm of the Martinican is contrasted sharply with the self-centred cruelty of the English woman: 'Only now did I allow myself to remember Juan and the accident. I felt guilt at leaving him to his fate; though not too much.'<sup>23</sup> Also taking a post-colonial angle, Peter Carey's *Jack Maggs* suggests a different version of the lives of the convict Magwitch and Pip of Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations*. As in the originating text, Magwitch risks his life in order to return to England from Australia to see how his patronage has benefited the young boy who helped him years

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<sup>22</sup> Will Self, *Dorian* (2002; rpt. London: Penguin, 2003), p. 49.

<sup>23</sup> D.M. Thomas, *Charlotte. The Final Journey of Jane Eyre* (London: Duck Editions, 2000), p. 130.

before. However, what becomes very clear to the reader, if not immediately to Magwitch, is that not only is Mr Phipps (aka Pip) a dandy, ruined by his inheritance, he also frequents Convent Garden clubs for 'Foreman's Friends'.<sup>24</sup> Henry Phipps' homosexual activities are presented by Peter Carey alongside his drunkenness and general worthlessness. The pointlessness of Magwitch's search for his perceived saviour also represents a potential attack by Carey on one of the classics of the canon and a dig at the self-satisfaction of the old world.

Finally, a couple of neo-Victorian novels use homosexuality as the driving force for development of plot. The *Tenderness of Wolves* (2006) is set in the tough environment of an isolated Canadian settlement where the murder of a local trader leads to a series of quest journeys which bring together old stories of missing children and the tensions between native Americans and immigrants. Key to these interwoven plots is the hidden homosexuality of the dead man's lover. In Beryl Bainbridge's *Master Georgie* (1998), Georgie's homosexuality is gradually understood by the reader through the novel's various narrative voices, from Myrtle's yearning for Georgie through the bluntness of Pompey Jones to Dr Potter's musings on the degeneracy that preceded the fall of Rome. However, it comes as a shock to piece all the clues together and conclude that Georgie marries for the sake of respectability, that Myrtle produces children for him because of his wife's continuous miscarrying and that the strain of all these secrets and the gap between pretence and actuality leads Georgie to his death in the Crimea. The hypocrisy of Georgie's sexual life is strangely highlighted in the novel's final scene when his dead body is humped into a group photograph with still living soldiers in order to show the folks back home how the troops are surviving. The homosexual who pretended to be heterosexual during his lifetime has his

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<sup>24</sup> Peter Carey, *Jack Maggs* (London: Faber and Faber, 1997), p. 161.

corpse immortalised as a Crimean survivor. These alignments of pretence, exposed by the framing device of the photograph – a frequent neo-Victorian trope – bring twentieth-century attitudes about the idiocies and cruelties of warfare into relationship with the hypocrisy of restrained or concealed sexuality.

*The French Lieutenant's Woman* is eloquent about the hypocrisy of Victorian society regarding prostitution:

What are we faced with in the nineteenth-century? An age where woman was sacred; and where you could buy a thirteen-year-old girl for a few pounds – a few shillings, if you wanted her for only an hour or two. Where more churches were built than in the whole previous history of the country; and where one in sixty houses in London was a brothel.<sup>25</sup>

However, apart from one scene describing Charles Smithson's visit to a prostitute, Fowles treats the subject of prostitution largely through factual asides away from the main action. Many neo-Victorian novels, on the other hand, especially those set entirely in the Victorian period, deal with all forms of prostitution as worthy subject matter in its own right. The plots of these novels often describe the treatment of working women in graphic and gory detail as though to emphasise the corruption of society in general and the power relations between men and women in particular. In Louis Bayard's *Mr Timothy*, the hopeless downward spiral towards prostitution for many working class women is described in a matter of fact way to emphasise its contemporary normality and ordinariness: 'The Workhouse. The poor-law school...How long before Philomela joins the troop of rouged dollymops catching soldiers' eyes outside Knightsbridge Music hall...treated for the clap once a month at the local infirmary.'<sup>26</sup> Bayard

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<sup>25</sup> Fowles, *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, p. 231.

<sup>26</sup> Louis Bayard, *Mr Timothy* (2003; rpt. London: John Murray, 2005), p. 107.

uses these generalised comments as introduction to the more specific concerns of the novel, child trafficking for prostitution, specifically to supply aristocratic patrons.

Child trafficking is a topic dealt with in several novels, including John MacLachlan Gray's *White Stone Day* (2006) and Clare Boylan's *Emma Brown* (2003). All three novels read as though their authors' intention is to expose and highlight one of the largely hidden evils of Victorian society.

Clare Boylan particularly acknowledges the deliberate emphasis on Victorian social history:

'Victorian social archivists like Dickens and Henry Mayhew and Gustave Doré became my bedside reading. One of my favourite characters... was inspired by Henry Mayhew's study of an eight-year-old watercress-seller.'<sup>27</sup> A further emphasis on child prostitution is provided by novels which include instances of mothers prostituting their daughters. The best known in this category is *The Crimson Petal and the White* (2002) by Michel Faber. Others include Peter Carey's *Jack Maggs*, Joanne Harris's *Sleep, Pale Sister* (1994) and Jane Harris's *The Observations*. The mothers in these novels vary from the poverty stricken and desperate to the sordid and vicious – there are hints in *The Observations* of maternal incest – but what unites them all is the need to attract men of a higher social status and income bracket to the fleeting innocence of their daughters: 'he wore a rose in his buttonhole and a brightly coloured scarf. My mother walked with him, a little way up the street. I couldn't hear what they were talking about but there was no doubt I was the subject under discussion.'<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Clare Boylan, *Emma Brown* (2003: rpt. London: Abacus, 2004), p. 442.

<sup>28</sup> Jane Harris, *The Observations* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p. 184.

Prostitution in the neo-Victorian novel is inextricably bound up with precarious financial and social circumstances and, not surprisingly, with crime. The hero of Charles Palliser's *The Quincunx* (1989) realises retrospectively that his mother has been reduced to prostitution in order to save them both from starvation and the gutter. In both Lee Jackson's *The Welfare of the Dead* (2005) and Peter Ackroyd's *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* (1994) psychologically disturbed protagonists take pleasure in dispatching prostitutes from the London streets: 'She had been left upon the old steps in three separate parts; her head was on the upper step, with her torso arranged beneath it in some parody of the human form, while certain of her internal organs had been impaled upon a wooden post by the riverside.'<sup>29</sup> *The Dark Clue* by James Wilson mixes prostitution and murder through a complicated, layered plot which hints at the painter Turner's obsession with visits to prostitutes, their deliberate drowning and Turner subsequently sketching the corpses. John MacLachlan Gray in *The Fiend in Human* concentrates on how prostitution links the various levels of society, with members of the aristocracy visiting specialist brothels in order to indulge specific fantasies. Above all, prostitution is a trade: 'Here working women come to chat, in confidence and safety, about men and millinery, decorating schemes, professional adventures, troubles with colleagues and landlords...and, of course, to exchange professional advice.'<sup>30</sup>

Some neo-Victorian novels place a prostitute and prostitution centre stage: *The Dress Lodger* (2000) by Sheri Holman, *Pity* by James Buxton and *The Crimson Petal and the White* by Michel Faber. *The Dress Lodger* explores the pimping technique of the elegant dress, 'lodged' on the prostitute to attract clients, alongside themes of body snatching and a threatened cholera

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<sup>29</sup> Peter Ackroyd, *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem*. (1994; rpt. London: Vintage, 1998), p. 5.

<sup>30</sup> MacLachlan Gray, *The Fiend in Human*, p. 44.

outbreak. In Buxton's novel a dissolute love triangle forms with Pity, a male prostitute masquerading as a girl as the focus for two competing men, one a surgeon, the other an artist. The ramifications of this complex relationship lead to murder, genital mutilation and endlessly shifting identities and power relations. *Pity* is a novel which is determined to shock, from the callous self-centredness of the artist narrator, Auguste Coffey, to the graphic descriptions of Pity's emasculation. *The Crimson Petal and the White* shocks too, from the start, in its insistence on detailing the daily lives of prostitutes: 'Using a plunger improvised from a wooden spoon and old bandage, she attempts to poison, suck out or otherwise destroy what was put inside her only minutes before by a man you just missed meeting.'<sup>31</sup> Faber, in common with other neo-Victorian novelists who write about prostitutes and prostitution, is openly sympathetic to working women and, again in common with other novelists, ridicules the oafishness, cruelty and pomposity of their punters. Prostitutes with hearts of gold and clients who are either cruel or entirely self-centred accord with contemporary stereotypes about prostitution in the Victorian period and the insistence on graphic descriptions of the reality of the prostitute's life reinforce further stereotypes about Victorian squeamishness compared with our own 'honesty' about such matters. By such means the neo-Victorian novel's treatment of prostitution, including child trafficking, covertly acknowledges that these are ongoing social problems, that the liberal stance is to be on the side of the exploited and that we are now at least able to describe these matters in all their shocking detail. Questions of taste, prurience and titillation are not addressed.

Sugar, the heroine of *The Crimson Petal and the White* is a young woman of courage and tenacity who uses her skill at her trade to fashion an independent life for herself. Such was

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<sup>31</sup> Michel Faber, *The Crimson Petal and the White* (2002; rpt. Edinburgh: Canongate, 2003), p. 6.



Sugar's popular success with her readers, that Michel Faber subsequently published a book of short stories which pick up on characters and themes from *The Crimson Petal and the White*, some pre-dating, others post-dating the events of the novel. *The Apple* (2006) includes stories about prostitution and prostitutes but the final story in the collection, *A Mighty Horde of Women in Very Big Hats, Advancing*, lets the reader know what has happened to Sophie, the daughter of Sugar's main client, abducted by Sugar at the end of the novel. Having been neglected by both parents during her childhood, Sugar determines to provide a better future for the child and *The Apple* shows that she has been successful. Sophie is a happily married feminist and suffragist. In the Foreword to the collection, Faber suggests a link between the situation of readers of Victorian instalment novels and readers of *The Crimson Petal and the White*, all wanting to know what happened next. He also stresses how the story *A Mighty Horde of Women in Very Big Hats, Advancing*, told as it is by Sophie's son in old age, reminds us, 'how few human lifespans it takes to link us to distant centuries.'<sup>32</sup> The constant reminder of the neo-Victorian novel – and short story – is of simultaneous connection to and disconnection from the Victorian past. The ambiguous ending of Faber's novel and the patchy links provided by the collection of short stories also serve to underline this paradox.

Given the neo-Victorian novel's predisposition to focus on all aspects of human sexuality, it is of interest that instances of rape in the novels are less frequent than plots involving various forms of bodily mutilation. Robert Goddard's inheritance saga *Painting the Darkness* (1989) includes a rape but only as part of a complicated plot involving prostitution, incest and illegitimacy. In *The Observations* the rape and impregnation of the maid Nora, Nora's subsequent suicide and her

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<sup>32</sup> Michel Faber, *A Mighty Horde of Women in Very Big Hats, Advancing*, in *The Apple* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2006), p. xvii.

haunting of her mistress Arabella are the mysteries which the current maid Bessie uncovers. The Reverend Pollock, local political worthy and guilty party, is spared any knowledge of Nora's pregnancy. In the neo-Victorian novel women's bodies are vulnerable to the predatory advances of men but at all costs the truth has to be hushed up in order to preserve the status quo. In James Wilson's *The Dark Clue* also, the rapist is let off the hook, and so far, so predictable. Walter Hartright comes to emulate the artist Turner in various aspects of aberrant behaviour: visiting prostitutes, sketching drowned bodies and finally raping his sister in law, Marion Halcombe, who chooses to protect him. However, with *The Dark Clue*, the neo-Victorian novel which treats of aberrant sexuality, enters territory which a contemporary readership might find uncomfortable, not in this case because of the depiction of the taboo specifically, but because of the seemingly gratuitous mutilation of Turner's reputation and the particularly violent repositioning of characters from a canonical Victorian novel.

The neo-Victorian novel examines every aspect of aberrant sexual behaviour, paedophilia and incest being no exceptions and it is at this point that the neo-Victorian novel moves from descriptions of sexual activity which a contemporary readership might assume exposes the sexually prudish nature of the Victorians and turns its attention to activities which are still illegal and taboo. Some of these novels are likely to cause disquiet for a contemporary readership but may also act as a screen for the projection of our own unresolved or repressed desires. Three novels which include unhealthy relationships between older men and female children are *The Rose of Sebastopol*, *White Stone Day* and *Sleep, Pale Sister*. All three novels align the paedophilic relationship with some form of artistic or intellectual endeavour, specifically, teaching, photography and painting and with a spuriously sentimental attitude towards the child

sex object. However, it is in John MacLachlan Gray's *White Stone Day* that the simultaneously paedophilic and artistically sentimental attitude to young girls is fully explored. Here, the Reverend Boltbyn, a literary version of Charles Dodgson, takes photographs of young girls, both for his own pleasure, and for his associate the Duke of Danbury. The plot involves the corruption and murder of young girls while their images in photographic plates are used as a roof to the duke's conservatory, a grotesque mix of beauty and degradation: 'They may be insufficiently clad for a proper choir, and have assumed postures in which anyone would be hard pressed to sing, yet heavenly light pours through them...turning them into angels.'<sup>33</sup> Here, the neo-Victorian novel appropriates a readily accessible and even 'acceptable' name onto which to project a debate about questionable relationships between men and children, in order to address an issue which is by no means resolved in our own time.

*Charlotte. The Final Journey of Jane Eyre*, a novel which sets out to unsettle and upset on a number of levels, includes both paedophilia and consideration of incestuous relationships among its other shock tactics. Miranda and her father discuss Miranda's husband David's antipathy to his father-in-law, including allegations of inappropriate bathtime behaviour with his granddaughter. Surprisingly perhaps, though at this stage in the novel the reader might be inured to shock, the grandfather asserts: 'Of *course* it was sexual! Everything in the world is sexual! Of *course* tickling her little pussy was sexual! ...I used to tickle your little puss at bath-time...My uncle's nanny used to suck his little widdler to put him to sleep! Back in the Victorian Age! ...All the nannies did.'<sup>34</sup> These comments are highly provocative in a number of ways. Miranda is a self-serving and damaged heroine and her father a sexually obsessed old man but the reader

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<sup>33</sup> MacLachlan Gray, *White Stone Day*, p. 261.

<sup>34</sup> Thomas, *Charlotte. The Final Journey of Jane Eyre*, p. 145.

is also aware that Thomas is attacking what he perceives to be an unnecessary sexual correctness in contemporary society. The reference to a more relaxed attitude to children's genitalia in the Victorian period is especially ironic in a novel which rewrites Jane Eyre's story, making Rochester impotent and providing Jane with a sexual relationship with Rochester's son by Bertha Mason. The above conversation is followed shortly after by a scene where Miranda, in front of her father, dresses for dinner in her dead mother's clothes, including underwear, the two of them fully aware that they are flirting for the umpteenth time with the possibility of a sexual encounter. 'We have never crossed the forbidden frontier.'<sup>35</sup> Thomas uses his novel to challenge established attitudes to sexuality now and in the Victorian era and to confront the idea of the sanctity of the Victorian classics.

Other novels which explore incestuous relationships include *The American Boy* by Andrew Taylor (2003), *Laura Blundy* (2000) by Julie Myerson and Matthew Kneale's *Sweet Thames* (1992). Incest in *The American Boy* is used as just one example of transgressive or brutal relationships between upper middle class women and their male relatives in a society where women are property and are expected to put up with the status quo in return for outward respectability and social standing. At the opposite end of the social scale, in *Laura Blundy*, the heroine's bizarrely chaotic personal life leads to her eventual sexual relationship with the baby she gave up for adoption at birth. This, and other, even more objectionable episodes in the novel are not condoned by the author Julie Myerson but nor are they condemned; rather, the reader understands that extreme poverty and neglect will result in extreme behaviour. In Matthew

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 153.

Kneale's *Sweet Thames*, the theme of incest is linked to the 1849 cholera outbreak in London, the slums and the sewers; personal and social ills entwine to present a picture of a degraded city.

However, it is in the last entry for this section, that incest provides not only the plot but also a commentary on the parallels between human and insect behaviour and on Victorian attitudes to Darwinian theories of sexuality and procreation. A.S. Byatt's novella *Morpho Eugenia* (1992) overlaps the worlds of the Amazonian jungle and aristocratic English family life, the insect systems of the hive and the formicary, all of them more or less enclosed and subject to internal rhythms and rules. Byatt makes clear that any discrete group will defend itself against outsiders even if that means tacitly condoning and allowing incestuous behaviour to continue unchecked over many years and the production of several children. The concept of what constitutes civilised and uncivilised orders of society is shown to be relative. It is the servant class which betrays the incestuous Eugenia and her brother, perhaps signalling the beginning of the demise of the ruling aristocracy which has become inbred and decadent. A.S. Byatt's most recent novel *The Children's Book* (2009), set slightly later in the nineteenth century, covers many of the same themes as *Morpho Eugenia*: complicated familial sexual relations which bear children; the apparently rock solid upper middle class family, exposed as a sham; tensions between the roles of men and women within a family or class. The emphasis on social change in *The Children's Book* comes with the turn of the century, a change of monarch and the growing threat of war, both in South Africa and Europe. Both *Morpho Eugenia* and *The Children's Book* suggest that social and political change are inevitable and their impact on family, sexual roles and class, inescapable. However, Byatt's emphasis in these novels on family breakdown, sexual tensions and the effects of incestuous and extramarital relationships on children, stresses the similarities

rather than the differences between the Victorian and the frequently hypothesised twenty-first century dysfunctional family.

Physical torture, violent, graphically described crime and extreme uses and abuses of the human body also feature in the neo-Victorian novels and are always associated, overtly or covertly, with some form of malfunctioning sexuality, the opening scene of *Laura Blundy* for example, telling of Laura's murder of her husband: 'I do it on a hot and stormy late-summer's afternoon, shortly after the evening post arrives and some time before the lamps are lit.'<sup>36</sup> The nonchalant tone of the account is reinforced later in the novel when Laura revisits the event of the murder in order to explain how she and her lover dispose of the body. 'Encouraged by the easy way the knife slipped in, I gave it a few more slicing movements... I should have laid a cloth over the head, I thought. Or maybe not messed up his face with the poker in the first place.'<sup>37</sup> There are several more pages of detailed description of the dismemberment of the body and, later in the novel, the attempt to dispose of the parts. In a deliberately disjointed plot, told often through flashback, the overall effect is of disintegration, especially once both Laura and the reader begin to realise that Laura has killed her husband in order to live with her lover who is, in fact, her son.

Gruesome descriptions of the killing and mutilation of prostitutes are unsurprisingly common in the neo-Victorian novel and often include allusion to the crimes of Jack the Ripper. Tom Holland's *Supping with Panthers* revels in gore. The 'hero', Dr John Eliot, is driven to the murder of prostitutes following demonic possession. Referred to as Ripping Jack, the

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<sup>36</sup> Julie Myerson, *Laura Blundy* (2000: rpt. London: Harper Perennial, 2005), p. 1.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 170.

descriptions of Dr Eliot's killings are lingeringly told: 'I caressed Mary gently with the edge of my blade; I severed her head from her neck until it hung from the skin; I sliced up her stomach and removed her organs; I placed her hand in the wound, so that she could feel it for herself.'<sup>38</sup> There is much more of the same, on several different occasions. Again in Peter Ackroyd's *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem*, another novel which alludes to Jack the Ripper's killing and mutilation of prostitutes, the murderer treats the prostitute as complicit in her own murder, almost as though she had wished her own death: 'I knew well enough that she wished to be free of this sad world...She only began to stir after I had taken out a piece of intestine and blown softly upon it.'<sup>39</sup> In the same way that a modern reader 'expects' graphic descriptions of sexual acts, so s/he also expects graphic descriptions of physical violence; many neo-Victorian novels are happy to supply both.

Finally in this section, three novels go even further in treating the body as neutral territory – evidently tapping into the gender theory discourses of academics like Judith Butler – where gender can be negotiable or an artefact to be customised or appropriated to satisfy the whim of the controlling power in a relationship. Wesley Stace's *Misfortune* (2005) engages in contemporary discourse about the inherent fixedness or otherwise of gender, through a narrative which examines in detail the psychological chaos caused by imposing a female gender onto a male child. As an adult, Rose can only reconcile the confusion of his cross-gendered upbringing by combining elaborate female clothes with a luxuriant moustache, seemingly in an argument for acceptance of difference. James Buxton's *Pity* contrasts the worlds of art and medicine but draws comparisons between them from the point of view of their ability to objectify the subject, the

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<sup>38</sup> Holland, *Supping with Panthers*, p. 473.

<sup>39</sup> Ackroyd, *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem*, p. 29.

sitter or the patient. ‘The resurrection men supplied corpses for doctors to practise on...it wasn’t unknown for artists to buy a corpse for study and some painters affected a deep knowledge of the trade.’<sup>40</sup> Giles the surgeon is persuaded to emasculate the boy prostitute Pity so that Auguste the painter can enjoy him as a woman. It is Pity’s body and the changes made to it which express the complex and constantly shifting sexual relations between Pity, Auguste and Giles. In *The Journal of Dora Damage* by Belinda Starling, Dora takes over her husband’s book binding business when he becomes too ill to work. Her growing skill as a bookbinder leads her into the world of Sir Jocelyn Knightley and his powerful friends, the Noble Savages, bibliophiles and connoisseurs of exotic pornography. It is only when Dora realises she has been using the skin of a foreign native woman to bind the group’s books that she is led to ask: ‘Is this the worth, I wondered, of the human body, to be so reduced after we are gone?’<sup>41</sup> In a novel which sees Dora moving on from a repressive marriage, through a revulsion towards the way well connected, powerful Englishmen use the bodies of their wives and the skins of foreigners, Dora comes to a particularly modern conclusion: ‘Author your own body. Walk your own text.’<sup>42</sup>

The above catalogue of the range of sexual activity, identity and image covered by the neo-Victorian novel, and its frequently deliberately disturbing representation has given rise to criticism. Marie-Luise Kohlke’s focus on sexual transgression in the neo-Victorian novel in her ‘Sexsation and the Neo-Victorian Novel: Orientalising the Nineteenth-century in Contemporary Fiction’<sup>43</sup> suggests that readers are allowed perversely to enjoy feeling simultaneously outraged

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<sup>40</sup> Buxton., *Pity*, p. 190-1.

<sup>41</sup> Starling, *The Journal of Dora Damage*, p. 389.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 392.

<sup>43</sup> Marie-Luise Kohlke, ‘Sexsation and the Neo-Victorian Novel: Orientalising the Nineteenth-Century in Contemporary Fiction’, in *Negotiating Sexual Idioms. Image, Text, Performance*, eds. Marie-Luise Kohlke and Luisa Orza (Amsterdam-New York: Rodopi, 2008), 53-77.



and degraded through reading material which focuses on situations of extreme sexuality. She argues that the Victorian has replaced the Oriental as a site of libidinal fantasy and as a corollary for the sexual degradations of our own times including the AIDS epidemic, sex trafficking and the rise in sexually transmitted diseases. ‘If the Victorians function as all too convenient bogeymen and nemeses to our modern-day sexual selves, they also act as our darkest doubles.’<sup>44</sup> Sexual content in the neo-Victorian novel, in all its manifestations, panders to a variety of desires, including the hidden or taboo. The establishment of missing representations of Victorian sexualities, often, ironically, by accessing material from the Victorian archive, chimes with a modern sensibility in sympathy with the marginalised who are thereby brought into the mainstream. The frisson experienced by reading possibly unexpected material into a ‘Victorian’ setting adds a daring sense of the iconoclastic, the modern and the classic in juxtaposition. However, neo-Victorian novels which examine contemporary sexual excesses and deviance like paedophilia or incest, practices which are still regarded as criminal and unacceptable, turn the spotlight away from sexual behaviour which has now been assimilated or at least accepted by society, towards behaviour which is still seen as abhorrent. By examining taboo sexuality within the safe confines of the recent past, the neo-Victorian novel queries these activities in the present, leaving them open to examination.

### 2.3 The Female Protagonist

Given the interest in all aspects of human sexuality, it is not surprising that the neo-Victorian novel also concentrates on an allied area of discourse, gender. However, the neo-Victorian novel is not only concerned with female sexuality or the relationships between the sexes but also with

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 57.

the possible routes to female emancipation and autonomy in the Victorian period, thereby providing a contemporary female readership with a sense of continuity with and connection to their Victorian fellow-travellers. In many neo-Victorian novels there is a tension between how women are perceived by the men in their circle or by wider society and how they struggle to determine their own lives. One of the commonest methods employed by the neo-Victorian novel to explore the 'Victorian' woman's – and by implication, since the neo-Victorian novel discusses contemporary issues through a 'Victorian' lens, the neo-Victorian woman's – struggle to achieve control over her own life and her own destiny, is through her own writing. In the previous section, the recently quoted passage from *The Journal of Dora Damage* emphasises Dora's progress from bookbinder of other authors' writings to independence, especially independence from male authority, and the publication of her own journal.

Many neo-Victorian novels discuss confused attitudes towards women, especially towards their physical bodies, and women's apparent intention to ensnare men. These viewpoints are usually, though not exclusively, portrayed by male characters about female characters but are so frequent that a reader could feel that this is an area of debate that is contemporaneous rather than purely 'Victorian'. The objectification, use and abuse of the female body are recurring themes in the neo-Victorian novel because they tap into contemporary anxieties about prostitution, child trafficking and various forms of body fascism. In *Mr Timothy* for example, a novel about the attempt to save a young vulnerable girl from the clutches of predatory males, the attitude towards other women who have been forced down the same path is more equivocal: 'And oh, my eye, do you meet some gay ladies...A fellow can't even pass from Piccadilly Circus to Waterloo place without having his virtue fairly laid siege to...The thirteen-year-old in pigtails, the bald crone

with a moth-worried purple cowl.’<sup>45</sup> The attitude towards women here is almost playful and tongue-in-cheek in tone; Timothy is well aware of his own shortcomings. However, male characters in other novels are more brutal in their attitudes towards the female body. In *Pity*, Giles the surgeon advises Auguste the artist to avoid having sex with Pity, who they both at this point believe to be a female prostitute because, ‘You don’t want anything to do with these creatures. They are disgusting. Loose. Diseased. Socrates thought femininity itself was a disease; that hysteria originated in the womb.’<sup>46</sup> In *The Journal of Dora Damage* this view of the inherent grubbiness of women’s bodies is clearly demonstrated by the attitude of Dora’s husband: ‘On our wedding night he had led me to the bedroom where he had prepared a tin bath, and waited outside the door barking instructions at me to scrub myself all over with carbolic soap and baking soda.’<sup>47</sup>

Other neo-Victorian novels foreground women’s bodies and their physical processes in a less negative fashion; not surprisingly, they are often written by women. These novels have all absorbed, exploited and re-worked aspects of Foucauldian discourse on Victorian scientific analysis of women’s bodies: ‘the hysterization of women, which involved a thorough medicalization of their bodies and their sex, was carried out in the name of the responsibility they owed to the health of their children, the solidity of the family institution, and the safeguarding of society.’<sup>48</sup> In several novels – Victorian Glendinning’s *Electricity* (1995), Michel Faber’s *The Crimson Petal and the White*, Jane Harris’s *The Observations* – a doctor of some standing in the community is brought in to pronounce on the female protagonist’s physical

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<sup>45</sup> Bayard, *Mr Timothy*, p. 5.

<sup>46</sup> Buxton, *Pity*, p. 154.

<sup>47</sup> Starling, *The Journal of Dora Damage*, p. 24.

<sup>48</sup> Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge*, p. 146-7.

and mental state and to prescribe treatments which will guarantee her return to the requirements of her role and status in society. *Electricity* tackles every aspect of the physical life of the heroine Charlotte including menstruation, miscarriage and the amputation of part of her foot. Charlotte's notebooks, which cover her escape from the family home and her father's inappropriate attentions, her marriage to Peter and her affair with the aristocratic Godwin honestly document the experiences of her body, in order to make it clear how difficult it is for women in the 1880s to escape physical dependency on men: 'I shall make a new beginning. My real life begins now. I have disabilities. I am an unsupported female with no useful connections, no qualifications, and I am lame.'<sup>49</sup> A.S.Byatt's *Morpho Eugenia* revels in voluptuous descriptions of the incestuous Eugenia's pregnancies, as though to emphasise the separateness of male and female physical experience: 'He slept alone, and his wife slept alone in her white nest, and swelled slowly, developing large breasts and a creamy second chin, as well as the mound she carried before her.'<sup>50</sup>

Distaste or confusion about female bodies and female sexuality and reproduction is common in many neo-Victorian novels and sometimes leads to pigeon-holing of different 'types' of women. One of these is the oppositional virgin/whore trope, where the inexperienced, innocent female is contrasted with her more knowing, sexually adventurous counterpart. Byatt subtly uses this opposition in *Morpho Eugenia* to contrast Eugenia's entrapment of William Adamson as cover for her incestuous relationship with her brother, with William's later relationship with Matty Crompton, a meeting of minds before it becomes a meeting of bodies. Several novels pair two female characters, sometimes friends or relations, to compare contrasting methods of dealing

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<sup>49</sup> Victoria Glendinning, *Electricity* (QPD: 1995), p. 249.

<sup>50</sup> A.S.Byatt, *Morpho Eugenia* in *Angels and Insects* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1992), p. 70.

with a masculine power-centred world. These would include Jane Rogers' *Mr Wroe's Virgins*, Robert Goddard's *Painting the Darkness*, Fiona Shaw's *The Sweetest Thing*, Lee Jackson's *London Dust* (2003), Katherine McMahon's *Confinement* (1998) and *The Rose of Sebastopol*. It is Michel Faber's *The Crimson Petal and the White* however, which makes explicit, even from its title, the opposing worlds of the pampered wife Agnes, trapped by domesticity and societal obligations and the skilled prostitute Sugar, scheming her way up the social ladder. Agnes represents the Foucauldian 'idle' woman who 'inhabited the outer edge of the "world" in which she always had to appear as a value, and of the family, where she was assigned a new destiny charged with conjugal and parental obligations.'<sup>51</sup> Faber's detailed descriptions of the indignities visited bodily on Agnes and Sugar, particularly by Agnes' husband and Sugar's main punter William, serve to demonstrate his sympathy with both virgin and whore and to emphasise the dependency of both classes of women, the wife and the mistress, on the whim of the controlling male.

Two of the novels mentioned above – *The Sweetest Thing* by Fiona Shaw and *London Dust* by Lee Jackson – which pair two contrasting female characters, use the recent craze for photography to emphasise the marketability and disposability of women's bodies. In *London Dust*, revealing photographs of a music hall actress, lead directly to her murder but also provide a clue for her friend to track down the murderer. In *The Sweetest Thing* Harriet finds work in a York cocoa factory and is chosen as a pin-up girl to front the company's advertising campaign; her friend Mary poses for more revealing photographs. Both women are compromised by the camera and the resulting photographs, realise that they have taken part in a pretence and become

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<sup>51</sup> Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge*, p. 121.

commodified in the process. 'All pretty and smiley I looked, all coloured-in, and like the thing I loved best was to stand there, pink-cheeked, with a cup of cocoa in my hand... But it hadn't really been like that. The photograph was fooling.'<sup>52</sup> The potentially ambiguous nature of photographs of women is specifically represented in *The Sweetest Thing* by Samuel, Harriet's unofficial guardian. He has for years indulged his interest in photography by taking pictures of young women in their work clothes, ostensibly to provide a record of working class trades. These photographs are kept hidden while his mother is alive and although Samuel's photographs are not prurient, they do expose a dubiously taxonomic attitude to his sitters: 'Working on broadly similar principles to those within which I had mounted my butterflies, I grouped the [photographs of the] girls according to distinguishing characteristics...stature, hand size, length of forehead, size of skull etcetera.'<sup>53</sup> Both novels use photography as a vehicle to suggest a semi-pornographic intent in the mind of the male photographer, the world of commerce and advertising conveniently used as a cover for the controlling power of the male gaze.

The neo-Victorian novel frequently concentrates on the lives of women and how they interact within society. Several novels, particularly those set entirely in the Victorian period, write about women and their work, and not just about women earning their living as prostitutes. Such novels would include *James Miranda Barry* (female doctor); *The Rose of Sebastopol* (women as nurses); *Confinement* (female teacher); *Tipping the Velvet*, *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* and *London Dust* (music hall performers); *The Journal of Dora Damage* (female bookbinder); *Fixing Shadows* by Susan Barrett (2005) and *Sixty Lights* by Gail Jones (2004) (female photographers) and any number of maids and servants. However, what the neo-Victorian novel

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<sup>52</sup> Fiona Shaw, *The Sweetest Thing* (2003: rpt. London: Virago, 2004), p. 266.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 406.

highlights especially is the constant struggle Victorian women experience in order to be seen as autonomous individuals within society. Belinda Starling's *Dora Damage*, for example, takes on her husband's bookbinding work because he is too ill to continue but it is without his blessing; he resents her growing independence and skill. James Miranda Barry has to dress for her lifetime as a man in order to practise medicine, a necessity which colours every aspect of her life including her relationships with other people and her perception of herself. The neo-Victorian novel is at pains to emphasise the difficulties women have to deal with in society just because they are women, clearly a use of the neo-Victorian novel to tap into the ongoing feminist debate.

Many neo-Victorian novels illustrate women's relative lack of autonomy and the restrictions on their freedom of movement or action through the incarceration of female characters. In *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, Charles Smithson and Dr. Grogan had discussed the possibility and desirability of committing Sarah Woodruff to an enlightened mental asylum because she had had the temerity to behave towards Charles in a way that was inappropriate to their relative social standing. As in later neo-Victorian novels, the observation and the apparently dispassionate male scientific assessment of wayward women and of their requirements go hand in hand. Power resides with the male, the doctor or scientist and the institutions which carry out his orders. In *The Observations*, the spirited Arabella is first confined to her room, purged with a variety of enemias, and by the end of the novel has entered a mental asylum. The reader is aware that her illness is due to her inability to condone the political and sexual machinations of her husband and his associates. As Bessy, her maid explains: 'Small wonder she was melancholy, Jesus Murphy, locked up in her chamber with nought to do and no visitors and the only event of the day a jet of

cold liquid up your fundament.’<sup>54</sup> Another afflicted wife under threat of the asylum is Agnes Rackham in *The Crimson Petal and the White*. She is actually suffering from a brain tumour as well as crippling loneliness, but Doctor Curlew treats her with leeches, having diagnosed her problem as, ‘Excessively thrilling reading, excessively taxing reading, excessively pathetic reading, too much washing, too much sun, tight corsets, ice-cream, asparagus, foot-warmers; these and many more are causes of the womb’s distress.’<sup>55</sup> The mental asylum is also used particularly memorably in Sarah Waters’ *Fingersmith* as a convenient means of disposing of Sue Trinder, once her usefulness to the inheritance plot hatched by Gentleman and Mrs Sucksby has been exhausted.

Sarah Waters has made particular use of the incarceration of women in two of her ‘Victorian’ novels, *Fingersmith* and *Affinity*. The long section on the mental institution in *Fingersmith* makes clear that many of the inmates have been placed there simply because they are encumbrances to their families: ‘Two or three, like Betty, were only simpletons... The rest were only miserable: they walked, with their eyes on the floor, and sat and turned their hands in their laps, and mumbled, and sighed.’<sup>56</sup> In *Affinity* much of the novel’s tension comes from the power exerted by the prison and its systems upon female warders and female prisoners alike. Waters draws on the philosopher Jeremy Bentham’s original idea for a panopticon prison and Foucault’s discussion of its intentions in normalising criminal or non-standard behaviour through constant surveillance. Margaret watches the women prisoners walking in the exercise yard: ‘There were all the women in the gaol there, almost three hundred of them, ninety women to each great

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<sup>54</sup> Harris, *The Observations*, p. 292.

<sup>55</sup> Faber, *The Crimson Petal and the White*, p. 172.

<sup>56</sup> Waters, *Fingersmith*, p. 417.



wheeling line. And in the corner of the yards stood a pair of dark-cloaked matrons, who must stand and watch the prisoners until the exercise is complete.<sup>57</sup> Both *Fingersmith* and *Affinity* are, amongst other things, novels which examine the ways that women are constrained by society, either literally through incarceration in asylum or prison, emotionally and personally through the plotting of others or, in *Affinity*, the requirements of middle-class respectability.

Other neo-Victorian novels which use variations of the incarceration theme include D.J. Taylor's *Kept* (2006) (heiress confined to an attic); Andrea Barrett's *The Voyage of the Narwhal* (1998) (Eskimo woman confined as exhibition specimen); Joanne Harris's *Sleep, Pale Sister* (child/woman as artistic muse) and Jane Rogers' *Mr Wroe's Virgins* (religious servitude).

Beyond these examples of actual restriction of female lives, there are multitudinous examples in the neo-Victorian novel of the use of drugs, especially laudanum and chloral, often to keep women sedated and compliant. Whether the form of restraint is overtly physical or drug-induced, it is almost always used by men against women as a means of exerting control and maintaining power. In *The Tenderness of Wolves*, Stef Penney's heroine explains her dependency on laudanum as a result of being 'seized with paralysing fears that rendered me incapable of movement, even of speech. I felt that the earth was sliding away from me, and that I could not trust the ground beneath my feet.'<sup>58</sup> Mrs Ross only comes to terms with her existential crisis after emigrating to Canada and dealing with the hardships of the climate, terrain and a local murder mystery. Back in England, middle class women are given laudanum for general unhappiness caused by inactivity as well as for post-natal depression (*Girl in a Blue Dress*) and

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<sup>57</sup> Sarah Waters, *Affinity* (1999, rpt. London: Virago, 2003), p. 14.

<sup>58</sup> Stef Penney, *The Tenderness of Wolves* (London: Quercus, 2006), p. 85.

anorexia/paternal oppression (*Strange Music*).<sup>59</sup> Short of emigration, the thing that saves many of the heroines of the neo-Victorian novel from the various forms of repression and restriction they suffer at the hands of men and society is to write their own texts in order to claim authorship of their own lives and bodies.

The letter writing, fiction writing or journal keeping heroine is a key and frequent figure in the neo-Victorian novel, where an author wishes to demonstrate a growing independence or assertiveness in his/her protagonist. This thematisation of women as writers, and the production, in some novels, of women's writing, aims 'to overwrite and invalidate the male gaze and its objectifying and dehumanizing discourses'<sup>60</sup> but more particularly, to illustrate that 'Victorian' women are 'doing it for themselves', expressing their versions of their lives and their own perception of the world around them. These novels often fall into a category between the *Bildungsroman*, the novel about growing maturity and self-determination and the *Künstlerroman*, the novel having an artist as a central character.

In *The Widow's Secret* by Brian Thompson (2008) Bella Wallis writes sensationalist detective stories under the pseudonym Henry Margam, in order to expose crimes she has observed in society. Two further novels are presented as documents which are the work of their eponymous heroines with an epilogue or afterword to explain how each document was discovered and came to be published. The epilogue to *The Journal of Dora Damage* is allegedly written by Dora's daughter Lucinda in 1902, some years after the events of the novel and also after Dora's death.

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<sup>59</sup> Gaynor Arnold, *Girl in a Blue Dress* (Birmingham: Tindal Street Press, 2008); Laura Fish, *Strange Music* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2008).

<sup>60</sup> Heilmann and Llewellyn, *Neo-Victorianism*, p. 140.

In its account of the publication of Dora's life story, it sketches the later years of the characters from the main narrative, hints at a Sapphic relationship for Dora and a period of greater prosperity and freedom. Lucinda's epilogue is followed by an afterword and acknowledgements by Belinda Starling in which she documents the research on Victorian bookbinding and pornography she undertook in order to write the novel. The final pages of the novel thus become many-layered: an inter-weaving of fictional and factual material, an emphasis on the continuing assessment of Dora's experience via her female descendant and a blurring of female narrative voices. Paratextual material functions in neo-Victorian novels in various ways. In *The Journal of Dora Damage* the combination of fictional epilogue and factual afterword provides a connecting narrative between the female authors, a continuous thread of female experience through the decades.

*Mary Reilly* (1990) is another neo-Victorian novel which is presented as a narrative within a brief framework added at a later stage, this time in order to cast doubt or at least query the events of the main account. The afterword to the novel explains that Mary Reilly's account of the extraordinary events in the house where she acted as maid and sometime confidante to Dr. Jekyll and his assistant Mr Hyde were discovered as a result of a property transaction. The unnamed author of the afterword proposes various explanations for the narrative contained in Mary's diaries and, as with *The Journal of Dora Damage*, is at pains to authenticate the credibility of his/her findings, citing discussion with a librarian at the British Museum and an awareness of similar Victorian archival material. The final lines of the afterword propose that 'the sad and disturbing story unfolded for us in the pages of Mary's diaries is now and always was intended to

be nothing less serious than a work of fiction.’<sup>61</sup> As with *The Journal of Dora Damage*, any reading of the main text is complicated by the afterword through the melding of alleged ‘fact’ and fiction and of different fictions, Mary Reilly already being a feminised version of Robert Louis Stevenson’s *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886). What the final lines of *Mary Reilly* also suggest, somewhat ambiguously, is the serious nature of Mary’s fiction.

Writing, for female protagonists in the neo-Victorian novel is a serious business, though it is often produced by some form of displacement: a male pseudonym, a contested history or via a descendant. In both *The Journal of Dora Damage* and *Mary Reilly*, paratextual material emphasises the neo-Victorian novel’s promotion of the importance of stories, storytelling and storytellers; a reliance on an appeal to fictional and non-fictional discourses beyond itself and the blurring of boundaries between fact and fiction, which in turn suggests the impossibility of one over-riding version of events.

Sarah Waters’ *Affinity* and Victoria Glendinning’s *Electricity* are two further novels whose texts are comprised of female writings. In *Affinity* the two alternating narrations are diary entries written by the medium Selina Dawes and her prison visitor Margaret Prior. Both women use their diaries to try to deal with their powerlessness in their respective situations and the difficulty of trying to put a comprehensible shape on their experience: ‘Pa used to say that any piece of history might be made into a tale: it was only a question of deciding where the tale began, and where it ended...I wish that Pa was with me now. I would ask him how he would start to write the story I have embarked upon to-day.’<sup>62</sup> This passage, which comes at the beginning of the novel, suggests the Victorian upper middle class male’s control over the organisation of

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<sup>61</sup> Valerie Martin, *Mary Reilly* (1990; rpt. London:Abacus, 2004), p. 247.

<sup>62</sup> Waters, *Affinity*, p. 7.

information. Margaret Prior, by contrast, uses her diary as a lifeline to attempt to sketch out and resolve her feelings of disconnectedness and insubstantiality. The text of *Electricity* is the heroine Charlotte's journal of her life experiences and is a more optimistic account than Margaret Prior's. She documents her marriage to Peter and her affair with the aristocratic Godwin, the competing forces of Peter's passion for the new science of electricity and Charlotte's career as a medium. At the end of the novel it is the writing of the journals which allows Charlotte to review her life so far and weigh up her options for the future. The endings of several other novels emphasise the importance of writing for the future wellbeing, development or independence of the novels' female characters. In *Morpho Eugenia*, it is the publication of Matty's allegorical fairy story 'Things are not what they seem' – a particularly freighted neo-Victorian title – which allows her and William to escape together to South America away from the claustrophobia of Bredely Hall. In *Fingersmith* the two damaged girls Sue Trinder and Maud Lilly are finally brought together as Maud starts to teach Sue to read using the pornographic literature she has been writing to earn her living. Gaynor Arnold's heroine Dorothea Gibson, rejected wife of Alfred, a thinly disguised Charles Dickens, is given a new lease of life at the end of the novel *Girl in a Blue Dress* when she determines to complete the famous author's last unfinished novel 'Boniface', thereby outlasting him in life and literature.

Women's writing in the neo-Victorian novel often creates links between women of different classes, generations or historical periods. The twentieth-century plot of Ahdaf Soueif's *The Map of Love* is only possible because a modern descendant of Lady Anna Winterbourne discovers Anna's journals and notebooks describing her marriage to an Egyptian nationalist a hundred years earlier and sets out on her own journey. In Michèle Roberts' *In the Red Kitchen* (1990)

three narratives from twentieth-century London, ancient Egypt and Victorian England are linked by telepathic communication and the need of the three narrators to be represented in print: 'To write is to enter the mysterious, powerful world of words, to partake of words' power, to make it work for me. To write is to deny the power of death, to triumph over it... Words mean life.'<sup>63</sup> Jane Harris's *The Observations* links mistress and maids through their writings, Arabella Reid requesting the maids to keep a diary of their lives while she writes 'The Observations', a catalogue of the maids she has employed, their characteristics and shortcomings. It is the combined reading of these documents which provides the latest maid, Bessy, with an understanding of what happened to her predecessor Nora and Nora's suicide as a result of being raped by the Reverend Pollock.

Women writers in neo-Victorian novels are also often writing in reaction to the history of their relationships with men. The simplest response here, perhaps, is that of the prostitute Sugar in *The Crimson Petal and the White* who, while servicing her clients in any way they wish, is also writing her autobiographical novel, fictionalised with imagined grisly murders of the men she encounters: ' "Please," he begged, tugging ineffectually at the silken bonds holding him fast to the bedposts. 'Let me go! I am an important man!' – and many more such pleas. I paid no heed to him, busying myself with my whetstone and my dagger.'<sup>64</sup> Sugar's writings graphically describe the physical indignities she has been subjected to by men. Agnes Rackham, the wife of Sugar's main client, is another writer but her diary makes clear her complete ignorance of the physical operation of her own body and the physical aspect of married life. The crimson Sugar and the

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<sup>63</sup> Michèle Roberts, *In the Red Kitchen* (1990; rpt. London: Minerva, 1991), p. 24.

<sup>64</sup> Faber, *The Crimson Petal and the White*, p. 226.

white Agnes are poles apart in their experience of men but both use their writings to express their disillusionment and fear in the face of male superior force.

If Sugar and Agnes write in order to feel more in control of their worlds, other female writers write to manipulate or change their circumstances. Elizabeth Cree in Peter Ackroyd's *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* writes a diary in her husband's name which details all the murders she has carried out herself. In *Charlotte. The Final Journey of Jane Eyre* Miranda rewrites the ending of *Jane Eyre* as a present for her father, a collector of Victoriana, using quill pens and yellowing paper. Father falls for the deception, wanting and therefore believing the manuscript to be a lost original. 'I think after a couple of years at Bletchley Park, twelve successful years working in the Bodleian, and forty in the antiquarian book trade I can spot a fraud!'<sup>65</sup> The document complicates an already complex relationship between Miranda and her father but also causes disruption to the reader's relationship with the text of *Jane Eyre* and raises issues of authenticity and validity, whose version of events can be regarded as the truth. This essential matter, a key question for the relevance and status of the neo-Victorian novel itself, is highlighted even more starkly in Alasdair Gray's *Poor Things* (1992). *Poor Things* overlays texts with other texts, constantly questioning any one interpretation of events. The main narrative tells a feminised version of the *Frankenstein* story. However, a letter printed late on in the novel, from Victoria McCandless, the allegedly reconstituted woman, to her future descendant claims the whole of the original narrative is a fraud. 'My second husband's story positively stinks of all that was morbid in that most morbid of centuries, the nineteenth. He has made a sufficiently strange story stranger still ... with additional ghouleries from the works of Mary Shelley and

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<sup>65</sup> Thomas. *Charlotte. The Final Journey of Jane Eyre*, p. 155.

Edgar Allan Poe. What morbid Victorian fantasy has he NOT filched from?'<sup>66</sup> Miranda, in *Charlotte. The Final Journey of Jane Eyre* rewrites the ending of *Jane Eyre* in order to impress her father and gain some form of authority over the classical texts of Victorian literature. She tells her father that she has had enough of academia and intends to become a full time writer, concentrating on rewriting the endings of other novels such as *Pride and Prejudice* and *Mill on the Floss*. Victoria McCandless in *Poor Things*, on the other hand, is at pains to disassociate herself from the Victorian period and its literature, to write her own version of her story and to send it into the future.

Many, even most, neo-Victorian novels are dependant on the use of documents, in both pastiche and parodic modes. Female protagonists particularly write novels and keep diaries in order to assert their right to an acknowledgement of their existence, even when they are using their writing to conceal the truth. Some neo-Victorian novels work from extant historical documents in order to provide weight to a twentieth or twenty-first-century narrative, particularly in the case of novels which treat of actual historical situations. In most of the novels outlined above, the point being made is that these poems, letters, and other documents are fictional because the lives of these women are unrecorded in the historical archive. Women writers and their writings in the neo-Victorian novel represent the female struggle for self-determination, the desire to turn their experiences into art and to become a recorded part of history. Through their documents, neo-Victorian women create continuities between past and present, authenticate their versions of history, voice their resistance to a dominant patriarchal male narrative and supply a female-centred archive as counterbalance.

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<sup>66</sup> Alasdair Gray. *Poor Things* (1992; rpt. London: Penguin, 1993), p. 272-3.



#### 2.4 Crime and the London Experience

It will be evident from the discussion above, that the neo-Victorian novel frequently combines the sexual and the criminal, the specific interrelationship between the two usually dependent upon the class to which the protagonists belong. Neo-Victorian crime novels invariably attempt to create an authentic 'Victorian' world, though narration may vary between third-person omniscient narration, first-person narration and multi-layered storytelling, including prologues, epilogues and additional 'documents'. Documentary material in crime novels or novels set in London, and the two frequently overlap, ranges through fictional documents which attempt to ground a fictional plot in a 'real' world to historical archive which is used to give substance to a fictionalised version of an actual Victorian crime. Neo-Victorian crime novels often seem to need to appeal to a non-fictional discourse beyond the novels' fictional parameters in a sometimes uneasy alliance between the known and imagined 'facts', which also suggests a particularly precarious partnership between authenticity and the constant neo-Victorian project of bringing hidden histories into existence. The discussion which follows illustrates the range and variety of neo-Victorian crime and London novels, including more specific detail about the ways that these novels manipulate the document.

The inheritance plot is a popular choice for the pastiche 'Victorian' novel, these novels imitating the blockbuster Victorian novel at least in their length, frequently running from five hundred to one thousand pages plus. Examples include: Robert Goddard's *Painting the Darkness*, Charles Palliser's *The Quincunx*, Sarah Waters's *Fingersmith*, Andrew Taylor's *The American Boy*, D.J. Taylor's *Kept* (2006) and Michael Cox's *The Meaning of Night* (2006) and *The Glass of*

*Time* (2008). These are quest novels whose plots are labyrinthine and often involve lurid crimes, including murder or incest, committed at least a generation ago. Descendants are left the task of unravelling a mix of family stories, obscure and sometimes hidden documents and chance discoveries, to solve a mystery. The dénouement reveals who is the true inheritor of the big house and estate, which characters, often family members, have been working to undermine their claim and what crimes have been committed against them. Given that these plots use the inheritance of stately piles and the continuation of family lines as currency, they inevitably focus on upper middle class or minor aristocratic characters with members of the working class or low-life characters brought in to provide local colour or do the dirty work. An exception to this common set-up is *Fingersmith* which gives equal weighting to sections set in the crumbling estate at Briar with its upper class bibliophile owner and the Borough with its forgers and thieves. There is rarely a straightforwardly happy ending. In searching for an apparent but elusive truth, characters are compromised: murders are committed, relationships are broken and women are locked up. Paratextual devices are used both to authenticate a Victorian foundational structure – the inclusion of a family tree for example (*Painting the Darkness*, *The Quincunx*, *The American Boy*) – but simultaneously to undermine the certainty of the authenticity of a single interpretation of events by the inclusion of appendices, post scripta, or letters from interested parties which throw doubt onto the veracity of the main narrative. By such combined means, the neo-Victorian crime novel aims to relate itself to its Victorian ancestor's probable emphasis on teleological structure and problem-solving and simultaneously suggest postmodern teleological uncertainty.

Some neo-Victorian crime novels reference actual crimes either to add period authenticity to a text or to explore famous crimes and trials alongside twentieth or twenty-first-century perspectives. The murder of prostitutes, which figures in many novels, either obliquely or more specifically, alludes to the 1880s Whitechapel Murders and the elusive figure of Jack the Ripper. *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* and *Supping with Panthers* both dwell lingeringly on the murder of prostitutes in seedy areas of London and pre-suppose the reader's understanding of the connections being made. The fact that the identity of the perpetrator of these notorious Victorian crimes is still unknown allows the neo-Victorian author to appropriate her/him for his own devices. In D.J. Taylor's *Kept*, another real life, mid-nineteenth-century crime, a train robbery is integrated into a plot which also includes a mad woman in the attic, a murdered husband and egg thieves in the Scottish Highlands. The author is open about the 'patchwork' nature of his novel, both the various strands of the plot and, 'the direct influence of Charles Dickens, George Eliot, Elizabeth Gaskell, George Gissing, Jack London, Mary Mann, Henry Mayhew, George Moore, Alfred Lord Tennyson, Anne Thackeray Ritchie, W.M. Thackeray and Anthony Trollope.'<sup>67</sup> The subtitle to *Kept* is 'A Victorian Mystery', the emphasis being not only on resolving the various strands of the plot but also on recognising the various echoes of the range of Victorian writers to whom homage is being paid.

Three further texts comprise detailed accounts of celebrated Victorian murders: *London 1849, A Victorian Murder Story* (2004) by Michael Alpert, *The Suspicions of Mr Whicher* (2008) by Kate Summerscale and *Mr Briggs' Hat: a Sensational Account of Britain's First Railway Murder* by Kate Colquhoun (2011). Colquhoun's novel is, strictly, outside the remit of this thesis, having

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<sup>67</sup> D.J. Taylor, *Kept* (2006; rpt. London: Vintage, 2007), p. 471.

been published in 2011, but has been mentioned, in passing, to illustrate what appears to be a developing trend, the fictionalised, factual Victorian murder. Michael Alpert's book tells the story of the murder by Frederick and Maria Manning of Maria's former lover, Patrick O'Connor, Kate Summerscale's the murder of the child Saville Kent at the family home, Road Hill House and Kate Colquhoun's the apparently motiveless murder by a stranger of the eponymous Mr Briggs while commuting home by train from his job as a bank clerk. These texts are meticulously researched, providing maps, notes and bibliographies. They also pad out hard evidence with imagined representations of the worlds the protagonists inhabited. Kate Summerscale's book refers a number of times to the Maria Manning murder and the detective in both cases was Jonathan Whicher. Michael Alpert and Kate Summerscale detail how the Manning and Kent murders influenced Charles Dickens and Wilkie Collins, 'most obviously Wilkie Collins' *The Moonstone*... Whicher was the inspiration for that story's cryptic Sergeant Cuff, who has influenced nearly every detective hero since. Elements of the case surfaced in Charles Dickens' last, unfinished novel, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*.'<sup>68</sup> Unlike the crime described in Summerscale's novel, Colquhoun's fictionalised murder, 'did not...inspire some classic novels, but rather a sub-genre of crime stories concerning encounters with cads in railway compartments.'<sup>69</sup> While the murder of Mr Briggs played upon fears of violent crime attendant on increasing urbanisation, the murder of Saville Kent exacerbated anxieties about the erosion of class boundaries. Both novels document the emergence of the figure of the isolated celebrity detective, battling his own demons and negotiating a professional role in changing class conditions, adopted by the neo-Victorian novel directly from the Victorian novel and replicated in numerous contemporary televisual and filmic representations.

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<sup>68</sup> Kate Summerscale, *The Suspicions of Mr Whicher* (London, Bloomsbury, 2008), p. xi.

<sup>69</sup> Andrew Martin, 'Mr Briggs' Hat: A Sensational Account of Britain's First Railway Murder by Kate Colquhoun – Review', *The Observer*, 8/05/ 2011. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2011/may/08/mr-briggs-hat-review/print>.

A mix of factual and fictional material also features in Julian Barnes *Arthur and George*, the story of the Edalji case and the Great Wyrley Outrages, the killing and mutilation of horses in Staffordshire at the turn of the twentieth century. *Arthur and George* is a highly structured text in four parts: ‘Beginnings’, ‘Beginning with an Ending’, ‘Ending with a Beginning’ and ‘Endings’, each section divided by the alternating accounts of the accused, George Edalji and the author, Arthur Conan Doyle. Despite this highly organised plot structure, the tenor of the novel is one of doubt and uncertainty: faith in English justice dampened by an awareness of English racist attitudes; competing belief systems – Anglicanism, spiritualism, atheism and overwhelmingly, the telling and re-telling of stories so that meaning becomes blurred. At the end of *The Suspicions of Mr Whicher*, Kate Summerscale debates whether the purpose of detective fiction is: ‘to transform sensation, horror and grief into a puzzle, and then to solve the puzzle, to make it go away...A storybook detective starts by confronting us with a murder and ends by absolving us of it. He clears us of guilt. He relieves us of uncertainty. He removes us from the presence of death.’<sup>70</sup> Julian Barnes’ *Arthur and George* does not provide such comforting closure but plenty of neo-Victorian crime novels do, especially those which revel in descriptions of London, its slums, taverns and river.

In 1801 London was home to 960,000 people and spanned five miles from east to west. Although it comprised some 60 squares and 8,000 streets, it was a walkable city. Visitors were struck by the grandeur of its buildings and the squalor of its limits, a blight of shanty towns, brickfields and rubbish heaps...By the century’s end all these wastelands were gone. The city measured 17 miles across and its population had swollen to more than 6.5 million, making it easily the largest metropolis in the world...<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Summerscale, *The Suspicions of Mr Whicher*, p. 303-4.

<sup>71</sup> Clare Clark, Review of Jerry White, *London in the Nineteenth-Century* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2007), *The Guardian*, 13/01/2007.

Given these staggering statistics in population growth and the resultant development of infrastructure it is not surprising that London, in neo-Victorian crime novels, is a palpable backdrop to narratives of human misery, disease and degradation and to depictions of extremes of wealth and poverty, elegance and squalor, a divided city of high society and a massed underclass. Jonathan Barnes' *The Somnambulist* (2007) goes so far as to place a crime against the city of London itself at the heart of his fantasy, science-fiction novel, playing on the twenty-first-century fear of London as a site of anxiety, especially with regard to terrorism. Many novels dwell lingeringly on descriptions of London landmarks, the juxtapositions of architectural grandeur and poverty and the sense of a rapidly expanding city:

Hungerford Pier. Up the hill there used to be a market...that's gone now. From its ashes rises a great six-platform railway station, not quite finished, and stretching to meet it, a nine-span wrought-iron lattice girder bridge, not quite finished. And up from the pier, earth for a new embankment garden is being laid (per Prince Albert's orders) over the remains of rotting sewers and wharf shops.<sup>72</sup>

The overwhelming physical presence of London is conveyed in many neo-Victorian novels, especially crime novels, by lengthy descriptive passages which name specific areas, streets, squares and yards. Some novels – for example John MacLachlan Gray's *The Fiend in Human* and Charles Palliser's *The Quincunx* – include maps of London; *The Fiend in Human* and Lee Jackson's *London Dust* have chapter headings which correspond to areas of London or London public houses, theatres and prisons. Covert connections are made between descriptions of the warrens of East End streets, a hotch potch of planning imposed on the old medieval street system, to suggest that order cannot be imposed on such disorganised chaos. The visual quality of descriptions of London in neo-Victorian novels taps directly into one Victorian artistic tradition of depicting London as anarchic – Turner's painting of the burning of the Houses of

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<sup>72</sup> Bayard, *Mr Timothy*, p. 31.

Parliament (1835) for example, or horrific, as in Doré's engravings of Whitechapel, night refuges and the regimented rows of working class terraces.

The fascination with The Thames as a site for drowning of prostitutes, suicides or disposal of murdered bodies has been documented above. The neo-Victorian novel also demonstrates an equal fascination with London sewers, the complex, underground system which mirrors the world at ground level with its varying trades, building works and the link between crime, disease and poverty. Several novels use the ratting trade as a metaphor for the filth and cruelty – as perceived by twenty-first-century standards – of working class London.<sup>73</sup> Ratters provided rats to the public houses for staged rat fights as a substitute for dog fighting after it had been made illegal. Clare Clark's *The Great Stink* details sewer and associated trades and makes the links between muck, wealth and industry: the toshers who trawled the sewers searching for coins and the pure finders, collectors of dog dung for the tannery trade. Several novels make reference to the cholera outbreaks of the nineteenth century (*The Rose of Sebastopol*, *Sweet Thames*, *The Great Stink*, *The Dress Lodger*), the search for the cause of the disease, and some address the eventual rebuilding and extending of the sewer system in London. Each novel uses the fear of cholera outbreaks as a link to other societal ills and their impact on individuals: *The Rose of Sebastopol*, The Crimean War; *Sweet Thames*, incest; *The Great Stink*, The Crimean War, mental breakdown and self harm; *The Dress Lodger*, prostitution and body snatching. *The Great Stink*, in particular, embeds its narrative in a personification of the stench and filth of mid-nineteenth-century London: 'At the bottom of the stink was the river... The smell was solid and brown as the river itself. The water didn't know nothing of any modesty or shame... a great open stream of

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<sup>73</sup> For example: Clare Clark, *The Great Stink* (2005; rpt. London: Penguin, 2006); Charles Palliser, *The Quincunx*; John MacLachlan Gray, *The Fiend in Human*.

shit through the very centre of the capital, the knobbls and bumps of rich and poor jostling and rubbing along together.<sup>74</sup>

Christian Gutleben in *Nostalgic Postmodernism* fashions a lengthy and damning criticism of the neo-Victorian novel's use of London slum environments, juxtaposing passages from Matthew Kneale's *Sweet Thames* and Charles Palliser's *The Quincunx* with similar extracts from the work of George Gissing, Charles Dickens and Charles Kingsley to discredit the later novels as nothing more than imitative pastiche.<sup>75</sup> This, however, is to partially miss the point. The pleasure of reading Kneale or Palliser is, in part, the connection to Gissing, Dickens and Kingsley, for if the descriptions of London fog and poverty are similar, the outcomes of reading the novels of the late twentieth century against the novels of the nineteenth are not the same. The reader of the neo-Victorian London crime novel knows that s/he is reading a pastiched homage to Victorian writing and colludes with the palimpsestuous nature of the undertaking. The imitation constitutes a search for connection which is echoed in architectural demolition and development of the capital; the old city can still be traced on every street but is overlaid by subsequent urban development. Kneale and Palliser, among other neo-Victorian writers discussed here, use archival material, including Victorian novelistic genres, to bridge the years between the reader's present and the Victorian past while acknowledging that any continuity is elusive.

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<sup>74</sup> Clark, *The Great Stink*, p. 12-3.

<sup>75</sup> Gutleben, *Nostalgic Postmodernism*, pp.60-67.



## 2.5 Colonialism and Race

A whole range of people in the so-called Western or metropolitan world, as well as their counterparts in the Third or formerly colonized world, share a sense that the era of high or classical imperialism...has in one way or another continued to exert considerable cultural influence in the present. For all sorts of reasons, they feel a new urgency about understanding the pastness *or not* of the past, and this urgency is carried over into perceptions of the present and the future.<sup>76</sup>

Edward Said's argument helps to explain a postcolonial climate of debate which has fed into the neo-Victorian consideration, expressed by writers from both former colonial powers and colonised nations, of the legacy of nineteenth-century imperialism. The neo-Victorian novel looks at crime at home, often localised within the capital, but also tends to frame colonialism as crime committed abroad, in a variety of locations, and often from the perspective of the outcomes of colonialism after the event and up to the present day. Neo-Victorian novels comment on Britain's conduct in the former colonies or British engagement in foreign policy, in a discussion 'about blame and judgement, about present actualities and future priorities.'<sup>77</sup> They may also highlight the issues of race and colonialism which are covert, often, in the Victorian novel, the inheritance plots in *Jane Eyre* and *Great Expectations* (1861) for example, concentrating rather on where fortunes were made and the effects on native people then and now.

Many novels examine blatant or latent racism and often do so through 'subaltern' narratives which conjoin a 'history from below' approach to postcolonial theorising about the necessity to represent the voices of the silenced. Three such novels are *Strange Music* by Laura Fish, *Windward Heights* by Maryse Condé (1995) and *The Mutiny* by Julian Rathbone (2007). *Strange*

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<sup>76</sup> Edward D. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (1993; rpt. London: Vintage, 1994), p. 6.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

*Music* juxtaposes the life of the poet Elizabeth Barrett with two women on the Barrett estate in Jamaica, a Creole servant and a former slave. Barrett, an abolitionist, frets about rumours of her brother's management of the estate and its workers. *Windward Heights* transposes the plot of *Wuthering Heights* to the Caribbean and, as with *Strange Music*, exploits the complicated racial, historical and social legacy left by the abolition of slavery. *The Mutiny* examines the casual racism of the British in India and the often contradictory motives of the Indian mutineers which combined to provoke bloodshed on a monumental scale. Some of the same issues are managed particularly subtly in Julian Barnes' *Arthur and George* where the wrongly imprisoned and racially disparaged George Edalji refuses to believe his conviction has anything to do with British racism. The reader is aware that he is mistaken in this, having been privy to the Chief Constable, Captain Anson's thoughts on miscegenation. This unwillingness to go for the easy option makes the reality of the institutional racism that Edalji and Conan Doyle have to combat all the more sinister and convincing.

Neo-Victorian novels which deal with racism do so through a wide variety of plots, geographical locations and narrative forms. Four novels which tackle racist themes in new worlds are Stef Penney's *The Tenderness of Wolves*, Andrea Barrett's *The Voyage of the Narwhal* (1998), Kate Grenville's *The Secret River* (2005) and Valerie Martin's 2003 Orange prize-winning *Property*. Set in the 1860s, in Canada, *The Tenderness of Wolves* examines the impact of European colonialism on native Indians including the effects of intermarriage. A key motivation for many white settlers is the suppression of any promotion of Indian culture, especially the possibility of an ancient Indian written language. *The Voyage of the Narwhal* charts a mid-nineteenth-century American expedition to the Northwest Passage to examine polar flora and fauna. Tensions arise

among the explorers over differing attitudes to the trophies to be brought back for exhibition, including Annie and Tom, mother and son Esquimaux. Annie dies as a result of being uprooted from her culture and home and Tom has to be sprung from his captors in order to return him to his homeland. *The Secret River* is the result of Kate Grenville's research into her English ancestry: William Thornhill, a Thames waterman is deported to Australia where he makes his fortune but at the expense of the native population, their attachment to the land he commandeers and his own humanity. Further novels which examine the convict experience in Australia include Richard Flanagan's *Gould's Book of Fish* (2001) and Matthew Kneale's *English Passengers*. *Property* uses first person narration to expose the unthinking racism of French colonial attitudes to slave ownership on a Louisiana sugar plantation and male attitudes to the ownership of women, black or white.

The neo-Victorian novel negotiates and sometimes elides complex questions raised by postcolonial theory about how subaltern voices can be represented. '[I]f we suggest that the colonial subjects can "speak" and question colonial authority, are we romanticising such resistant subjects and underplaying colonial violence? In what voices do the colonised speak – their own, or in accents borrowed from their masters?'<sup>78</sup> There is the constant danger for the neo-Victorian novel that complex issues of race and the effects of colonialism may be treated in overly simplistic or patronising ways. Heilmann and Llewellyn make the point that one of the techniques novels deploy to attempt to revive '[t]he voices of resistance'<sup>79</sup> is through the representation of hybrid languages and disruptive narrative methods. In many postcolonial novels the desire is to imaginatively recreate possible voices of those who have been excluded or

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<sup>78</sup> Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 192-3.

<sup>79</sup> Heilmann and Llewellyn, *Neo-Victorianism*, p. 69.

silenced but questions of the fidelity or motivation of post hoc expression still remain. Novels which attempt to investigate this minefield include Belinda Starling's *The Journal of Dora Damage* which exposes the mixed motives and hypocrisy of the Ladies' Society for the Assistance of Fugitives from Slavery whose members rescue escaped former slaves and enjoy a vicarious sexual thrill at the sight of black flesh. D.M. Thomas's *Charlotte. The Final Journey of Jane Eyre*, exposes patronising attitudes towards the formerly colonised which masquerade as sympathy in the present. The protagonist Miranda congratulates herself on her sensitivity to the suffering of Martinique's former slaves when she will take every opportunity to exploit native men for her own gratification: 'I could hear a low chorus of pain, of slave women being taken from behind like dogs, and men being beaten... I cried out in tune.'<sup>80</sup>

*English Passengers* is representative of the colonial neo-Victorian novel which makes the suggestion that a young country offers greater freedoms than the class bound society of the old world. Many of these novels, some of which have been mentioned above in contiguous contexts, particularly offer female characters escape from loveless marriages, stultifying sexual mores or restrictive working conditions. Instead, in these novels, women battle with weather and terrain and are often rewarded with exotic sexual encounters and a sense of self determination. Such novels include Stef Penney's *The Tenderness of Wolves*, Rose Tremain's *The Colour* (2003), Jane Campion and Kate Pullinger's *The Piano* (1994), and the novella *Morpho Eugenia* from A.S. Byatt's *Angels and Insects*. In *A Mighty Horde of Women in Very Big Hats, Advancing*, one of Michel Faber's follow-up stories to *The Crimson Petal and the White*, the reader learns that Sophie, the damaged child from the novel, has survived, become a suffragette and spent much of

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<sup>80</sup> Thomas, *Charlotte. The Final Journey of Jane Eyre*, p. 81.

her childhood abroad, including Australia. She has been healed of the trauma of her childhood by escaping from England.

However, just as these new worlds offer potentially renewed lives, especially for women constrained by old world restrictions, they also offer opportunities for plunder of their natural resources. It is noteworthy that some of the later neo-Victorian novels which move characters from England to the former colonies describe the despoiling of the local terrain and its flora and fauna. The current, pressing conservation agenda has collided with the neo-Victorian novel. Two novels mentioned above allude to these issues. *English Passengers* is scathing about the colonists' attitudes to and their appropriation of indigenous people's land; in *The Tenderness of Wolves* men are murdered for the sake of valuable animal skins. It is Jem Poster's *Rifling Paradise* (2006) however, which puts the environmental debate centre stage. Having made a bad job of managing his estate in England, Charles Redbourne embarks for Australia, seeing himself as a latterday Darwin. The novel exposes the fine dividing line between scientific enquiry, a desire to understand the natural world, and selfish egotism. The result is the destruction of birdlife and local terrain.

The neo-Victorian novels outlined above confront political outcomes of nineteenth-century colonialism and conflict across various continents and do so by appropriating aspects of twentieth-century postcolonial discourse, particularly the debate about how to represent the voices of those silenced by colonial power. In common with neo-Victorian novels which highlight or invent lives of Victorian women or sexual minorities, postcolonial neo-Victorian novels give a voice to convicts and slaves or to minor characters from Victorian Ur-novels. They

participate in a ‘debate about historical memory and the direction of the political future in which we, as readers and citizens, do have a voice and a role to play’<sup>81</sup> and so underline, yet again, the way that the neo-Victorian novel is used as a vehicle to consider pressing contemporary issues. Hybridity, a problematic area for postcolonial theory, given that the hybrid can be represented as a debased product of the ruling elite, is celebrated in the neo-Victorian novel, both through potentially positive outcomes for descendants of inter-racial relationships and through the sheer variety of structural approaches to addressing the postcolonial experience. The postcolonial theoretical position that the subaltern voice cannot be represented is generally rejected, as is a binary opposition between coloniser and colonised, in favour of various representations of middle ground.

## 2.6 Fictional Biographies

If the neo-Victorian novel is eager to expose contemporary society’s problems through the vehicle of the Victorian plot, it is, at the same time, looking for something to believe in, in the present. The final sections of this overview of the thematic interests of the neo-Victorian novel consider how the neo-Victorian novel deals with the concept of the self through the agency of the celebrated name and the problem of belief itself.

Given the complex relationship of dependency, homage and conflict between the neo-Victorian novel and its Victorian forbears, it is not surprising that oblique or overt reference to key Victorian texts is commonplace in many contemporary neo-Victorian novels. Furthermore, many

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<sup>81</sup> Kaplan, *Victoriana*, p. 162.

novels include characters from Victorian literature or the Victorian period and some do both within the same text, producing a conflation of art and life. Clearly, this examination of real or literary lives foregrounds philosophical questions about the fixity of the self and the stability of any one individual's knowledge of another person and moral questions about the ethical appropriateness of adapting, embellishing or subverting the historical facts, particularly of real lives. Further questions could be raised about the various possible motives of the person doing the imagining. One novel which includes both literary and actual Victorians is Jeanette Winterson's *Lighthousekeeping* (2004) which includes Robert Louis Stevenson as a discussed character in the novel as well as characters and themes from *Treasure Island* (1883) and *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. Winterson appears to take the line that what is not known can be imagined; in *Lighthousekeeping* fluidity exists between fact and fiction, past and present but what matters is the life force and fossil record of stories: 'The brittle ghosts of the past...memory is layered. What you were was another life, but the evidence is somewhere in the rock – your trilobites and ammonites, your struggling life-forms.'<sup>82</sup> In *The Biographer's Tale* (2000) A.S.Byatt exposes the fruitlessness of the task of trying to pin down and sum up a life. Her postgraduate hero, fed up with theoretical criticism, decides to write the biography of a biographer in an effort to grapple with real life. The results are predictably diffuse and unspecific. Byatt's novel points to the current fascination with fictional and real literary figures and also the layering effect of writers writing about writers: the 'truth' may be exposed, changed or buried by such a process. 'Victorian biography in the twenty-first century,' Byatt suggests

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<sup>82</sup> Jeanette Winterson, *Lighthousekeeping* (2004; rpt. London: Harper Perennial, 2005), p. 149-150.

persuasively, ‘cannot ever be an innocent pastoral return to some imaginary *status quo ante* for its subject, author or reader.’<sup>83</sup>

These ‘warts and all’ literary-fictional biographies of Victorian writers and characters from Victorian Ur-texts, take their cue from the innovative attitude to biography adopted, early in the twentieth century, by Lytton Strachey’s *Eminent Victorians* (1918). Debate about Victoria’s long reign and its key figures had already begun late in the nineteenth century. As Taylor and Wolff suggest: ‘Even before Strachey began his incisive muck-raking, biographers and *belles-lettristes* alike had begun to separate out the post-1880 generation.’<sup>84</sup> Strachey had toppled four eminent Victorians – Cardinal Manning, Florence Nightingale, Dr Arnold and General Gordon – and shown them to be prey to the ambitions and hypocrisies of their age. Florence Nightingale, for example, whose popular image of the self-sacrificing and saintly ‘lady with the lamp’ is given a makeover as a selfish and stubborn neurotic. Strachey was writing for a world weary of war and in reaction against obsequious reverence for the big guns of the previous century. In his Preface, Strachey admits to being cavalier about doing justice to the wealth of material at his disposal; he is more interested in his own individual examination of obscure fragments of material concerning his subjects. He adds: ‘They are, in one sense, haphazard visions – that is to say, my choice of subjects has been determined by no desire to construct a system or to prove a theory, but by simple motives of convenience and art.’<sup>85</sup> Neo-Victorian bio-fiction is also motivated by convenience and art; if it is also trying to prove a theory, it is that personality is fluid rather than

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<sup>83</sup> Kaplan, *Victoriana*, p. 44.

<sup>84</sup> Taylor and Wolff (eds.), *The Victorians Since 1901*, p. 4.

<sup>85</sup> Lytton Strachey, *Eminent Victorians* (1918; rpt. London: Penguin, 1986), p. 9.



stable and that the iconic names of the Victorian period are open to interpretation and criticism in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Several novels take characters from Victorian novels and re-write their lives according to a contemporaneous theoretical standpoint or simply the personal inclination of the author. In an interview with *The Observer* Will Self admits of his novel *Dorian*, 'some of those scenes are very familiar to me. And whether it's anything I'm confessing I don't know. Yes, maybe I am.'<sup>86</sup> *Dorian* is merciless in its examination of the 1980s, the period of the author's youth – the Diana cult, AIDS, recreational drugs – just as Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* had portrayed a demi-mondaine version of the 1880s. The neo-Victorian novel is adept at transposing mythic narratives – including the Faustian – and giving them a new lease of life. As with Will Self's *Dorian*, A.N. Wilson's *A Jealous Ghost* re-writes an iconic Victorian text – in this case, Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw* – as a modern narrative. The nanny here is a disturbed American Ph.D student, working on James' text, and unable to differentiate between fiction and reality, thus highlighting a reading of the original text as a study in repression and psychological disturbance. In *Mary Reilly* the Jekyll and Hyde narrative of the split personality is given a female, working class observer. Jekyll and Hyde are perceived at one remove through Mary's growing awareness, whereas in *Jack Maggs*, Peter Carey brings Dickens' *Great Expectations* convict Magwitch to the fore, sidelining Pip and dispensing with Estella and Miss Havisham altogether. If *Mary Reilly* adds a softening feminised aspect to the masculine narrative of Jekyll and Hyde, *Jack Maggs* emphasises the vigour and entrepreneurial nature of the emerging Australian colony compared with the foppish decadence of the old country.

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<sup>86</sup> Robert McCrum, 'Self Analysis', *The Observer*, 29/09/ 2002.  
<http://books.guardian.co.uk/departments/generalfiction/story/0,,800896,00.html>. Accessed, 22/02/ 2008.

Further neo-Victorian novels provide some form of sequel to the lives of characters from Victorian novels. *Charlotte. The Final Journey of Jane Eyre* merges aspects of both *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* to provide Jane with a sexually liberating relationship with Rochester's son by his first wife, though she does not live very long to enjoy it. *Charlotte* complicates the biographical leanings of the neo-Victorian novel by jumbling into a modern plot characters from two iconic earlier texts with the female authors of those texts. *Poor Things*' heroine, Arabella Boxer, a female version of Frankenstein's monster, goes on to enjoy a career as a doctor. In Louis Bayard's *Mr Timothy*, Tiny Tim is haunted by the saccharine version of himself he has been lumbered with, spending much of his early adulthood trying to escape Dickens and the imposed necessity to be good. Similarly, in *The Dark Clue*, characters from *The Woman in White*, released from Wilkie Collins' hold, find the world a complex place and struggle to maintain their moral authority. Clearly, these novels are playing with the idea of the death and possible resuscitation of the originating author or at least with the malleability of his/her text.

Novels such as these are attempting to bring characters from iconic Victorian novels to a contemporary understanding and into a version of present fictional 'reality', even where a 'Victorian' setting is maintained. The paradoxical effect is that while the original text may be sabotaged, its importance is strengthened. Given this predilection for introducing fictional Victorian characters into contemporary texts, it is not surprising that the neo-Victorian novel also showcases actual Victorians. Tony Pollard's *The Minutes of the Lazarus Club* (2008) brings together Isambard Kingdom Brunel, Ada Lovelace, Florence Nightingale and Charles Babbage, amongst others, in a novel involving body snatching, a mechanical heart and a plot to influence

the course of the American Civil War. According to A.S.Byatt, ‘We like historical persons because they are unknowable, only partly available to the imagination, and we find this occluded quality attractive,’<sup>87</sup> but many neo-Victorian novels behave as though historical persons are largely knowable, certainly imaginable and their representations are not occluded so much as filtered through a particular lens or authorial point of view.

Many novels feature Victorian authors. A.S.Byatt’s Tennyson (*The Conjugal Angel*) is autocratic but to be taken seriously, Lynne Truss’s Tennyson (*Tennyson’s Gift*, 1996) is a buffoon. Adam Foulds’ *The Quickening Maze* (2009) concentrates on the life of the poet John Clare, during his stay in a private mental institution and this novel too introduces Tennyson as a visitor to his melancholic brother, another resident of the asylum. Foulds’ Tennyson is distant, charismatic and smelly. The poet John Clare also features in two further, recent novels, Judith Allnatt’s *The Poet’s Wife* (2010), which focuses particularly on Clare’s long-suffering wife Patty and Hugh Lupton’s *The Ballad of John Clare* (2010) which examines Clare’s early life and loves against a background of land enclosure and the reorganisation of agriculture along commercial lines. Both novels, in common with the majority of neo-Victorian novels featuring great men, emphasise the often negative effect Clare has on the various women in his life – lovers, wife and mother. Perhaps it is not surprising that novels about Clare are being published now, during another era of impending environmental disaster, nor that Clare should assume a role as figurehead for green environmentalism.

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<sup>87</sup> Byatt, *On Histories and Stories*, p. 31.

The two fictional biographies of Henry James (Colm Tóibín's *The Master* and David Lodge's *Author, Author*, both published in 2004) select overlapping material from James's life and works and treat it differently, Tóibín stressing James's role as observer rather than participant in the world and Lodge locating James in a literary tradition from Byron to the present day. David Lodge has followed his fictional biography of Henry James with another of yet another late-Victorian novelist, H.G. Wells ( *A Man of Parts*, 2011), which catalogues the author's numerous sexual conquests, alongside his position as a late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century thinker. Conan Doyle in *Arthur and George* is given a modernising treatment, shown to be inadequately in control of the evidence in the Edalji case and willing to take risks in both his professional and private life. Dickens makes an appearance in the unscrupulous character of the journalist Titus Oates in *Jack Maggs*, as the writer and theatre impresario Alfred Gibson in *Girl in a Blue Dress* and as himself in Richard Flanagan's *Wanting* (2008) and Matthew Pearl's *The Last Dickens* (2009), whose labyrinthine plot revolves round the publication of the final instalments of Dickens' final novel, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*. Dickens' uncomfortable relationship with his wife is a recurrent theme in many neo-Victorian novels.

*Strange Music* examines the family life and neuroses of Elizabeth Barrett Browning and *The American Boy* the English schooldays of Edgar Allan Poe. In Jane Urquhart's *Changing Heaven* (1990) Emily Brontë's crochety, plain-speaking ghost joins forces with the ghost of a young woman killed in a ballooning accident above Haworth; their narratives become entangled with that of a present-day American student working on *Wuthering Heights*. Justine Picardie's *Daphne* (2008) emphasises the 'slippery' and secretive nature of all her protagonists, including Daphne du Maurier and Branwell Brontë, the object of du Maurier's research. The

representations of these authors are not irreverently distorted but in all cases the facts are given a selective or imaginative emphasis. Other Victorians are subjected to the fictional biography treatment because of the arresting eccentricity of their lives: the female doctor who spends her life dressed as and largely behaving as a man in *James Miranda Barry*, the non-conformist preacher in *Mr Wroe's Virgins* and the English aristocrat, the fifth Duke of Portland, whose mental disintegration is chronicled in Mick Jackson's *The Underground Man* (1997).

A final group of Victorians who make an appearance in neo-Victorian novels are the key thinkers of the age, Marx, Freud and Darwin. Freudian and especially Darwinian ideas and references abound and are discussed in the novels but the men themselves make an occasional appearance. Some novels take an oblique view of the subject, as in Roger McDonald's *Mr Darwin's Shooter* (1998), which details the career of Covington, the man who shot and prepared Darwin's bird specimens. This novel, examining as it does the life of the great man from the point of view of an underling – a typical neo-Victorian trope to concentrate on the minor rather than the major character – comes closest to A.S.Byatt's idea of the occluded personality. Peter Ackroyd's *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* includes fleeting visits by Marx who is using The British Library Reading Room at the same time as the novel's main characters, as if to make a connection between the birth of a grand narrative that would have lasting world significance to the present day and localised and fictionalised serial murders, with their overtones of Jack the Ripper. However, it is in Jenny Diski's *Monkey's Uncle* (1994) that Marx, Freud and Darwin are assembled to answer to the present day for the usefulness or otherwise of their theories. Darwin is accused of undermining mankind's need to be seen as relevant within the universe, Marx of offering the erroneous ideology of the poor inheriting the earth without having to die for it first

and Freud of confusing people's sexual lives. 'In the end, none of you really improved anything very much... The poor are still poor, the confused are still confused, and science has provided no more comfort or certainty than religion did. The only theory that hasn't been tried yet is the theory that there's no theory at all and we've all just got to get on with it as best we can.'<sup>88</sup> This quotation from *Monkey's Uncle* underscores the novel's comparisons between the great philosophical debates of the nineteenth century and the apparent lack of ideological focus of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries and equally the lack of faith in the present with regard to the continuing value of the individual genius.

The neo-Victorian novel reinstates pre-Modernist iconic figures but reserves the right to re-examine these lives in highly individualistic and haphazard fashion, marrying the personnel of the Victorian age to the twentieth-century debate about the death of the subject. Like Strachey, neo-Victorian novelists at the end of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first centuries look obliquely at Charles Dickens, Elizabeth Barrett and Henry James or Tiny Tim, Jane Eyre and Pip for the sake of art and, in some cases perhaps, for the sake of convenience: it could be argued that neo-Victorian novels pick off the most iconic and readily accessible targets, those which already have a solid foundation in the audience's collective memory. However, the continuing fascination with the novels of Dickens and the Brontës in particular cannot be dismissed out of hand as some sort of sloppy shorthand to an ersatz, feel good Victoriana. A *Guardian* review by D.J. Taylor, himself a neo-Victorian novelist, refers to the publication in 2008-9 of three 'Dickens novels'<sup>89</sup>, all of which deal with the author's last years, as an example

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<sup>88</sup> Jenny Diski, *Monkey's Uncle* (1994: rpt. London: Phoenix, 1995) p. 185.

<sup>89</sup> Dan Simmons, *Drood* (London: Quercus, 2009); Matthew Pearl, *The Last Dickens* (London: Harvill Secker, 2009); Jean- Pierre Ohl, *Mr Dick: or The Tenth Book* (Sawtry, Cambs.: Dedalus, 2008).

of ‘morphic resonance’, a term more often applied to ‘the communal impulses of the animal kingdom’.<sup>90</sup> The continuing imagining and re-imagining of these novels and these authors indicates their fundamental canonical position despite, or even because of, changing times and theoretical discourses. By including authors or characters in new texts, the reader enjoys the best of both worlds: the disruption of the epistemological completeness of the original, untenable in a postmodern world, at the same time as the psychological pleasure of restoration and return. As Cora Kaplan expresses it: ‘Even where biography or biofiction represents authors’ lives as contingent and unstable identities, a view of identity perfectly suited to our times if not theirs – it provides the modern reader with that crucial thing that a sense of futurity seems to require, a figure who can be ritually resuscitated, murdered, mourned and praised.’<sup>91</sup> The neo-Victorian novel’s treatment of both literary and actual Victorians suggests that while we still need the figure on the pedestal we need even more to express our doubts about his/her right to occupy that pedestal.

## 2.7 Systems of Belief

‘[W]hat does it mean to write about Victorian spiritualism and/or faith in a neo-Victorian (con)text? What is it we want to see and in what do we desire to (dis)believe?’<sup>92</sup> These are the key questions to be asked in relation to the many neo-Victorian novels which deal with Victorian attitudes to belief and its aftermath and the collision between orthodox religious practice and evolutionary science. The neo-Victorian novel playfully satirises or pokes fun at the chicanery of the séance or, at least, places spiritualism within a contained time-frame but the Darwinian neo-

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<sup>90</sup> D.J. Taylor. ‘Who did it – and why?’ *The Guardian*, Review Section, 21/03/ 2009, p. 10.

<sup>91</sup> Kaplan, *Victoriana*, p. 78-9.

<sup>92</sup> Heilmann and Llewellyn, *Neo-Victorianism*, p. 146.

Victorian novel poses more problematic and relevant questions for a twenty-first century reader, especially when presented within a split-narrative by which means ‘contemporary fiction set in the nineteenth century can believably address the Victorian crisis of faith in the light of our own post-Christian contexts.’<sup>93</sup> So, as with neo-Victorian novels which deal with wide-ranging matters of sexuality, the neo-Victorian reader is also faced with a spectrum of novels which address questions of faith and belief. In the same way that neo-Victorian novels dealing with homosexuality can be approached by a contemporary reader with a sense of liberal acceptance, so neo-Victorian novels dealing with spiritualism may be read with interest but without personal engagement. At the other end of the spectrum, novels which deal with paedophilia or incest are still upsetting or alarming and so are the neo-Victorian novels which engage the reader in a dialogue about what we believe in now.

By its very nature the neo-Victorian novel deals in hauntings from the past, so it is not surprising that ghosts feature in one form or another in many of the novels. Tiny Tim in *Mr Timothy* is pursued by the ghost of his dead father, the dead maid reveals her story to the current maid in *The Observations* and the Laudanum Empress is the resident ghost in *Arkbaby*, regularly making conversational connections between past and present. In John Harwood’s *The Ghost Writer* (2004) the present day plot is constantly paralleled by fragments of Victorian ghost stories and the malevolent intervention of re-incarnations of figures from the past. The interest in the ability of contemporary psychological practices to make sense of, or unlock, the mind is explored in Sebastian Faulks’ *Human Traces* (2005), through phrenology in *The Underground Man* and mesmerism in *Jack Maggs*. The Victorian interest in spiritualism provides setting in Faye L.

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid., p. 148.



Booth's *Cover the Mirrors* (2007), plot episodes in *White Stone Day* and *The Dark Clue*, a link between the various narratives in *The Red Kitchen* and as a system of belief in *Arthur and George*, *The Conjugal Angel* and *The Master*. Non-conformist belief is also examined in *Mr Wroe's Virgins* (the Christian Israelites), Sonia Overall's *The Realm of Shells* (2006) (evangelical Protestantism and the Margate shell grotto), *The Sweetest Thing* (Quakerism) and Lindsay Clarke's *The Chymical Wedding* (1989) (green man worship).

From the range and variety of the above examples, it is clear that the neo-Victorian novel is interested in non-mainstream Victorian belief; where it does tackle conventional religion it is often in the context of the collision between traditional religious faith and the upheaval caused by the discoveries of the scientific community and Charles Darwin in particular. The examination of Darwinian theories and the effect of Darwin's writings on Victorian and contemporary society is a major concern of numerous neo-Victorian novels. Spiritualism features nearly as frequently in the novels, often in order to provide female characters with a means to earn their living, as a contrast to the world of scientific rationality or to evoke the period through the set-piece paraphernalia of the séance. The difference in the treatment of spiritualism and Darwinism is that spiritualism is isolated in the neo-Victorian novel largely as a late Victorian or early Edwardian belief system, even though, to be historically accurate, spiritualism had its heyday in the 1850s, an example of neo-Victorian poetic licence. Darwinism, even in novels located entirely within a Victorian setting, speaks to the future as an alternative way of reading the world from that of traditional religious belief. As with the other discursive areas covered by the neo-Victorian novel, and discussed above, 'the foregrounding of the Darwinian crisis enables

contemporary fiction to explore its modern extensions and simultaneously to ponder the context of the past.<sup>94</sup>

Darwin the man appears in *Mr Darwin's Shooter*, *Arkbaby* and Harry Thompson's *This Thing of Darkness* (2005) and explorers who see themselves as part of a Darwinian spirit of enquiry in *Rifling Paradise*, *Morpho Eugenia* and *Voyage of the Narwhal*. Many novels set up an explicit or implicit dialogue with Darwinism and find various ways to contrast differing receptions of Darwinian ideas. *This Thing of Darkness* specifically contrasts The Beagle's Captain Fitzroy's liberal-leaning, Christian attitudes to the men under his command and the native peoples The Beagle encounters, with Darwin's opinions on the inferiority of women and an acceptance of the loss of individual lives as part of the necessity of the survival of a species. *English Passengers* exploits the allegory of the 'ship of fools', in a more implicit examination of the impact of evolutionary thought and its existential repercussions: 'All at once I felt myself haunted by a terrible vision, of a world without guidance: a land of emptiness, where all was ruled by the madness of chance. How could one endure such a place, where all significance was lost? I myself would mean nothing, but would merely be a kind of self-invention: a speck upon the wind, calling itself Wilson.'<sup>95</sup> The survivors of this misadventure are those who are prepared to change with changing circumstances and who see themselves as merely a part of the wider physical environment.

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<sup>94</sup> Gutleben, *Nostalgic Postmodernism*, p. 209.

<sup>95</sup> Matthew Kneale, *English Passengers* (2000; rpt. London: Penguin, 2001), p. 370.

Three further novels examine the effect of Darwin's work on succeeding generations by means of split-narratives: Jenny Diski's *Monkey's Uncle*, Graham Swift's *Ever After* and Liz Jensen's *Arkbaby*. *Arkbaby* is the cheeriest of these, a celebratory version of opposites: past and present, human and monkey, vegetarianism and meat-eating, God and Darwin. Above all *Arkbaby* celebrates new life in the form of hybridity. The present-day protagonist in *Monkey's Uncle* is Charlotte Fitzroy, descendant of Robert FitzRoy, real-life captain of Darwin's ship the *Beagle*. The novel suggests that FitzRoy's depression and suicide is influenced by the clash between his personal faith and Darwin's discoveries. Charlotte's breakdown is caused by a mix of personal tragedy and what she sees as the meaninglessness of any grand narrative, Darwinian, Freudian or Marxist. Having quizzed the three grand old men during her mad phase, Charlotte is finally left with a vision of the oppositional nature of life: 'It was now perfectly clear to her how everything fitted together and never would, and how movement and stillness, light and dark, truth and deception, feeling and numbness were created out of that single contradiction... which never could, would or should be conclusive.'<sup>96</sup> Graham Swift's *Ever After* also features a nineteenth-century character tortured by a growing loss of faith and a present day descendant despairing, since the death of his wife, from a lack of belief in anything. *Ever After* endlessly moves between the past and the present in a constant search for meaning but concludes: 'What can Darwin tell me that is new? That nothing in this world is fixed, that everything is mutable?... That Nature is a veritable graveyard littered with failed prototypes, in which Man, who is not the point of the plan, since there is no plan, will surely find his place.'<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Diski, *Monkey's Uncle*, p. 251.

<sup>97</sup> Graham Swift, *Ever After* (London: Picador, 1992), p. 235.

Darwinian theories, references to fossils and the repetitive layering of stories – Victorian and present day, literary references and newer narratives – abound in the neo-Victorian novel. In essence, the novels argue for recognition of a continuing relationship between past and present, some sense, however unclear, of connection between what happened then and what people believed then and what happens now and what people believe now. In this section one final novel will illustrate these points. Jem Poster's *Courting Shadows* tells the story of John Stannard, an architect engaged to restore an ancient village church. Concerned only with modernisation and rapid results he orders the excavation of the church wall and part of the churchyard, railing against the slowness of the workmen and the reverence with which they treat exhumed bones. The novel is full of instances of layered artefacts and objects, heavy with both mythic and historical significance: the doom painting in the church, the ranks of dead in the churchyard but Stannard understands nothing of these connections, wreaks havoc within the village community and leaves the village close to breakdown himself. Poster comments further on relationship and responsibility between the individual and the historical in his next novel *Rifling Paradise*, which also investigates hierarchies of men, the relationship between men and terrain and the struggle to find something to believe in beyond mortality.

## 2.8 Summative Comments

The various thematic areas of interest of the neo-Victorian novel outlined and discussed above go part way to answering a central question of this thesis: why this insistent return to the Victorian? Clearly, topical material from this mass of novels displays present-day sites of anxiety or concern which are being worked through via the medium of the 'Victorian', perceived to be an originating or ancestral period of influence and one of sufficient cultural similarity and

difference to encourage comparison. This shared Victorian and contemporaneous material is glossed in various ways. Novels may emphasise our similarity to or difference from the Victorians, congratulate us on our superiority to the Victorians or use the Victorian as a template for our own unresolved problems. All neo-Victorian novels, in one way or another, fuse the historical and the contemporary and explore an interplay of shifting power relations at either the individual or institutional level. These centres of power may be demonstrated variously through conflict between the sexes and changing attitudes towards types of sexual activity, the relationship between the individual and the state, class conflict, systems of punishment, the imposition of colonial rule and the challenge from new to traditional faith-based systems of belief. However, while neo-Victorian thematic material attempts to establish some form of linear connection to the Victorian, the various forms that the neo-Victorian novel adopts, to a greater or lesser extent undermine or upset the possibility of connection.

The following chapters of this thesis examine three neo-Victorian novels which have chosen different routes to presenting a neo-Victorian novel; the form that each novel takes has profound effects on the novel's reception, including its potential for expression of continuity between Victorian subject matter and a present-day sensibility. The majority of neo-Victorian novels are pastiche representations of a more or less convincing Victorian world and arguably attempt the most challenging of neo-Victorian forms: a creation of the past which is relevant to the present both in its concerns but also in its acknowledgement of its own constructed fictionality. The following chapter examines the pastiche neo-Victorian novel – concentrating particularly on Matthew Kneale's *English Passengers* as an example of an 'intelligent' neo-Victorian novel – in its attempt to construct a convincing 'Victorian' world which addresses the present by re-

connecting it to the past but which also plays to the modern reader's sense of postmodern irony inherent in such an undertaking.

### **3. The Pastiche Neo-Victorian Novel**

Curving back upon ourselves is as natural to us as it is to cosmic space or a wave of the sea. It does not entail jumping out of our own skin. Without such self-monitoring, we would not have survived as a species.<sup>1</sup>

All neo-Victorian novels curve back and many monitor, by examining contemporary areas of concern against a 'Victorian' backdrop, how we are surviving as a species. The object is to remain in one's own skin, at the same time as inhabiting someone else's skin or someone else's world, as a way of restoring a sense of connection and belonging, the reassurance of the continuity rather than the fragmentation of history, something akin to Baudrillard's assertion that what mankind requires is 'a visible past, a visible continuum, a visible myth of origin, which reassures us about our end.'<sup>2</sup> This is the 'pull' of the neo-Victorian novel, especially the pastiche neo-Victorian novel: reading now about the near past, just sufficiently removed to allow for the charm of distance but also close enough to provide a window onto the present and to suggest that human life is lived in a historical continuum rather than through historical rupture. The form that any neo-Victorian novel adopts is crucially important in playing to the potential for reassurance about the seamless nature of historical experience and it is the pastiche neo-Victorian novel set entirely, though almost inevitably, in some sense, problematically, in the nineteenth century which offers the most comfort through its immersion in a Victorian world which is nevertheless animated by twentieth and twenty-first-century concerns.

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<sup>1</sup> Terry Eagleton, *After Theory* (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 60.

<sup>2</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981; rpt. University of Michigan Press, 1994), p. 10.

These pastiche novels, and they make up the bulk of neo-Victorian novels, occupy an anomalous position: they employ various pastiche effects in order to provide connection to the past yet also feel obliged to allow the present to obtrude in ways which inevitably disrupt the coherence of the fabricated Victorian world. This anomaly becomes the problem each neo-Victorian pastiche novel faces: how to reference the Victorian while simultaneously engaging with the contemporary and managing this apparent contradiction. Pastiche is an elastic term. While all neo-Victorian novels contain elements of pastiche, the neo-Victorian novel set in its entirety in the nineteenth century is self-evidently the most extreme example of the technique. Split-narrative neo-Victorian novels or those which appropriate specific Victorian texts combine pastiche with the layering effects wrought by alternative twentieth or twenty-first-century narrative strands or the weight of comparison provided by an originating text. Broadly speaking, pastiche is concerned with some form of aesthetic imitation; it is therefore always historical because it inevitably references something which has preceded it. Neo-Victorian novels often pastiche presumed Victorian narrative conventions, including plot complexity and resolution and some form of omniscient storytelling; they may 'borrow' Victorian plots, characters and authors. It is common for the pastiche neo-Victorian novel to build a plot around iconic Victorian institutions like the prison (John MacLachlan Gray's *The Fiend in Human*), the asylum (Sarah Waters's *Fingersmith*), or the great house (Michael Cox's *The Meaning of Night*).

'Pastiche' as a critical term may be employed in derogatory fashion to describe works which are perceived as second-rate imitation or empty historical recreation, neutrally to describe playful or homage imitations or positively in parodic or effective historical recreations, and neo-Victorian pastiche novels fall into all these categories. At its best, pastiche is a knowing form of imitation,



combining likeness and discrepancy. Many pastiche neo-Victorian novels usually consciously, sometimes unconsciously, upset, by a variety of means, the traditional or stereotypical narrative expectations of the Victorian period. The imitation of canonical texts suggests dependence and subordination but many pastiche neo-Victorian novels aim for recreation or re-invigoration. Neo-Victorian novels in this category disrupt the possibility of an omniscient storytelling mode, introduce inappropriate or surprising material into a Victorian setting or make reference to time beyond the novel's remit as a 'hook' to the reader's present.

This chapter focuses on the pastiche neo-Victorian novel which locates its plot entirely in the nineteenth century. Many such novels were written from 1990 to 2010, and range from the commercial neo-Victorian novel which attempts to disavow any relation to the twentieth or twenty-first century, to the literary neo-Victorian novel which acknowledges the impossibility and, perhaps, the undesirability of keeping a modern consciousness or sensibility out of the novel. All pastiche neo-Victorian novels take up a position at some point along this continuum.

Many of these novels – again including the commercial and literary – focus on broadly female narratives and advertise themselves as such in their covers, even at the more literary end of the spectrum. Connoted to refer to narratives concerning the fragmentation or incompleteness of women's lives, covers depict women's torsos cropped at the neck (Gail Jones *Sixty Lights*, John MacClachlan Gray's *White Stone Day*, Judith Allnatt's *The Poet's Wife*), an emphasis on a specific female body part, often the hands (Valerie Martin's *Mary Reilly*, Clare Boylan's *Emma Brown*), ethereal depictions of child-women (Joanne Harris's *Sleep*, *Pale Sister*, Katie Roiphe's *Still She Haunts Me*) or two-dimensional 'Victorian' shadow cut-outs (Susan Barrett's *Fixing*

*Shadows*, Brian Thompson's *The Widow's Secret*). Two further book covers also illustrate how such visual material can be used in the service of both commercial and literary examples of the pastiche neo-Victorian novel. The covers of Faye L. Booth's *Cover the Mirrors* and Belinda Starling's *The Journal of Dora Damage* feature images which on immediate comparison appear very similar: a back view of a tightly corseted female. *Cover the Mirrors* shows the back of a woman from head to below the waist, her hair unpinned and facing away from the reader, displayed in a oval 'frame' entwined with greenery and against a background of striped wallpaper. The emphasis is on safe titillation in the manner of a Victorian/Edwardian pin-up. The novel stitches together some of the most predictable tropes of the pastiche neo-Victorian novel: a girl from the slums, sham spiritualism, risqué sexual encounters. The cover illustrates what the book delivers, a pastiche 'Victorian' wallow with added sex. The cover of *The Journal of Dora Damage* also features a corseted female form but now the woman is cropped at the shoulders and enclosed within a bookplate and the subheading 'Damages Bookbindery, Bindings of any Kind'. This bookcover suggests far more disturbing associations which are followed through in the text, including a total objectification of women and sado-masochistic sexual practice. The woman has become a book to be opened, her skin – potentially literally in Starling's novel – the site of 'the gendered... subject's effort to break free from physical and textual strangleholds'.<sup>3</sup> The comparison of these two bookcovers illustrates how the pastiche neo-Victorian novel can treat the same type of material, in these examples, female emancipation through work, relations between the sexes, yet produce outcomes of variable quality. As a result, the pastiche neo-Victorian novel is easily labelled as derivative, superficial and nostalgic, giving the reader the pleasure of reading the present into the safely-contained if luridly-presented past but ultimately doing little more than playing to a commercial market.

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<sup>3</sup> Heilmann and Llewellyn, *Neo-Victorianism*, p. 108.

However, ‘the higher end of neo-Victorianism seeks to illuminate its own trickeries in the process of seeking to articulate a “Victorian” voice, or character, or plot, or standpoint. It might be argued that this sets up an artificial “high” and “low” cultural divide between literary fiction and its popular culture equivalent; and the divide is clearly there.’<sup>4</sup> Thus far, neo-Victorian criticism has been reluctant to acknowledge the evaluative implications of dealing with a high/low cultural divide but this is likely to be one result of a development of neo-Victorian criticism. The analysis in this, and the following two chapters, of three differently structured but very self-aware novels, is one example staking out an aesthetic and evaluative distinction between self-conscious neo-Victorian novels and the also-rans. If popular culture neo-Victorian novels are content to pastiche Victorian novels while adding contemporary material to the mix, some neo-Victorian novels set in the nineteenth century put a strain on the reader’s credulity, forcing an awareness of belatedness or inauthenticity. Matthew Kneale’s *English Passengers* is a representative example of a ‘high-end’ pastiche neo-Victorian novel which at the same time advertises its postmodern credentials through disruptive narrative techniques. Using *English Passengers* as an example of an ‘intelligent’ pastiche neo-Victorian novel, this chapter will examine the ways and means by which the novel’s themes play to current anxieties about the legacy of past colonial misadventures and the continuing relevance of nineteenth-century evolutionary theory through an analysis of the mechanism of postmodern pastiche.

*English Passengers* is Matthew Kneale’s second neo-Victorian novel, the first being *Sweet Thames*. *Sweet Thames* links the private crime of incest with the public search to contain mid-

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 23.

century cholera outbreaks, by finding solutions to London's sewerage problem. In *Sweet Thames* Matthew Kneale marries hidden and criminal obsession with the struggle to effect necessary but costly social reforms; *English Passengers* has a much larger canvas both in terms of cast of characters and material scope but it too combines seemingly disparate narrative strands and scrutinises various forms of obsession – religious, anthropological, colonial – and the unavoidable fallout for all parties involved when the various storylines meet. The novel's title carries various ironies. The three 'passengers' represent three types of Englishman: the fundamentalist parson, the eccentric scientist and the dilettante young man about town. The ship's crew is Manx, politically and emotionally at odds with Englishness. The three men are passengers too in the sense that they are not worthwhile or useful, each representing a particular aspect of English superiority or supremacy. Essentially, two narratives collide across decades and continents. The framing narrative is the expedition of 1857, from England to Tasmania, whose self-appointed leader, the Reverend Geoffrey Wilson, intends to prove that Tasmania is the lost Garden of Eden. Enclosed within the expeditionary storyline is a darker account, again delivered by a range of competing voices, of the virtual extinction of the Tasmanian Aborigines by the colonising English and the establishment of Tasmanian penal colonies. Natives and convicts are both treated by the colonial classes as forced experiments in reformation into exemplary if inherently inferior English citizens. This narrative contains a wide range of voices including settlers of all classes, local government officials, visiting 'bigwigs' and most importantly the half-Aboriginal Peevay.

Peevay's story begins thirty years before the *Sincerity* embarks for Tasmania when his mother, the native woman Walyeric, is raped by the escaped convict, Jack Harp. Peevay's efforts to

negotiate an identity between his conflicting origins and gain acceptance from his mother, becomes emblematic of the wider clashes between empire and native people. Peevay's story becomes intimately linked with the calamitous expedition to locate the Garden of Eden when he is co-opted to act as guide. Both narratives deal with interfaces between various groups and various changing worlds and encompass race, colour, geography, language and class as power paradigms within a complex mix of confrontation.

This synopsis of the complex narrative arcs of *English Passengers* exposes the fundamental difficulty facing the pastiche neo-Victorian novel: how to construct a convincingly Victorian historical narrative which also has resonance or relevance for a contemporary readership both in its thematic concerns and in its construction. Split-narrative or re-write neo-Victorian novels trade directly on the juxtapositions between fictional or actual former narratives and competing or contrasting contemporary narratives. The *raison d'être* of these novels is to acknowledge and explore the similarities and discrepancies between experience then and experience now. The pastiche neo-Victorian novel set entirely in the Victorian period faces a much more difficult task, which is, firstly, to construct a credible Victorian world which additionally plays to contemporary issues and, secondly, to deliver this mix in a fashion which both acknowledges and manages the contradiction. The author and reader are obliged to collude to a greater or lesser extent in an awareness that the narrative is a simulation, a vehicle to carry ideas about the present as much as a faithful representation of the past. The result becomes what Baudrillard suggests is

‘an *invocation* of resemblance, but at the same time the flagrant proof of the disappearance of objects in their very representation.’<sup>5</sup>

Given this emphasis on the gap between credibility and credulity, it is understandable that many pastiche neo-Victorian novels (Sarah Waters’s *Affinity*, Victoria Glendinning’s *Electricity*) focus on the Victorian interest in spiritualism and the séance, using the attendant paraphernalia of smoke and mirrors as a metaphor for the neo-Victorian novel’s inherent ‘trickery’. A novel like *English Passengers* which purports to be a plausibly accurate though fictionalised account of an actual period of English colonial history can have no recourse to such stage effects and so faces a more difficult challenge. The ‘game’ played between text and reader in many neo-Victorian novels is still played in *English Passengers* but by different means and to a slightly different end; the emphasis here is less on the skill and enjoyment of author’s performance in pulling off the illusion and more to do with the nature of the tension created by the imposition of modern sensibilities on contentious historical material. The novel raises questions about whether contemporary attitudes intrude despite an author’s best efforts to exclude them or whether the novel represents an acceptance of the inevitability of this intrusion, an inability or unwillingness in the present fully to understand the past on its own terms.

*English Passengers* pastiches the conventions of the Victorian realist novel in its use of time-specific geographical settings, followed by the introduction of key characters in order to lull the reader into an assumption about embarking on a ‘traditional’ reading experience. The novel is composed entirely of Victorian voices, the narratives follow chronological lines and provide

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<sup>5</sup> Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, p. 45.

teleological resolution. However, despite the range of competing voices in *English Passengers*, many of them representatives of the English establishment, the balance of sympathy is undoubtedly with the Tasmanian underdogs in their spirited but ultimately hopeless attempt to retain their traditional way of life, a decidedly contemporary political standpoint. The emphasis in the novel now moves away from the realist tradition of documenting characters' struggles towards eventual success or enlightenment to focusing on their inherent character flaws and inability or unwillingness to cope with the situations in which they are placed. Here Kneale, like many other neo-Victorian authors, 'disrupts the implied conventions by treating the eminent protagonists with irreverence'<sup>6</sup> and the novel begins to move between various possible positions vis-à-vis the imposition of modern attitudes onto historical material: these could be deliberate or unintentional intrusions or some combination of the two. If they are deliberate, the reader needs to ask what these additions achieve; if they are not, the author has failed to understand his own motivations or to control his own material. The question is whether pastiche is being disrupted deliberately or accidentally and, subsequently, what the outcomes are of the disruption.

Matthew Kneale has said of *English Passengers* – and of *Sweet Thames* – 'My first interest was in the craziness of the Victorian British mind. I had written about Victorians being disastrously wrong-headed at home (in London) and so it seemed only right to look at them being disastrously wrong-headed overseas. Their record in Tasmania seemed especially atrocious, so that seemed the right place to start.'<sup>7</sup> This tends to suggest that Kneale had in mind from the outset the idea of angling his novel towards an expression of colonial misadventure and raises

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<sup>6</sup> Gutleben, *Nostalgic Postmodernism*, p. 98.

<sup>7</sup> Matthew Kneale, *Interview. A Conversation with Matthew Kneale*, [www.randomhouse.com/bold\\_type/0400/Kneale/interview.html](http://www.randomhouse.com/bold_type/0400/Kneale/interview.html). Accessed, 03/03/ 2010.

the question as to whether he is offering any further insights beyond the conventional. However, in another interview – and speaking of the novel’s polyphonous narrative technique – Kneale expresses the view: ‘I...hope it allows the reader to feel that they are discovering things for themselves along the way. If you’ve got a number of different voices who are conflicting then there’s less danger of forcing a message down people’s throats, which I was very wary of doing.’<sup>8</sup> This second quotation implies an even-handed, non-partisan approach which is somewhat at odds with the former. Although these two quotations come from interviews and the opinions expressed are not necessarily therefore as considered as if had they been written, they do offer interesting, and potentially conflicting, insights into the problems of legitimacy confronting texts which fictionalise historical events using a researched, factual setting and pastiche documentary styles, alongside a modern socio-political sensibility. In fact, the extracts from the two interviews illustrate the in-built quandary facing authors of neo-Victorian pastiche novels: how to manage the inevitable ‘presentism’ of such novels so that they can be read as more than mere mouthpieces for contemporary political attitudes while also offering the reader a space within which to consider and to make her/his own choices about historical events and people.

Kneale does not overtly force a particular point of view down the reader’s throat and the novel includes scenes of sometimes gratuitous violence committed by both sides, yet however wary he may have felt about imposing a message on his readers, this is the ultimate effect of the novel. The misguided and pig-headed arrogance of many of the English characters, and the bathetic nature of the scenes in which they are involved, indicates quite clearly where Kneale’s

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<sup>8</sup> Emma Yates, *Five minutes with Matthew Kneale*, (Books Unlimited, 18/01/2001) <http://books.guardian.co.uk/print/0,,4119401-106427,00.html>. Accessed, 22/01/ 2010.



sympathies lie. In Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, the choice between a conventionally romantic and an unresolved dénouement is forced on the reader by the toss of the twentieth-century narrator's coin. Ironically, in *English Passengers* the very proliferation of multiple points of view, coupled with a barely concealed disdain for Victorian colonial expansionism, nudges the reader towards a politically predictable standpoint. This is not to suggest, however, that the complexities of the interactions between different ethnic and class groups in Tasmania are portrayed entirely without subtlety.

One key entry demonstrates how various allegiances to country and authority and a sense of personal survival in a hostile land can influence even the most open-minded young Englishman. George Baines, employee of the New World Land Company writes a long letter home to his father which he knows he will never send. It details his growing awareness of the brutal conditions in an outback settlement where stock-keepers who murder the natives do so with the complicity of the company chairman. Any company employee who speaks out about the native inhabitants' treatment is ostracised and Baines eventually, after much soul-searching, acknowledges that he will side with men he knows, his own clan, even though he also knows many of them have less integrity than their victims. As the company chairman explains to Baines: 'not once in the short history of Van Dieman's Land has any white man been hanged for killing a black, regardless of what laws may say. What will result is a mighty outcry in England...Newspapers will shout. Shares will lose their value.'*(EP 73)*. The economic imperative is shown, in several neo-Victorian novels to be the driving force of empire and one which unites classes of Englishmen who would not have given each other the time of day in the old country – an alliance of ex-convicts, failed administrators and assorted misfits – in

unavoidable opposition to the local population. Baines' letter displays a sensibility which might appear to have little effect in denting the novel's conventional attack on colonialism; it also invites the criticism that Kneale has over-simplified the complexity of nineteenth-century international trade relations in order to reinforce his polemical standpoint. However, through the agency of the third 'English passenger' Timothy Renshaw, a more subtle and innovative angle on the colonial experience is developed; his importance to the novel is discussed later in this chapter.

### 3.1 Literary Pastiche: Imitation, Combination and Discrepancy

*English Passengers* exhibits a range of features pertaining to the practice of literary pastiche and it is through the intertextual resonances produced by echoes of former texts that Kneale's narrative is connected to a familial hierarchy of literary antecedents. Through the conscious or unconscious invocation of canonical forbears which Kneale's novel may imitate, diverge from or develop it becomes attached to 'a narrative enchainment of discourse'<sup>9</sup> and reinforces the fantasy that a historical truth is being offered which nevertheless includes the reader in its present-day aftermath. Apart from the return to the Victorian, the resuscitation of Victorian voices 'in the form of first-person narratives, letters, diaries or dialogues,'<sup>10</sup> and the resulting concomitant mix of admiration and criticism deployed by most pastiche neo-Victorian novels, *English Passengers* additionally references other literary works, borrowing from them and adapting them for its own ends. These are not whole texts which are embedded or plagiarised so much as echoes of former texts, imitated or combined in a form of literary *découpage* and having the effect of adding the novel to the span of literary history and thereby re-enforcing the central tenet of the pastiche neo-

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<sup>9</sup> Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, p. 47.

<sup>10</sup> Gutleben, *Nostalgic Postmodernism*, p. 11.

Victorian novel of continuity of history, in this instance through continuity of reference. The pleasure of considering possible echoes of former texts links the reader to a historical community of other readers and suggests a continuously evolving relationship, one of connection rather than dislocation.

Pastiche in *English Passengers* is less about homage towards earlier canonical texts and more to do with the carrying forward of ‘a medley of references.’<sup>11</sup> The effect is of a collage of intertexts which combine to form a web of associations rather than that of the dominating power and influence of a monolithic literary forbear, acknowledged or not. *English Passengers* does not acknowledge any of its literary influences, rather it is left to the individual reader to wonder if a former text has infiltrated the novel and if so, for what purpose, beyond the pleasure of association or simple recognition; the important question is how any intertexts have been developed into something new. The pastiche neo-Victorian novel set entirely in the nineteenth century usually tries to maintain the illusion of being an original and self-contained piece of work while, paradoxically, allowing a knowing dependence on earlier textual material. As a result, while the pastiche neo-Victorian novel often includes a preamble or postscript which acknowledges the influence of ‘factual’ material, it is less common for the ‘closed’ world of the pastiche to be breached by too obvious reference to former novels or other works of literature. This is less the case with the split-narrative neo-Victorian novel or, self-evidently, the neo-Victorian novel dependent on a Victorian Ur-text which may name, allude to or hint at an association with a literary ancestor. Examples of both will be discussed in later chapters.

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<sup>11</sup> Julie Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 5.

*English Passengers* concentrates on three central motifs in the development of its thesis – the island experience, the epic journey and the colonial/postcolonial debate – and each of these draws on literary antecedents. Firstly, *English Passengers* absorbs and modifies ideas for characters, setting and themes of identity and betrayal, language and hierarchy from *The Tempest*. *The Tempest* provides an obvious point of literary reference for a postcolonial pastiche neo-Victorian novel, given the play’s canonical position in postcolonial studies in the late twentieth century, ‘harnessed as it was in performance and revisionary writing to think about both the discovery of the New World of the Americas and the British imperial project in Africa and elsewhere.’<sup>12</sup> Kneale’s novel re-examines and inverts the binaries of freedom and slavery, civilisation and savagery and explores themes of travel, exploration, and competing systems of belief. What *English Passengers* borrows from *The Tempest* is an island setting where representatives from oppositional cultures are brought into conflict through diametrically opposed philosophical standpoints with regard to power and influence and what constitutes the civilised life. The multiplicity of voices in *English Passengers* is key here in that it disallows a monologic, Eurocentric version of colonisation; in fact the privileged voices are those of the geographically and socially marginal ship’s captain, Kewley and the mixed race Peevay, both of whom, notably, are bilingual. What *English Passengers* develops from *The Tempest* is the potential for a different kind of future, one which acknowledges the changes wrought by colonisation but which rejects the idea of return to the site of colonial power.

In *English Passengers*, *The Tempest*’s Prospero as a proto-colonialist is suggested by the triumvirate of the administrator Robson, Dr Potter and the Reverend Wilson, all of whom use

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 52.

their sojourn on the island to pursue their own ends from within the context of the overarching power paradigm of the British Empire. Here, Kneale's somewhat instrumental rendering of the Prospero figure leads to a simplistic range of exemplars of British idiosyncrasy. Robson's character is based on the real life George Augustus Robinson who carried out one of the most high profile but subsequently notorious experiments with native people in the history of the empire. As a key figure in the ethnic cleansing of indigenous people from parts of Tasmania coveted by British settlers, Robinson provides contemporary writers 'with a lens through which to refract colonial history and postcolonial anxieties.'<sup>13</sup> As Prospero attempts to 'civilise' Caliban, Robson attempts to bring the depleted remnants of the Tasmanian aboriginals to God, teaches them English, gets them to wear western clothes and plans to house them in European style piazzas, thereby stripping them of all references to their own world. In the same way that *The Tempest's* Miranda goads Caliban with his ignorance before she taught him English, so Robson has learned the natives' language but refuses to let them use it, including their own names.

Where Robson represents bureaucracy and ethnic cleansing, Potter stands for scientific fascism. His work *The Destiny of Nations* is based loosely on the writings of Robert Knox (*The Races of Men*.1850), anatomist, surgeon and associate of the grave robbers Burke and Hare. In the chapter 'On the Future Fate of the Races of Men', Potter writes of the Tasmanians: 'The dominating characteristic of the Black Type being barbarism, he has no comprehension of ideas, of enterprise, or time, and yet he cannot be regarded as harmless...he is possessed of a brutish cunning...Worse, he is filled with a malevolent envy of those races who have...developed the

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<sup>13</sup> Anna Johnston, 'George Augustus Robinson, the 'Great Conciliator': Colonial Celebrity and its Postcolonial Aftermath', *Postcolonial Studies*, 12: 2 (2009), 153-172, p. 153.

wondrous fruits of civilization.’ (EP 406). Potter echoes the attitude of the ruling white elite which cannot comprehend native self-sufficiency, the intimate relationship to terrain and the acquired skills to live unencumbered by houses and clothing. Potter represents an extreme version of survival of the fittest whereas Wilson, the third potential Prospero, represents religious imperialist intolerance. Unable to accommodate any modification of a strictly Biblical account of the earth’s origins, he likens the expedition to establish Eden in Tasmania to the need to impose British rule in India against the murderous rebels, another of Kneale’s shorthand methods of expressing, and caricaturing, the complex relations between nineteenth-century colonial administrators and missionaries: ‘If they were attempting to defend the rule of civilization, we were endeavouring to defend the very rock upon which was built that civilization: the Scriptures themselves.’ (EP 40).

Kneale combines the various excesses of these three men – a mania for control and the imposition of western values, scientific extremism and creationist religious belief – to explore ‘a political or ethical commitment...to re-interpret a source text.’<sup>14</sup> It is the idea of political or ethical commitment which is of importance here, rather than a strict adherence to a re-shaping of a source text, Kneale’s intertextual musing on *The Tempest* being an application of themes of travel, power politics and class to a site of nineteenth-century colonial expansion. That the character of Robson also draws on the colonial administrator Robinson and Potter’s writings echo those of Robert Knox indicates that Kneale’s references combine the literary and the historical in a move towards the potential for contemporary interpretation and resolution of these various strands. However, this compilation of references also underscores the political impetus

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<sup>14</sup> Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation*, p.2.

behind Kneale's narrative. The exposition of the characters of Robson, Potter and Wilson suggests a composite of a simplified Prospero figure, used for the purposes of proselytising for a particular political standpoint.

The character of Peevay is more successfully developed from his forbear from *The Tempest*: '[u]nlike his famous precursor he is a hybrid not of a devil and a witch but of a depraved English convict and an aboriginal amazon warrior, an equally problematic inheritance.'<sup>15</sup> Like Caliban, Peevay is taught the language and religion of the master race. Again like Caliban, at various points in the narrative he is cast as a monster, though the outcome of a rape rather than a would-be rapist. A hybrid with blond hair and dark skin, he is spurned by his mother, has an uneasy relationship with his tribe and has his own Frankenstein moment when he sees his reflection in a pool of water. His relationship with his island's colonisers is complex and changeable, moving from bemused admiration through to vengeful hatred. It is only at the end of the novel that he finds peace when he forms a community with fellow hybrids. Where Robson, Potter and Wilson each represent a strand of the political power base Kneale is criticising, Peevay negotiates his life alongside various foreign agencies and eventually points to the possibility of a new politics beyond the remit of Kneale's intertextual sources. The parallels between Shakespeare's *Tempest* and Matthew Kneale's *English Passengers* include comparisons between the competing cultures of island life and the wider world and the effect of imposing alien religion or language on indigenous people. Kneale's novelistic pastiche of *The Tempest* offers the various Prosperos no mercy or second chance while his Caliban is not given his freedom so much as he finds a way to

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<sup>15</sup> Michael L. Ross, 'Some Subtleties of the Isle: Matthew Kneale's *Anti-Tempest*', in *Race Riots. Comedy and Ethnicity in Modern British Fiction*, ed. Michael L. Ross (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2006), p. 258.

live with the complications of his heritage. In line with the practice of pastiche, *English Passengers* imitates aspects of the source text and combines these elements with influences from other sources in order to highlight similarities and differences and suggest something new. Kneale chooses to offer a possible solution to the problem that both he and Shakespeare explore suggesting that while Shakespeare's text is, in this instance, the more polyvocal text, Kneale is indicating a way forward in a world becoming increasingly globalised.

*English Passengers* absorbs and re-arranges influences from *The Tempest* for the island stages of the novel but for the sea journey to Tasmania appears to have been influenced by a second intertext, William Golding's *Rites of Passage* (1980). *Rites of Passage* is a structurally simpler novel than *English Passengers*. The sea journey is the sole setting and instead of multiple voices *Rites of Passage* is comprised of two narrations, the journal of Edmund Talbot, an upper class Englishman, on his way to Australia to take up a position as an assistant governor and the letter the Reverend Colley writes to his sister back in England. Both men detail their observations about life on board, Talbot with the effortless superiority that befits his class, Colley with the self deprecation that comes from an awareness of his lowlier status, combined with an excessive emphasis on the dignity of his calling. In *English Passengers* the two key narratives of Potter and Wilson jostle together and against each other for the duration of the novel. In *Rites of Passage* Colley's letter is wrapped around by Talbot's journal and this is a key difference between the two novels. Potter and Wilson do not develop or change; the purpose of their narratives is to represent two oppositional poles, one religious, one scientific. The two men will have little influence on each other because the purpose of each is to maintain an unwavering belief in their particular worldview. In *Rites of Passage*, Talbot and Colley also each represent a specific



version of Englishness, born from the life expectations engendered by specific gradations of class but each man is writing for a specific reader, Colley for a loved sister and Talbot for his godfather. These connections result in documents which personalise each man's description of his fellow passengers and his struggles with the indignities of life on board and afford the reader an understanding of how events spiral out of control and affect each man. Colley's lack of sophistication, his anomalous position as a minister of the church on an anti-clerical vessel and his lack of awareness of his latent homosexuality culminate in a tragedy that will see him die, literally, of shame. His death and its aftermath do have the effect of a rite of passage on Talbot as the final part of his journal demonstrates. He will continue with his career in the service of queen and country, his confidence in the superiority of his class largely undented but with the realisation that his own behaviour has been suspect and his judgement with regard to his fellow passengers inappropriate or lacking in compassion.

*English Passengers'* borrowing from *Rites of Passage* includes the idea of the microcosm of the sea voyage and the juxtaposition of two written accounts of the journey. Pastiche imitates and often combines references from various sources but it also diverges from its influences. *English Passengers* specifically adapts settings and characters from *Rites of Passage* and *The Tempest* but it also adds a third 'English passenger', the botanist Timothy Renshaw, who provides an alternative link between sea and island locations and an alternative route to a potential future, beyond the exigencies of class, race and religion. He – and, to a lesser extent, Peevay – carry the weight of Kneale's combining of intertexts to produce something new and original. The pastiche neo-Victorian novel frequently carries a political imperative and Renshaw's role and importance

is to carry Kneale's vision of a possible world beyond dogmatic belief and conquest. His contribution to the novel is discussed later.

### 3.2 The Politics of Pastiche

The imposition of present-day cultural attitudes upon historical events or people raises questions about the ethics of appropriation. Specifically, the political or socio-political agendas of pastiche neo-Victorian authors often bring with them accusations of inappropriate treatment of sensitive material, or of playing to the liberal inclinations of the 'chattering classes'. The first of these charges is more easily dealt with than the second, both with regard to the pastiche neo-Victorian novel in general and *English Passengers* in particular. Marie-Luise Kohlke has interrogated the purpose of novels like *English Passengers* and, especially, Julian Rathbone's *The Mutiny*, on the grounds that it is morally questionable to resurrect episodes of historical violence and trauma. Kohlke links *English Passengers* with Beryl Bainbridge's *Master Georgie* and Rathbone's *The Mutiny* to make a case for the postcolonial neo-Victorian novel's fascination with, 'nineteenth-century violent crime and the exploitations of the sex-trade, the institutionalised brutality of penitentiaries and asylums, epidemics and famines, the horrors of slavery and imperialist colonisation, massacres and genocide, civil and international wars.'<sup>16</sup> Kohlke's thesis that such depictions of violence are voyeuristic and consumerist is especially valid in the context of Rathbone's novel, where an occasional, disembodied, authorial voice from the present sacrifices his fictional characters in gory fashion, in order to flesh out the main historical events of the Indian Mutiny but in other examples of the postcolonial neo-Victorian novel, *English Passengers* included, the impetus is more towards present-day apology for historical crimes. To add a

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<sup>16</sup> Marie-Luise Kohlke, 'Sexation and the Neo-Victorian Novel', p. 1.

contiguous, and more exacting line of enquiry to Kohlke's argument that what is in play here is a kind of nostalgia for posthumous violence, is the aesthetic necessity for pastiche as a form to distinguish itself from its referents through divergence of some kind, 'by discrepancy, by something inconsistent or inappropriate in an aspect of the writing.'<sup>17</sup> *English Passengers, The Mutiny* and *Master Georgie* inject scenes of shocking violence into their narratives in order to produce an effect of 'likeness, deformation and discrepancy' against their Victorian progenitors but in doing so not only pose an ethical question but also the question: what is this pastiche for?

Doubts about the ethics of representing colonial trauma are clearly a response to Spivak's famous article 'Can the Subaltern Speak?'<sup>18</sup> which queries the ability of the subaltern, especially the female Hindu widow, to be representable rather than forever silenced. 'We ask if it is better to avoid the subject altogether and forget them, or give them a voice, even if it means recreating their humiliation and pain.'<sup>19</sup> In *English Passengers*, Kneale tackles this issue head on through the character of Walyeric, Peevay's mother, who is not only voluble but a warrior leader of her people and based on a real Tasmanian aborigine, though in Spivak's analysis this would only place Kneale alongside other first world 'intellectuals' keen to represent 'the Other'. Neo-Victorian novels in general, including postcolonial novels, tend to make a point of taking an opposing view to Spivak's, especially when writing about the lives of women in the nineteenth century, at home and abroad. Many neo-Victorian novels luxuriate in exposés of the cruelties of women's lives – enforced prostitution, tyrannical fathers and husbands, death by boredom or

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<sup>17</sup> Richard Dyer, *Pastiche* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), p. 58.

<sup>18</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', in *The Post-Colonial Reader*, eds. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, Helen Tiffin (London: Routledge, 1995).

<sup>19</sup> Celia Wallhead, 'To Voice or not to Voice the Tasmanian Aborigines: Novels by Matthew Kneale and Richard Flanagan', *Revista Estudios Ingleses*, 16 (2003), 6-35, p. 6.

frustration – and neo-Victorian authors, Sarah Waters in particular, are on record as saying that one purpose of their novels is to fill gaps in the historical record and give a voice to otherwise unrecorded lives. Novels such as *Master Georgie* and *English Passengers* attempt to do the same for victims of foreign conflicts and Kneale's adaptation of a third intertext, Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902), illustrates that this is his intention.

Points of comparison between *Heart of Darkness* and *English Passengers* are numerous: the sea voyage; the big idea of conquest whether for ivory, territory, Eden or specimens; the taking of local women; the white man as supernatural being; the spread of disease. Both novels focus on the behaviour of white men in virgin territories, set free from the constraints of polite society, but here there is a divergence. Marlowe, despite being appalled by Kurtz' manipulation of the local population, the heads on spikes surrounding his hut and the stockpiles of ivory, is still prepared to preserve the memory of the great man intact, allowing Kurtz' fiancée to believe he died a saintly representative of a largely benevolent empire. In *English Passengers* by contrast, white and black men in Tasmania tell their own stories. Kneale gives Tasmanians a voice and compares them with Europeans, especially convicts, who are also suffering displacement and victimisation. As with neo-Victorian novels which treat of the 'missing' lives of nineteenth century women, Kneale's novel fills a gap in the historical record: 'Kneale's objective is to tell the "truth" about the Aborigines' fate, a story that has been silenced or glossed over in the history books.'<sup>20</sup> However, if *English Passengers* does not fail on an ethical level, its pastiche borrowings from *Heart of Darkness* are in some respects less successful on an aesthetic level. Potter and Wilson can be allowed to die or disappear as the reader has no investment in their

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<sup>20</sup> Celia Wallhead, 'To Voice or not to Voice', p. 24.

survival. Characters in *Heart of Darkness* are complex and multi-dimensional; Potter and Wilson by contrast are used as mouthpieces for a particular worldview. The pastiche neo-Victorian novel applies a modern political consciousness to historical material; it provides the reader with a point of entry into a recent historical period and a connection to it. If it can do more than this it also provides a continuation into the future as well as a route backwards into the past, if it cannot it merely exposes historical attitudes which are now considered at best outmoded, at worst inappropriate, in an easy bid for the liberal vote.

In *English Passengers* this purpose of creating a relationship between past events and future possibilities is carried by the themes of hybridity and change and through the characters Peevay and Timothy Renshaw. Kneale's combination of influences from a variety of intertexts culminates in his vision of a potentially new and positive outcome for some of his characters and for a future society. Kneale's narrative does not oblige the reader to recognise or acknowledge its intertexts; the sealed world of the pastiche would be easily breached by too obvious literary intrusions. However, the pleasure, for some readers, of the possibility that the novel absorbs resonances from other texts suggests that the novel is polyvocal in its attitude to its audience as well as its characters. Some readers will take the key themes of the journey, the island and the new territory forward to see what Kneale can do with this material that is new. It is at this point that Kneale moves away from the contradictions inherent in the pastiche neo-Victorian novel – the combination of a necessarily restricted version of, in this case, Victorian imperialism, expressed via modern sensibility – towards a genuinely novel vision of an alternative way of living.

### 3.3 English Passengers: the Darwinian Legacy

The polyphonic narrative of *English Passengers* is only one aspect of the novel's consideration of the nature and value of hybridity. Like other postcolonial neo-Victorian novels, *English Passengers* is preoccupied 'with the in-betweenness, diasporas, mobility and cross-overs of ideas and identities created by colonialism.'<sup>21</sup> *English Passengers* is a melting pot of a novel where a diverse range of characters, speaking different languages, some of whom stay for the duration of the novel, some of whom speak or write briefly and then disappear, converge across continents and the early decades of the nineteenth century. Their interactions – the struggle for supremacy and imposition of alien belief systems – lead to new alignments and allegiances and rarely to the outcomes envisaged by the protagonists. This is a novel which considers post-Darwinian concepts of chance and change, men in a version of a state of nature versus self-styled civilised men and the fixity or fluidity of belief.

The novel begins with the Reverend Wilson's advertisement 'A Proof against the Atheisms of Geology' and is immediately followed by Captain Illiam Quillian Kewley's first entry which muses on cause and effect, the unfathomability of life, our lack of control over events and how they will impact upon us: 'Say a man catches a bullet through his skull in somebody's war, so where's the beginning of that?' (*EP* 1). The contrast between the two opening passages is stark. Wilson's language emphasises certainty – 'proof', 'truth', 'conclusively', 'explanation' – but his advertisement is in reality a response to his own fears in the face of new theories about the evolution of the earth and its species being propounded by godless geologists. If his faith is taken away from him he has nothing; most particularly he would lose his sense of entitlement as an

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<sup>21</sup> Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, p. 145.

Englishman and a Christian and the security of his position in the pecking order of nations. The Manxman and buccaneer Kewley, by contrast, faces life's uncertainties with equanimity; he reacts to whatever mishaps occur with cunning and insouciant good humour. Wilson's fate is to end his days living as hermit on the Isle of Wight: 'Though he cannot so much as remember his own name...show him any piece of rock or mineral, however rare, and he will name it at once. He is never wrong.' (EP 448). Able to name rocks, Wilson was never willing to understand their significance. He is himself a fossil.

If Wilson represents bigoted fundamentalist Christianity, Potter represents something even more sinister, a social Darwinist view of humanity. Within the narrative, Potter's fate is appropriately ironic. He is accidentally killed during the *Sincerity's* final moments and later displayed as one of his own specimens – 'Unknown male presumed Tasmanian aborigine Possible victim of human sacrifice' (EP 454) – at an exhibition at The Royal College of Surgeons. Having regarded Tasmanian natives as barely human, Potter's remains are indistinguishable from a Tasmanian skeleton, giving the lie to his racist hierarchy. However, his magnum opus, *The Destiny of Nations*, a treatise on the superiority of the white race and the Saxon strain in particular, survives. In the Epilogue to *English Passengers* Matthew Kneale credits the disgraced surgeon Robert Knox's 1850 text *The Races of Men*, on which Potter's journal is based, with being the precursor to Hitler's *Mein Kampf* (1925-6). 'Knox was among the first writers to claim that the various races of mankind were actually different species...while it will come as little surprise that he proposed that the Saxon, of England, was among the most exalted.' (EP 456). There seems little doubt that Kneale uses Potter as a mouthpiece for ideas about eugenics and the more rightwing applications of natural selection that were circulating from the middle decades of the

nineteenth-century and which culminated in the death camps of the Second World War. He overtly wishes to indicate the importance of what Mariadele Boccardi refers to as ‘the ideological function of texts in the shaping and understanding of national and individual identity, particularly when confronting the otherness of an alien land and culture’<sup>22</sup> but covertly or inadvertently allows his pastiche to be hijacked by a clumsily included reference. This is Kneale stepping outside the text, as many neo-Victorian novelists do, to disrupt, albeit at the end of the novel, the possibility of the novel’s autonomy; the fictional Potter comes to a sticky end but his writings transmute into a relationship with twentieth-century fascism. The Epilogue to *English Passengers* reinforces the reader’s suspicion that Kneale, while claiming to represent the era of the colonisation of Tasmania as truthfully and clearly as possible, has been unable to avoid overlaying his narrative with obtrusive political propagandising, the overall effect of the undertow of literary and documentary intertexts pushing the narrative towards a conventionally safe interpretation of historical events. Kneale’s use of Wilson and Potter as opposing versions of Victorian eccentricity and bigotry is largely conventional and overly simplistic. However, Timothy Renshaw offers something more, a character from a historical pastiche who provides a convincing bridge between the nineteenth-century world and a potential future.

It is surprising that in other discussions of *English Passengers* little comment has been made about the expedition’s dilettante botanist, since he offers a third way after the twin manias of Wilson’s and Potter’s religious and scientific excesses and provides a convincing focus for a Darwinian reading of the novel. Wilson’s and Potter’s voices document the growing competition between them for the domination and success of each individual world view, while Renshaw on

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<sup>22</sup> Mariadele Boccardi, *The Contemporary British Historical Novel. Representation, Nation, Empire* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 25.



the other hand honestly describes his own nature and looks out to the wider world as he travels through it. Renshaw adapts to whatever the circumstances happen to be and gradually finds a way he can fit with the world rather than the other way round. In this, Renshaw's character bears comparison with Captain Kewley; neither man proselytises for any particular creed and each attempts to make the best of circumstances. They accept the role of chance in life and adapt. Renshaw's first entry describes how Wilson's improving on-deck sermon to the crew is disrupted by attack from pirates, thus giving the subordinate character the voice to deflate the pomposity of a more senior character. It is Renshaw too who gets to describe Potter's alternative sermon on animal magnetism during which Potter attempts to mesmerise the ship's pig. 'So it was that the ship became quite a library of scribbling, as my two colleagues worked upon their discourses like swordsmen sharpening their blades...as if to demonstrate the superiority of his work over the other's.' (*EP* 157). Through the repeated use of the term 'discourse' in this section, Kneale, through Renshaw's voice, indicates the deliberate foregrounding of oppositional philosophies and by giving Renshaw the descriptions of Wilson's and Potter's comeuppance – the mesmerising of the pig does not go well – Kneale paves the way for Renshaw's fate in the novel to be seen as an alternative to Wilson's religious zeal and Potter's scientific rigidity.

It is Renshaw who is most able to blend with his surroundings: 'There was something curiously satisfying about an existence so simple, where all that was required was careful watchfulness... and which was rewarded at dusk with a fine sense of satisfaction of limbs stretched and miles traversed.' (*EP* 373). When the final showdown comes between Wilson and Potter, Renshaw saves the guide Peevay's life. This act of selfless courage from one of the master-race to one of the conquered, leads to Renshaw's life being saved, literally and metaphorically. After several

days alone and injured in the Tasmanian wilderness – the quasi-religious imagery is unmistakable – Renshaw is granted two visions. In the first he believes he sees his parents and brother come to discuss his imminent demise. He rejects them and staggers on to safety and his second vision, an earthly Garden of Eden. ‘How strange it was though! Everywhere I looked, you see – on walls, atop stones, and stood upon the lawn – were winged angels, dozens of them, all regarding me with smiling faces.’ (EP 405). The irony of Renshaw’s situation cannot be lost on the reader: he finds his Garden of Eden when he was not looking for one, in the outback which Peevay has always known as ‘the world’. Renshaw’s final entry details how he is nursed back to health by a convict’s daughter, appropriately named Sheppard – it is her father who had carved the angels – and how he is using his botanist’s training on the farm. The reader is left to assume he has put England, family and class behind him and will make a new life with a new breed of people, working class immigrants and ex-convicts now integrated into the landscape of Tasmania.

It is not an entirely idyllic picture. Renshaw notices that the Sheppard family, so recently tainted by convict status, are partially shunned at the local church; the Sheppards’ garden represents a complex mix of impulses: a staking out of a piece of territory which indicates both a retreat from and a representation of the former existence in the old world which has rejected them. However, the Sheppards’ garden also provides a new model of Eden, the garden achieved after rather than before the fall. If Wilson had hoped to find Eden in order to shore up nostalgic visions of a lost English identity, Renshaw is rewarded for putting aside all the effects and benefits of the exclusivity of his birth – class superiority, membership of the ‘English’ club – and embracing choice and chance. Renshaw’s narrative underlines *English Passengers*’ emphasis on the

influence of chance in human affairs, rather than the successful working of any rigid organisational system, religious, scientific or otherwise. The narrative threads of *English Passengers* suggest that events happen randomly and cause outcomes that none of the protagonists could have foreseen or planned. Episodes which are concerned with English characters and their schemes and systems for organising the world and subduing the natives are juxtaposed by events of a more haphazard and subversive nature which the English usually fail entirely to comprehend. In this way, the novel reinforces notions of chance as the main determinant in human existence, where survival depends on avoiding fossilisation. The pastiche here provides a convincing link between historical events, changing philosophical viewpoints and the world of the future.

### 3.4 Hybridity and the Neo-Victorian Novel

As well as embedding the idea of chance within plot organisation, *English Passengers* also examines a further Darwinian concept, that of hybridity, through both the cultural and physical hybridisation of Peevay and his half brother Tayaleah. Tayaleah's fictional story is based on fact. Tayaleah is renamed George Vandiemann – for the English king and his native land – and sent to England to be educated. On his return to Tasmania he is disowned by his mother Walyeric for his contamination by English customs and language, as she has disowned Peevay for his white blood. Peevay's jealousy of his brother's greater facility in this alien language is combined with confusion about his own and Tayaleah's torn loyalties: 'He did CRAFTS and he was FARMER. Then he did GIVING THINGS FOR COINS, whose name was MARKET, and got a hat called STRAW...I supposed he must be pleased at this fine greatness but... mostly he was just sad, like he was some great puzzle to confound.' (EP 256). What Peevay is not fully aware of himself, is

that his Pidgin idiolect represents his strength, his ability to fashion something unique to himself from a combination of his own and others' languages. Tayaleah never recovers from his sense of cultural dislocation and commits suicide; the real Tayaleah/George Vandiemán was also returned to Tasmania after his visit to England but fell sick and died. It is Matthew Kneale who fleshes out the factual story with a polemic about the dangers of combining native innocence and western education. The final pages of *English Passengers* are given over to a full copy of George Vandiemán's school report detailing George's intelligent response to his lessons and even more tellingly, his teacher's views about the inherent equality of nations: 'I feel much gratified in having had this boy with me...as it confirms me more in the opinion that I have long cherished: that Man is on all parts of the globe the same; being a free agent, he may mould himself to excellence or debase himself below the brute, & that education, government and customs are the principal causes of the distinctions among nations.' (EP 457). The actual George Vandiemán returns home, sickens and dies; the fictional George is treated as a quaint novelty by the English and as an outcast by his own kind. For Tayaleah, black physiology and white culture produce disaster as they do for other children 'adopted' by the white colonisers.

Through the plotlines of Peevay and Tayaleah, Matthew Kneale uses his pastiche to join the postcolonial debate about the fixity or fluidity of relationship between coloniser and colonised and the ability or otherwise to negotiate the limits of the boundaries existing between the two, thereby making relevant the fictionalised events of the past to continuing negotiations in the present. Neo-Victorian pastiche colonial novels absorb two key debates from postcolonial theory. The first is the question of the silence of the subaltern and here Kneale, in common with other neo-Victorian authors, takes the view that the subaltern cannot and should not remain

silent. The second debate relates to questions of hybridisation: to what extent can the colonised subvert their colonisation; by what means do the forces of colonial power shift over time; what kinds of ambivalent forms will result from hybridisation?

If the effect of colonial power is seen to be the *production* of hybridization rather than the noisy command of colonialist authority or the silent repression of native traditions, then an important change of perspective occurs. It reveals the ambivalence at the source of traditional discourses on authority and enables a form of subversion, founded on that uncertainty, that turns the discursive conditions of dominance into the grounds of intervention.<sup>23</sup>

*English Passengers* deals with the effects of colonial power by subverting the authority of the ruling class and instead celebrating Peevay's survival as a representative of the borderland between white and black, his creolisation of the English he has been taught both a debased form of the mother tongue but also a vibrant, powerful rejection of the white man's hypocrisy.

Richard Flanagan's *Wanting* is another neo-Victorian novel which deals with the English colonisation of Tasmania, including the fate of the indigenous population. It takes up the real story of the native girl Mathinna, adopted by Lady Jane and Sir John Franklin, the governor of Tasmania from 1836 to 1843. Mathinna is educated by the Franklins but subsequently is left in an orphanage on their return to England. In both factual records and in the novel, Mathinna's fate is to die an early death caused at least in part by dissolute living after her abandonment. Tayaleah and Mathinna are both black children exposed to white culture, a form of hybridity which produced tragedy in their lives and in their fictional representations. Both children have spent the early years of their lives looked after by at least one natural parent and have been brought up within their native cultural community, even though this is circumscribed by the encroaching colonisers. The fictional Peevay however, is a true hybrid who from the first has had to negotiate

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<sup>23</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, 'Signs Taken for Wonders', in *The Postcolonial Reader*, eds. Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin, p. 35.

living on the edge of or between cultures, simultaneously placed within several discourses of power relating to blood, race, colour, language and education. Happily for him, after a lifetime oscillating between the opposing poles of his mixed inheritance and mixed language skills, Peevay is granted, like Renshaw, the possibility of an earthly Garden of Eden, in Peevay's case, a community of hybrids like himself. He returns to the old ways of hunting and fishing, along with his extended family of his own father's various descendants and children of other liaisons between white sealers and black native women, 'Peevay's Mob'. 'The peaceful co-existence of this variegated group offers Peevay an alternative paradise to either the Biblical one that is no more than an expression of colonial power or the one he knew as a child and lost with colonisation.'<sup>24</sup> A group of people of every shade from nearly black to nearly white co-exist and develop a community based on native ways of managing the environment. Peevay's story links the past of Tasmania's Aboriginal natives with the shared present between natives, settlers and convicts. In this way, Peevay's story celebrates hybridity, not only of blood but also of manners, as a potentially new starting position for the future society of Tasmania.

Hybridity in *English Passengers* is not only expressed through the circumstances of major characters but also through the novel's structure. The dual narrative, the one dating from the 1820s and detailing the impact on Tasmania and its inhabitants of the arrival of convicts in their midst, and the other from the 1850s, the Garden of Eden mission, converge to produce further consequences for the protagonists. Both narratives, singly and together, emphasise the inescapable importance of the past for the interactions of the present and the outcomes of the future. The two tier narrative, both contained within the historical pastiche, underlines the

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<sup>24</sup> Mariadele Boccardi, *The Contemporary British Historical Novel*, p. 123.

interconnected but unpredictable results of decisions made and actions taken in one context which will have implications for characters in another time and geographical place, suggesting an opening up to the future while remaining embedded in the past. ‘The best post-colonial novels...display a constant duplex or indeed multiplex effect, the literary equivalent of globalisation.’<sup>25</sup> Giles Foden’s comments on the links between the colonised and the colonisers in Richard Flanagan’s *Wanting*, apply even more accurately to *English Passengers*, particularly given the multiple entries which describe life at sea for both crew and passengers, underlining the sheer physicality of getting from England to Tasmania and back again and the unforeseen consequences which will stem from these journies.

### 3.5 Polyphony Disrupts Pastiche

If plot structure in *English Passengers* produces layering effects from the convergence of different narrative threads, so too does the use of multiple narrators. A multiplicity of voices and styles of presentation – internal monologue, letter, report, journal entry – serves to convey the conflictual nature of the pastiche neo-Victorian novel which re-examines ‘Victorian’ material in the present. Ania Loomba’s comment that ‘While many critics believe that post-modern ideas of multiplicity and fragmentation make the standpoint of marginalised historical subjects visible, others argue that post-modernism carries these ideas to the extreme so that we cannot understand historical dynamics at all’<sup>26</sup> is useful in an assessment of *English Passengers*’s inevitably contradictory examination of nineteenth-century Tasmanian colonisation. The novel certainly makes visible marginalised historical subjects but imbues historical events with a modern consciousness. *English Passengers*’s fragmented narrative strategy allows the subaltern Peevay’s

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<sup>25</sup> Giles Foden, *Wanting* by Richard Flanagan, Review in *The Guardian*, 26/09/ 2009.

<sup>26</sup> Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, p. 200.

voice to be heard, ridicules the voices of the master race and underwrites contemporary awareness of the collapse of empire, creating a version of historical dynamics which plays to contemporary anxiety about colonial imperialism. This mix of realism and narrative plurality produces a situation where 'it is as if the contemporary reader had side by side a conventional (Victorian) version of history and a subversive (modern) account of the events'<sup>27</sup>, which hints at Britain's future decline. The reader brings an awareness of Britain's contemporary standing in the world to an understanding of either the ridiculous or the sinister in Wilson's and Potter's self aggrandisement and assumption of superiority. This subversive, modern account is particularly complicated by the inclusion of Kneale's Epilogue which explains the factual material included in the narrative, notably the stealing of Aboriginal women, the cruelties of the penal system and details actual historical characters, such as Walyeric and George Vandiemann, whose school report provides the final section of the Epilogue. The numerous narrators of the fictional novel give way finally to an actual voice from the past but a voice which expresses the necessity for understanding and accepting equality between nations and peoples. Here it is the Victorian voice which expresses the modern point of view. Boccardi suggests that, '[the] abruptness of the transition from fiction to fact confirms the author's desire to avoid the consolations and mystifications of seamless connections between events, narrative strategies and historical periods as they are operated by an overarching imaginative reconstruction.'<sup>28</sup> A more convincing reading, however, is that Kneale is suggesting, yet again, that contemporary problems stem from historical events. The connection between the two is not necessarily direct and the novel's polyphonic narration generates as many contradictions as it resolves.

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<sup>27</sup> Christian Gutleben, *Nostalgic Postmodernism*, p. 141.

<sup>28</sup> Mariadele Boccardi, *The Contemporary British Historical Novel*, p. 106.



Kneale does eschew the idea of ‘seamless’ connections between events and periods as Boccardi suggests, but he nevertheless overwhelmingly emphasises that connections do exist and do matter, that what happened in the past will impact on what happens in the future. The novel focuses on cause and effect, a generalised awareness that new situations are born from unlikely liaisons and connections between people and continents. The novel concentrates on random, chance encounters and the choices which characters make when placed in extreme situations. Characters like Captain Kewley, Peevay and Timothy Renshaw who accept life as chaotic and fluid, learn to adapt and survive. Notably two of these are bilingual – Kewley and Peevay – suggesting that an ability to negotiate the boundaries between opposing linguistic paradigms is useful preparation for survival in a world where a dominant language also represents a dominant ideology. Matthew Kneale’s glossary on the Anglo-Manx Dialect notes, amongst other examples, that there are nine words to represent smooth, slippery people – ‘slebbly’ and ‘sleetch’ being two of them – and ten words for boastful, showy people – ‘neck’ and ‘stinky’, among others. The Manx seamen’s ability to manage their own affairs and at the same time abuse their passengers, permits them to travel to the other side of the world and back while concealing their real activities. Cunning and adaptability are needed if you are not a member of an elite. Wilson and Potter, Englishmen and members of religious and scientific elites do not succeed because they are unable to adapt to new ideas or the evidence of their own eyes. What survives and potentially thrives in *English Passengers* is hybridity. This is a novel which places multiple fictional voices on top of archival material and expresses those voices through letters, journals and monologues, via Captain Kewley’s picaresque narrative, Doctor Potter’s underlined and capitalised racist text and Peevay’s bastardised English. The various pasts of the ill-assorted

protagonists collide and combine to produce, in some cases, a new way of living for the future, including new versions of Eden.

Like its illustrious forerunner *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, *English Passengers* is a neo-Victorian novel ostensibly set in the Victorian era but whose seamless immersion in the nineteenth century is upset by various narrative means, allowing a modern consciousness to leak into the text. Where *The French Lieutenant's Woman* makes the reader choose between two – or three – endings and introduces a twentieth-century narrator to comment on the action, *English Passengers* suggests associations with and descent from literary antecedents in a thread of heredity while polyphony and overlapping narrative structures attempt to undo the possibility of 'uninterrupted continuities'<sup>29</sup>. However, where choices imposed on the reader by *The French Lieutenant's Woman* are embedded in the novel's existential credentials, the devolution of power to the reader through multiple narrations in *English Passengers* is at odds with the novel's barely concealed satire on Victorian attitudes to race and religion. Yet *English Passengers* additionally offers a vision of a potentially optimistic future through its evolutionary emphasis on new hybrid societies. Like many pastiche neo-Victorian novels *English Passengers* attempts an impossibility, or at least a contradiction: the simultaneous creation of a Victorian world and the revelation of the constructed nature of that world. It does so in order to explore another contradiction, the continuity and discontinuity of history. As Baudrillard has it, 'It is the fantasy of seizing reality that continues – ever since Narcissus bent over his spring...We dream of passing through ourselves and of finding ourselves in the beyond.'<sup>30</sup> The Narcissus myth is an

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<sup>29</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969; rpt. London and New York: Routledge Classics, 2005), p. 13.

<sup>30</sup> Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, p. 105.

apt one for the pastiche neo-Victorian novel; it embodies the solipsistic search for ourselves through a reflection that is inevitably skewed and fragmentary. Appropriately, the 'beyond' that this novel offers is an evolutionary vision of change, chance, continuity and disruption.

The next chapter will examine the split-narrative neo-Victorian novel of which there are far fewer than there are pastiche neo-Victorian novels. The juxtaposition of a 'Victorian' against a present-day narration in a split-narrative is a very different means to organise material compared to the pastiche novel. Where the pastiche colludes with the reader in a pretence about the authenticity of the presentation of the nineteenth century, the split-narrative advertises fracture and difference while continuing an overt search for continuation and relationship.

#### **4. The Split-Narrative Neo-Victorian Novel**

Neo-Victorian novels which employ a split-narrative technique – one ‘Victorian’ narrative, one contemporary, which weave around and play off each other throughout the novel – have a specific agenda for establishing a dialogue across the centuries which could be political, philosophical or literary and often, a combination of all three. There are far fewer of these novels than there are pastiche neo-Victorian novels, immersed entirely in the nineteenth century. The most straightforward of these novels juxtapose a related ‘Victorian’ and twentieth or twenty-first century plot. In Katharine McMahon’s *Confinement*, for example, a twentieth-century secondary school teacher weighs the value of career against marriage, while her nineteenth-century counterpart at the same school sacrifices personal happiness for the sake of her charges. The two narratives alternate chapter by chapter in a simple comparison of women’s relative freedoms across the centuries. More adventurously, Liz Jensen adapts magic realism and science fiction genres in her two split-narrative neo-Victorian novels, *Ark Baby* and *My Dirty Little Book of Stolen Time* (2006). *Ark Baby* examines the influence of Darwin’s ideas on his contemporaries and their continuing effect on familial descendants at the end of the twentieth century and *My Dirty Little Book of Stolen Time* employs a time machine to catapult characters from nineteenth-century Copenhagen to twenty-first century London. Two further split-narrative novels which examine evolutionary themes and which also stray into magic realist or fantasy genres are Jenni Diski’s *Monkey’s Uncle* and Jeannette Winterson’s *Lighthousekeeping*. At the complex end of the split-narrative spectrum, Ahdaf Soueif’s *The Map of Love* mirrors a late-nineteenth-century love affair between an English woman and an Egyptian nationalist with a late-twentieth-century relationship between their descendants. In Soueif’s novel, movement between these two narratives is constant, takes in fragments of personal and political documents and holds all

together through the inclusion of a family tree and the headings of the grouped chapters: A Beginning, An End of a Beginning, A Beginning of an End, An End. There is a continuous insistence on the relationship between private and public worlds and the potential for salvation through family and the potency of inherited artefacts and archival material. Soueif takes a relatively optimistic line in *The Map of Love* regarding the potential for the past to provide connection and healing to the present, as had A.S.Byatt in *Possession*, the key split-narrative neo-Victorian novel. Graham Swift's *Ever After*, another split-narrative which examines the influence of family across the generations and against a backdrop of social and political change, is less sanguine about the success of using the past to make sense of the present.

All these split-narrative novels examine continuities and discontinuities between the novel's present and a 'Victorian' past, often using historical documents of all kinds to question the knowability and relevance of the past to the present. They presuppose a reader interested in this kind of overt metafictional reflection and the uneasy intrusion of the contemporary into the historical. The constant inter-weaving of Victorian and contemporary storylines in these novels enforces a very different reading experience from 'pastiche' Victorian novels which encourage an immersion in Victoriana, albeit with the addition of occasional, and usually deliberate, anachronistic stylistic techniques. The split-narrative neo-Victorian novel, on the other hand, advertises and explores the divide between the historical and contemporary plots and brings centre-stage the quest for communication across the divide. Modern-day characters in split-narrative neo-Victorian novels – Maud Bailey in *Possession*, Isabel Parkman in *The Map of Love*, Bill Unwin in Graham Swift's *Ever After* – are often making deliberate excursions into a documented 'Victorian' past in search of explanation for their current predicaments and for

possible catharsis. Essentially, the split-narrative technique highlights separation and difference through its structure, even while attempting to construct a bridge between the past and the present, while the neo-Victorian novel set entirely in a Victorian past colludes with the reader in ‘a pleasure tinged with [a] sort of unease, associated with the mix of familiarity and strangeness which Freud theorised as the uncanny, and which surfaces when we do that tempting thing and try to imagine ourselves in the past or the past in our present.’<sup>1</sup> The ‘pastiche’ Victorian novel induces a frisson of discomfort through the sense of an almost illicit pleasure in reading ourselves into a Victorian situation; we have to carry with us the combination of what we know and what we tacitly know we are inventing. The split-narrative, on the other hand, openly probes the void between us and the Victorians while still continuing the search for an understanding of the quality of the relationship which may exist between their lives and ours.

Graham Swift’s *Ever After* shares many of *Possession*’s attitudes and themes: an academic quest from the present into the past, a discussion of the usefulness or otherwise of twentieth-century literary theory, an importance accorded to the objects which have survived from the past.

However, where *Possession*’s dénouement suggests a somewhat conventional and nostalgic reliance on heterosexual pairings and on a perceived continuity, albeit fragmentary, between the events and protagonists of the Victorian period and their present-day inheritors, *Ever After* avoids the consolations of closure or enlightenment. Like *Possession*, *Ever After* opens in a late twentieth-century present but the narrative constantly circles back on itself into two further narratives, the early life of the protagonist Bill Unwin and a portrayal of the life of his Victorian forebear Matthew Pearce, told partly via Matthew’s journal and also through Bill’s interpretation

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<sup>1</sup>Kaplan, *Victoriana*, p. 11.

thereof. The three narratives entwine in constant juxtaposition while further details of each are gradually released, leading to a bewildering kaleidoscope of inter-related fragments which are simultaneously commented upon in the present by Unwin, a potentially unreliable narrator. The novel's fairy story title, *Ever After*, points to what is a particularly literary text, sporting numerous overt and covert paratextual allusions, and suggests the reader needs to be cautious of too obvious or immediate a response to the narrator and his reminiscences, a notion further reinforced by the omission in the title of the traditional adverb 'happily'. Meaning is constantly being re-negotiated between the two main narratives and the literary digressions of each. The novel is, in fact, a meditation on grief and loss, the overwhelming importance and simultaneous irretrievability of the past and the relationship between the facts of history and telling stories.

The novel opens with the sentence 'These are, I should warn you, the words of a dead man.' (EA1). The narrator, Bill Unwin, attempting a tongue-in-cheek nonchalance, is signalling his allegiance to another, former world and coming clean about his recent attempted suicide, the third suicide of the novel and the only unsuccessful one. Unwin, whose surname underscores his own self-perception, is an academic at a Fenland university – Cambridge, by its architecture and ambiance, though it is never named – with very little to do. His position has been solicited for him by his stepfather Sam Ellison, an American plastics magnate, in return for a handsome endowment to the college, and in an attempt by Sam to cheer his stepson following the death of Bill's actress wife Ruth, one of the novel's successful suicides. Bill, throughout the novel, is constantly compared to more decisive or less introspective characters. His emotional turmoil is all-pervasive: he is still grieving for Ruth, one of three recent family deaths; he has always blamed Sam for the suicide of his own father, Colonel Unwin, suspecting that his father had

discovered Sam's affair with his mother and he knows that he is only tolerated by the university because of Sam's money.

This is the point from which Bill solipsistically trawls through episodes of his own history, examines his antecedents and lights on the diary of Matthew Pearce. The events from his own life to which he constantly returns include his Parisian childhood during the years following the Second World War, Colonel Unwin's suicide, his mother's relationship with and subsequent marriage to Sam Ellison, his own courtship of and marriage to Ruth and the recent deaths of Ruth, his mother and Sam. This list would suggest an orderly progression of life events, leading to Bill's consideration of his current troubled existence. In fact, the reader has to construct a path through Bill's erratically complex musings which follow no particular organisational structure and which are regularly intercut by present-day events and comparisons with Matthew Pearce's diary and life-history. By these means the first person split-narratives of *Ever After* underline the lack of teleological certainty in both the 'Victorian' and, more especially, the present-day protagonists' lives. Graham Swift has himself commented on the regularity of his use of a first person narration which discourages a linear narrative: 'This condition of shifting time is a natural habitat for me and one which I think we all exist in, because it's the habitat of memory. Memory is not sequential. We're all formed by our past, and even as we walk about in the present we are the creatures of time.'<sup>2</sup> However, not only is memory in *Ever After* shown to be fluid and non-sequential, it is also a many-layered trap, highlighted through Swift's split-narration, which produces paralysis in the present.

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<sup>2</sup> Graham Swift, *Making an Elephant* (London: Picador, 2009), p. 370.



In the present, Bill's concerns include his decision about what use he should make of the Pearce diary; his relationship with his colleague, the media don Michael Potter, who desires the Pearce diary to further his own academic career and Potter's wife Katherine and her ambiguous designs on Bill himself. Matthew Pearce's diary has come to Bill among his mother's effects, Matthew being his great-great-grandfather. The diary chronicles the years 1854-1860, beginning with the death from scarlet fever of Matthew's unfortunately named son Felix and ending with Matthew's quitting his marriage and family. Matthew subsequently dies at sea in 1869, en route for America, having bequeathed the diary with a covering letter to his former wife Elizabeth. The diary documents in agonising detail Matthew's gradual loss of faith in a benevolent God and the impossibility of the validity of a literal translation of The Bible. The origins of Matthew's atheism began when as a young man, newly graduated from Oxford University and having developed interests in natural history and geology, he comes face to face with a fossilised ichthyosaurus while on holiday in Lyme Regis. The final straw is the death of his son.

*Ever After*, through its labyrinthine narrative structure, makes much of the comparisons between Bill Unwin and Matthew Pearce. Bill himself compares Matthew's situation with his own on a number of levels: the relationship between husband and wife, the question of belief – what is true and authentic against what is false or plastic – and the dilemma about how to act or be in the world. Matthew's nineteenth-century crisis of religious conscience is contrasted with the postwar world of nuclear weapons and the potential end of history, especially when Colonel Unwin's reasons for suicide are more fully unpacked. Many of the concerns of the neo-Victorian novel generally are debated in *Ever After*: '[P]ast and present, history and story, fact and fiction, the impossibility of separating them out one from the other, and the impenetrability of the swirling,

murky discourses that compose and relate them.’<sup>3</sup> However, where the pastiche neo-Victorian novel may attempt to disguise or gloss over some of the tensions generated between oppositional standpoints, the split-narrative neo-Victorian novel showcases them. Two narratives, one embedded in the past, one contemporary, highlight the passage of time and emphasise the inevitable erosion of what can be definitively categorised as ‘history’ and ‘fact’ on the one hand, or ‘fiction’ and ‘story’ on the other.

The above quotation is taken from Peter Widdowson’s discussion of Graham Swift’s celebrated novel *Waterland* (1983). *Waterland*, like *Ever After*, places a late-twentieth-century world against a nineteenth-century past and the years in between, dominated by two world wars, but far from privileging the Victorian past as a site of stability, the two novels emphasise rupture, failure and uncertainty in both Victorian and contemporary eras. What the novels additionally have in common is the understanding that disruptive events from the past, often seemingly buried, will make their presence uncomfortably felt in the present. *Waterland*’s literal and metaphorical title emphasises hybridity, apparent binaries of earth and water of the Fenland landscape which instead of being oppositional, intermingle to create a fluid impermanence between fact and fiction, history and stories. Marital discord, incest, contested paternity and botched abortion are the personal, family tragedies played out over decades against declining class and wealth and the backdrop of the two world wars. As in *Ever After*, Swift explores fundamental questions of existence – ‘What’s life? What is it made of? Where does it come from and what’s it for?’<sup>4</sup> – from a position in the novel’s present via excursions into the pasts of the key protagonists but without allowing for any sense of nostalgia that the past was a more comfortable place to be. The

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<sup>3</sup> Peter Widdowson, *Graham Swift* (Tavistock, Devon: Northcote House Publishers Ltd., 2006), p. 24.

<sup>4</sup> Graham Swift, *Waterland* (1983; rpt. London: Picador, 1984), p. 210.

answer to the observation, ‘It’s the old, old feeling, that everything might amount to nothing’<sup>5</sup> appears, in both novels, to be that there is a form of salvation in the telling and re-telling of stories from the past in an attempt to get nearer to some version of the ‘truth’ which might throw light on the present. The repeated zig-zagging between narratives of the past and present brings the protagonists of both *Waterland* and *Ever After* to some form of acceptance, if not complete understanding, of their current circumstances. *Ever After* has, until the last few years, been considered by critics as a novel existing almost in the shadow of *Waterland*, as though a pale imitation of an original. More recently however, *Ever After* has been more closely read for its own sake, from a variety of frequently compatible perspectives.

#### 4.1 From Pastiche to Parody

Graham Swift’s literary multifariousness has been noted by many. *Waterland* could be read as a hypertext of Dickens’ *Great Expectations* and *Last Orders* as a hypertext of Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales*, though *Last Orders* has also been criticised as a plagiarism of William Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying* (1930). Swift’s and A.S.Byatt’s novels are often compared, exercised as both writers are by the disruptions and continuities between past and present and both exhibit the use of similar metaphorical tropes and narrative techniques to address these ambiguities. Swift and Byatt both explore the limitations of twentieth-century literary theories as potentially restricting, rather than illuminating frameworks. *Ever After* and *Possession* employ the figure of the questing academic and the totemic importance of Victorian memorabilia in linking the generations – in *Ever After* the clock made by Matthew Pearce’s father which finds its way through the generations to Bill Unwin. *Ever After*, *Morpho Eugenia* and *The Children’s Book* all

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 233.

examine incestuous relationships and contested parentage. The closed worlds of the locked college garden in *Ever After* and the Alabasters' country house in *Morpho Eugenia* are represented as ivory towers which support an anachronistic status quo against the hordes of barbarians outside the gates and in both texts sons-in-law and fathers-in-law are at odds over how to reconcile Darwinian ideas and traditional religious thought. Additionally, Matthew Pearce's Damascene meeting with an ichthyosaurus inevitably recalls John Fowles' iconic neo-Victorian novel *The French Lieutenant's Woman*.

This layering of literary forbears reinforces Swift's position as 'a deeply allusive writer'<sup>6</sup> who emphasises the palimpsestuous nature of all writing and all experience, making the split-narrative technique an obvious choice for expressing all the confusing influences of the past on the present, literary and otherwise. For Swift's anti-hero Bill Unwin literature is a potential life-saver; he has always used *Hamlet* as a framing device to understand his own life, with himself playing the title role. If references to other novels in *Ever After* are playfully covert, *Hamlet* references are unavoidable and woven into the fabric of the text. Bill Unwin overtly embeds the text of *Hamlet* into his own narrative. Speaking from the present, the modern protagonist is under no embargo about naming his literary references and influences, as a nineteenth-century character in a pastiche neo-Victorian novel is more likely to be. There is no nineteenth-century illusion to be broken. However, where the pastiche novel may use covert literary references to add ballast or intellectual playfulness to a text, the split-narrative is free to expose ambiguities or erroneous readings of iconic literary texts for parodic effect.

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<sup>6</sup> Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation*, p. 35.

‘I will only say, for the time being, that for a large part of my life, ever since my old English master, Tubby Baxter, made us read the play, I have imagined myself – surreptitiously, presumptuously, appropriately, perversely – as Hamlet. And you all know one of his tendencies.’ (EA 4). Coming very early on in the novel, this direct address to the reader, with its ironic aside on suicide, is typical Unwin: the intimate named reference to the old English teacher, suggesting nostalgia for a manageable past but also the circumlocutory mix of almost oppositional adverbs. This is a storyteller who is well aware of the simultaneous slipperiness and power of words and, rather less clearly, the implications of living a life via literary allegiances and references. If Bill is Hamlet then his mother is Gertrude and his step-father Sam is Claudius. However, if ‘the pretext of *Hamlet* takes over a stabilizing function and provides a means of comparison’<sup>7</sup> at the beginning of the novel, Bill tends to undermine his own construct by signally failing to dislike Sam, despite half-heartedly considering ways of avenging Colonel Unwin. The reader is now alerted to the possibility that Bill’s interpretation of events is suspect and that he is trying to make an acceptable shape of the muddle of his past by imposing a universal narrative upon it. Towards the end of the novel, and just before his own death, Sam visits Bill in his college rooms. Bill assumes this is Sam’s version of Claudius’s confession in the chapel moment. Far from it: Sam has come to unburden himself of his knowledge that Colonel Unwin was not Bill’s father, that Bill is the result of his mother’s fling with an engine driver, killed in the war. The *Hamlet* edifice is instantly risible; tragedy has bathetically become comedy. Daniel Lea argues that Bill’s ‘specious introjections of Hamlet, with its concomitant rejection of the interloping Sam, imaginatively compensates for the absence of the father figure that he feels would locate him

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<sup>7</sup> Hannah Jacobmeyer, ‘Graham Swift, *Ever After*: a Study in Intertextuality’, [http://webdoc.sub.gwdg.de/edoc/ia/eese/artic98/jacobm/88\\_98.html... p.3](http://webdoc.sub.gwdg.de/edoc/ia/eese/artic98/jacobm/88_98.html... p.3). Accessed, 14/08/2010.

within a symbolically efficient social framework.’<sup>8</sup> However, Bill’s appropriation of a fictional tragic hero, victim – just as he sees himself – of others’ excesses and intrigues, in an attempt to provide himself with a stable role model and stabilising forbear cannot work alongside the ‘wholesale collapse of transmissible knowledge that severs the present from workable models of pastness.’<sup>9</sup> Specifically, Bill’s old fashioned anti-theoretical notion of literature as quasi-religion, puts him at odds with ‘the sexy young studs of academe who attempt to go against the grain’ (EA1) and the media dons by whom he is surrounded; more generally, Bill’s attempt to create meaning about himself and the events of his life by using literature as a touchstone is shown to be fallacious. Where Hamlet uses the play within a play to establish the truth about his father’s death and provide himself with a route to action, *Ever After*’s split-narrative continuously holds the events of the present up to the mirror of the past in search of response and continuity and finds instead piecemeal echoes and only equivocal ‘models of pastness’. Swift’s use of *Hamlet* as a stabilising text for the modern narrative’s protagonist is turned to parodic effect. Unfortunately for Bill, literature is not the only totalising paradigm which will fail him.

#### 4.2 The Split-Narrative and Romantic Love

The split-narrative neo-Victorian novel often investigates the difficulties faced by couples in the nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first centuries, attempting to maintain personal relationships alongside the exigencies of time, place, family, politics, careers. In *The Map of Love* and *Possession* romantic love is granted equivocal happy endings. *Ever After* is less optimistic. Alongside his love of literature, Bill has, throughout his adult life, put his faith in the redemptive

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<sup>8</sup> Daniel Lea, ‘Feigning Reason: *Hamlet* and the Dynamics of Desire in Graham Swift’s *Ever After*’, *Critique*, 50: 2 (2009), 155-171, p. 158.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 160.

promise of romantic love. A search for the beautiful through the feminine was already present in his Parisian childhood when he gazed at the ballet dancers taking a croissant break from the local dance school, as though seeing life through a Degas painting. As with Bill's *Hamlet* fetish, he is unable to heed the warnings, even to a degree, in retrospective middle age, of his attachment to a sometimes wilful misreading of signs or a clutching at inappropriate straws. 'The sublime fact that in a world so in need of being sorted out, young girls of sixteen and seventeen...could devote themselves so strenuously to becoming sugar-plum fairies...Paris first bred in me the notion that the highest aim of civilization is the loving perfection of the useless.' (*EA* 19-20). This frivolous valuing of superficial glamour is first bred in him by his shallow mother Sylvia who chooses to ignore her considerable musical gift and opt instead for a life of indulgence, then develops into the desire to worship his wife's acting talent, somewhat in the manner of a courtly knight.

Bill endlessly re-states his love for Ruth, that theirs was love ever after, cut short by her illness and suicide. However, Bill, during the many re-iterations of the rock solid nature of his and Ruth's relationship also lets slip other, less secure musings on, amongst other things, his awareness that romantic love is a socially constructed phenomenon; the ease with which Ruth could slide from one persona or role to another; the potential for her adultery; his own position, as her manager, as attendant lord rather than key player. As Peter Widdowson has it: 'Actually, Bill reminds me more of Prufrock in T.S.Eliot's poem of 1917, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" ("No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be"), with his endless unanswered questions, self-deprecation, and pathetic fantasies about what *Ever After* repeatedly calls "romantic love".'<sup>10</sup> Bill's tendency to over-emphasise or over-value the importance of romantic

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<sup>10</sup> Widdowson, *Graham Swift*, p. 69.

love takes on another dimension when he turns his attention to editing the Pearce diaries, by which means he intends to re-boot his flagging career and provide himself with a valid reason for continuing to hold the Ellison fellowship. Here the novel's split-narrative is used to emphasise Bill's manipulation of the nineteenth-century evidence regarding Matthew Pearce's marriage, in order to reassure in the twentieth century, ironically producing exactly the opposite effect, for the reader at least. If the pastiche neo-Victorian novel tends to attempt a simulation of wholeness or totality, the split-narrative, *Ever After* in particular, points to misalignment and undermining of cause and effect.

Matthew Pearce's confrontation with the ichthyosaurus comes before his marriage to Elizabeth Hunt, a devout clergyman's daughter, but he hopes that love of a good woman will override his growing doubts about God, evolution and the supremacy of human life. All is reasonably well until the death of the couple's son Felix. For Bill, reading the diaries in a world which has long accepted man's minor role in the history of the universe, Matthew's religious crisis is interesting but less crucial than the question of whether Matthew and Elizabeth continued to love each other despite their divorce and he goes to considerable lengths to suggest they did. Matthew's and Elizabeth's continuing regard for each other in the nineteenth century is essential to Bill in the twentieth as a form of proof of the value of his own feelings for Ruth, the validity of their marriage and the enduring quality of romantic love. Bill and Matthew both question the human need to attach significance to a particular set of values – 'What makes us give to any one belief (since it is only a matter of shifting, tuning the mind) the particular weight of actuality?' (EA143) – Bill's somewhat bastardised version of Hamlet's '“for there is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so”.' (EA 143). Although Bill is fully aware of the arbitrariness of placing faith



in any one version of ‘truth’, he continues to do so, shamelessly constructing additional potential episodes or angles to the Pearce diary for which he has no proof whatsoever. Bill is aware too that he is moulding Matthew’s diary to fit his own requirements. A typical passage moves from an incontrovertible fact – ‘Matthew’s father married Matthew’s mother in 1817’ – to the use of the conditional tense in speculating about the basis for Matthew’s early religious belief – ‘[F]rom his mother he would have inherited his simple, sanguine faith.’ (EA 94). Later, Bill constructs the dialogue for the imagined scene of the breakdown of Matthew’s relationship with his father-in-law, knowing all the while that this is make-believe. ‘So what, on the part of this unforeseen testifier, is a little bit of creative licence? A little bit of fiction?’ (EA 185). Bill decides that because Matthew bequeathed his notebooks and a final letter to his ex-wife Elizabeth before embarking for the New World, that he must have still loved her, and that because Elizabeth kept these documents and they passed on through the family to Bill, that she must have loved him too.

Moving from the ‘Victorian’ to the contemporary narrative, one final testing of Bill’s certainty about the enduring importance of romantic relationships comes in the form of Katherine Potter, Michael Potter’s put-upon wife. Katherine’s increasingly overt interest in Bill dismays him in part because he finds himself unable to deny his own physical response to her. The ambiguity of their relationship – does Katherine have genuine feelings for Bill or is this a come-on to extract the Pearce manuscripts from him for her husband, to shore up her failing marriage – insists on and underlines the ambiguity of all other relationships in the novel, including those from the nineteenth century, emphasising how the effects of the split-narrative technique highlight uncertainty not only about knowledge in the present but also about ‘facts’ in the past. In the present, if Bill’s love for Ruth was for ‘ever after’ then finding Katherine an attractive

proposition is a problem. Bill's attempted suicide following Katherine's attempted seduction could imply either that Bill is trying to follow Ruth's example, conceding that life is meaningless without her, or, realising that life with Katherine offers distinct potential for the future, the premise of his life, that romantic love is monogamous and for ever, is shown to be an empty sham.

The novel's final sentence – 'He took his life, he took his life' (*EA* 261) – sums up all the varied, contradictory and deliberately ambiguous potential meanings offered by the novel for life in the twentieth century. Bill has been 'taking' someone else's life all along. Swift himself has suggested that, '*Ever After*, which begins with a death, with an end...ends with a beginning. And that making things "come alive", that simple siding with creation, is a mainspring of fiction.'<sup>11</sup> However, the evident ambiguity of the final lines is a direct and inevitable result of the constant cutting between one narrative and another throughout the novel: nothing is certain in Bill Unwin's life which is as fractured as the narrative he inhabits. By comparison, Matthew Pearce's direct choice between God and fossils in the nineteenth-century narrative of *Ever After* appears to be relatively clear-cut but a reliance on historical certainty is also shown to be insubstantial and porous.

#### 4.3 The Relation of the Subject to History in the Split-Narrative

The first problem with history in *Ever After* is the impossibility of deciding where it begins or at least how one individual life is connected to a related life which preceded it and additionally how

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<sup>11</sup> Swift, *Making an Elephant*, p. 308.

one individual life is connected to the events of the wider world. These are perennial, important concerns of the neo-Victorian novel generally and are particularly eloquently explored through the exploitation of the novel's split-narrative technique. The first area of relationship is that between the protagonist's individual life and the lives of his forbears. In middle age and following various family deaths, Bill Unwin is attempting to attach his own memories to artefacts which have come to him as part of his mother's estate. At the same time, and probably too late since the players are now dead, he tries to make sense of other people's motives for their actions. This trawling through his antecedents unearths a disgraced pioneer brain surgeon and a tenuous link to Sir Walter Raleigh, another example of the neo-Victorian novel's frequent mix of fictional and actual people. Matthew Pearce's letter to Elizabeth also looks down the generations to his mother's recollection of being taken as a child to see the captured Napoleon, anchored on the Bellerophon off Plymouth Sound. Through such historical details, and the objects that have been passed from one generation to the next, Bill's life is allied to Matthew's via all the intermediate generations, yet the lasting impressions left by these links is of the fleeting nature of any human life, especially when placed against the sweep of history, and the impossibility of making any substantial relationship between present and former generations. 'Much of the history-as-event that is observed in this novel is a matter of transience and destruction. The atom bomb destroys; the great trains of the thirties and forties pass into oblivion; plastic becomes a substitute for hundreds of other materials; the tin boom comes and then fades.'<sup>12</sup> The paradox of historical reference in *Ever After*, as with the neo-Victorian novel generally, is that despite all the diaries and inherited clocks, the past always remains tantalisingly ungraspable, leading to an unquenchable yearning or, 'the nostalgia for the nostalgia of nostalgia.'<sup>(EA 81)</sup>. Writing about

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<sup>12</sup> David Malcolm, *Understanding Graham Swift* (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 2003), p. 147.

*Waterland*, but equally relevant to *Ever After*, Peter Widdowson sums up this desire to understand the past in order to process and possess the present: ‘however far back and however inclusive, “the whole story” ... will only ever be partial - in two senses of that word: both incomplete and biased. It will be told by someone who has incomplete knowledge and a particular slant on the account they are giving.’<sup>13</sup> Bill Unwin knows he only has incomplete knowledge and that he spins his own narrative to fill the gaps. ‘In so doing, he hopes to be able to turn the past into a source of stable personal identity.’<sup>14</sup> Both Bill’s and Matthew’s histories, already fraught and freighted in themselves, are placed against each other and against national or international social and political events of moment via the two interwoven narrative strands but here the two men’s reactions diverge.

Bill links his account of his own birth to the abdication crisis: ‘I was born in December 1936, in the very week that a King of England gave up his crown in order to marry the woman he loved.’ (EA 57). Fully aware of what a contentious decision this was both personally and politically, Bill chooses to see his arrival in the world as touched by romance. Instead of Hitler, Mussolini, France and the collapse of empire, Bill concentrates on his fairy-tale childhood in Paris, conniving even with his mother’s infidelity. When Bill marries Ruth in 1959 at the height of the Aldermaston marches, they were ‘Too happy, too busy being happy, to worry about the Bomb.’ (EA 249). Aldermaston is an iconic twentieth-century point of reference and recurring place name in *Ever After*: Bill was born there, his engine driver father came from there, Bill and his mother take afternoon tea there the day before the first atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima.

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<sup>13</sup> Widdowson, *Graham Swift*, p. 27.

<sup>14</sup> Stef Craps, *Trauma and Ethics in the Novels of Graham Swift: no Short-Cuts to Salvation* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2005), p. 136.

Most particularly, Bill discovers in a letter from a Whitehall department, that his supposed father, Colonel Unwin, probably committed suicide not because of his wife's infidelity nor because he realises that Bill is not his son but because he could not live with the results of his own involvement in the development of atomic weapons. Colonel Unwin's suicide and his mother's fecklessness and re-marriage separate Bill from 'historical subjectivity within an evolutionary familial progression. The severance of this historicised identity emphasises his placelessness and alienation.'<sup>15</sup> The Second World War and its aftermath have shaped Bill's life but as if from afar; he is apparently disengaged from the political upheavals of the twentieth century and increasingly from any meaningful connection to his immediate family. Bill chooses to throw in his lot with the narrative of romantic love and, following Ruth's death, with a search for a more fixed or clean cut version of historical identity through the notebooks of his ancestor Matthew Pearce.

For Matthew however, romantic love is not a sufficient bulwark against his time's theological and environmental upheavals but his search for solid ground is doomed to failure like Bill's. Using key historical landmarks and moving between the twentieth-century and nineteenth-century narrative strands to point up the dislocation between the two men's life experiences, Bill's reminiscences are placed in relation to the Second World War and the development of atomic weapons, while the equivalent points of reference in Matthew's notebooks are the development of the railways and publications by Lyell and Darwin, nineteenth-century engineering, geological and evolutionary revolutions in nineteenth-century Victorian society. Bill wants to adopt Matthew as a figure of stability against whom he can measure his own

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<sup>15</sup> Daniel Lea, *Graham Swift. Contemporary British Novelists Series* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), p. 152.

rootlessness, with much emphasis on Matthew's profession of surveyor, but Swift 'stresses in his presentation of Matthew's development the unbridgeable gulf which divided the pre- and post-Darwinian worlds.'<sup>16</sup> Bill makes the mistake of assuming that Matthew's crisis of faith, being a cleaner break, is somehow more manageable than his own vague ennui and indecisiveness, 'That sense of lack, of being incomplete...an engagement with the historical process that juxtaposes the individual's dislocating experience of the historical moment with the form of grand narrative that constitutes History and against which the unsatisfying experience of the subject is always judged.'<sup>17</sup> The main difference between the two men, however, is not that Matthew's situation is more straightforward than Bill's but that Matthew engages more fully with the external world. Matthew meets Brunel and works on his Saltash Bridge, he considers the ethical questions about what it means to build bridges or dig mines and he debates issues of the comparative slavery of the cotton plantations and the Lancashire mills. Bill by comparison, is detached from society, fearful only of the braying proletariat outside his sheltered walls. 'Out there in the dark, in the 'real world', is a prowling, snarling lout, all tattoos and bared teeth. He too, like us, is social scrap, but without our preservation order.' (*EA* 2). The constant divergence from one narrative to the other emphasises a solidity and clarity in the Victorian past which allows or forces Matthew to make his painful decision; by comparison, Bill's present is less historically or politically focused, allowing him to keep abdicating from taking responsibility for himself or his future.

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<sup>16</sup> Frederick M Holmes, 'The Representation of History as Plastic: The Search for the Real Thing in Graham Swift's "Ever After"', *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature*, 27:3 (1996), 25-43, p. 36.

<sup>17</sup> Lea, *Graham Swift*, p. 7.

#### 4.4 The Real Thing

What is real and what is phoney and the value or otherwise of the past – ancient buildings, arcane knowledge and questions about who or what is fittest to survive – are the recurring and tangled issues at the heart of *Ever After*. These are not only debated between but also within each narrative and are given particular focus in the relationship between Bill and his stepfather Sam. Bill is predisposed to assess Sam as fake both because of his affair with his mother, which Bill realises Sam had initially seen as a wartime fling and because of Sam's stepfather status, given Sam's perceived culpability in Bill's 'real' father's suicide. Even more pertinently, Sam's fortune, made in the plastics industry, confirms Bill's assessment of him as a substitute for 'the real thing'. Bill is in search of the real thing anywhere he can find it, in literature, love and the documents and relics of history and Sam represents everything the real is not. This is not to say that Bill is unaware of the complex issues bound up in his diatribes against all that is plastic: 'Is a plastic cup less real than a china one? Nylon stockings less real than silk? More to the point, is plastic any more fraudulent than a stage performance?' (*EA* 7). The reference to the essential pretence of the stage ironically highlights Bill's dilemma and confusion given his utmost faith in his wife as the epitome of the real thing. Sam buys a mock Tudor mansion for himself and Sylvia, perfectly happy to substitute a pastiche for an original. Later, Sam buys a mockery of a Cambridge fellowship for Bill, which he accepts *faute de mieux*, and continues his search for solid ground via Matthew Pearce's notebooks, another form of substitution for his own un-lived life. The 'Victorian' narrative, juxtaposed with the perceived simulacra of the contemporary narrative, is supposed to provide Bill with access to the 'real thing', but it is the task of the split-narrative to prove this quest fallacious.

In fact, what Bill sees as a showdown between the ersatz and the real can simultaneously be viewed as a stand-off between post-war sons and pre-war fathers or the failing English old world power vis-à-vis the new world American upstart. One way of reading Bill's male significant others is that they are all presented as men with a solid history in the world who make clear-cut decisions about how they relate to their times, even if the consequences of those decisions are painful or catastrophic or if they, especially if they are English, perceive themselves as failures. Bill's ancestor Matthew Pearce agonises over his inability to sustain a quiet domestic life but is, in the end, unable to compromise his beliefs about the failure of faith and the reality of man's place in the universe. He gives up the security of his home and family and eventually leaves England for the New World. Bill's supposed father Colonel Unwin, with his soldierly past and his current incarnation as part diplomat part spy, chooses suicide rather than live with his guilty conscience. Sam, representative of the new world order, is quite certain of his value to the world in bringing plastic substitutes to an old world still clinging to the vestiges of former certainties. Comparing himself with these men of earlier generations, however different their values from each other, Bill appears to himself as listless and spineless, at the mercy of forces beyond his control. He neither tussles with the profound moral and spiritual dilemma of Matthew Pearce nor the political and ethical crisis of Colonel Unwin. He does not have the confidence to forge a new life for a new era in the spirit of Sam Ellison. He rejects commerce and he also later rejects what he sees as the selling out of academia in the manner of Michael Potter but he is left with nowhere to go except the role of manager to his wife's glittering career or pretend don-hood. He even botches his own suicide. *Ever After's* portrayal of post second World War II masculinity, contrasting the sedentary academic with his engineer Victorian counterpart, offers a contrasting



study of gender roles to a preponderance of neo-Victorian novels, pastiches especially, which focus on the opportunities opening up for Victorian women, even against considerable odds.

Bill does not envy his genetic or adoptive forebears their beliefs or their struggles so much as he wonders about the fact that they had something specific to believe in or to struggle against, oppositions which are constantly underscored by the juxtaposed narratives. ‘What is the difference between belief and make-belief? What makes us give to any one belief (since it is only a matter of shifting, tuning the mind) the peculiar weight of actuality?...Who lets a Big Question upset his small, safe world?’ (EA 143). Matthew Pearce allowed a big question to totally destroy his small safe world and Colonel Unwin removes himself from the world rather than shift or tune his mind to another set of values. The ability, perhaps the necessity, for post-Second World War man to be able to shift or tune his mind not only highlights the emptiness at the heart of Bill’s existence, it also emphasises the impossibility for him to understand the life of a man, especially a Matthew Pearce, for whom belief is the cornerstone of existence. Bill knows that in his time, ‘knowledge is an ambiguous virtue, that to make a fetish of full consciousness...is simply to court another human disability.’<sup>18</sup> This is the essential difficulty for Bill Unwin: rather than stalwart and decisive, his male forebears could just as easily be viewed from another angle, particularly a post-war angle, to appear not as courageous and resolute in the face of the challenges of their times but as stubbornly self-centred and unable to dissemble or accommodate uncomfortable realities. Bill knows he cannot emulate these men. The question of faith is irrelevant; evolutionary discourse has long become part of the established orthodoxy. The war is over, American culture has triumphed and Bill has nowhere to go. ‘[T]here is a problem of

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<sup>18</sup> Michael Levenson, Review of *Ever After*, Graham Swift, *New Republic*, 206:25 (1992), 38-40, p. 39.

inheritance in Swift's work: there is a sense in which a traditional frame of reference, typically associated with a father figure, has lost its credibility and become untenable.<sup>19</sup> Bill rejects the advances of his 'substitute' father and stakes all on love and literature. When the loved one dies, he turns to history, only to find that the man he thought was his father was yet another substitute and that his only way to get near to Matthew Pearce is to invent him by imagining or fictionalising his story. The search for stability and meaning constantly disappears in the fissure between the two narrative strands.

#### 4.5 Split-Narrative Dilemma: the Present Eclipsed by the Past

The inherent potential problem for the split-narrative neo-Victorian novel is the possibility that the Victorian narrative possesses a solidity and clarity which is denied to the present; the very act of delving into the past in order to illuminate the present fictively bestows a certainty onto the past which is perceived as lacking in the complexity of the present. There are critics who have suggested that the fragmented and constantly recycled narrative threads of *Ever After* lead to a vacuum at the heart of the novel. Michael Levenson in particular disparages the concentration on romantic love as a plot driver and a potentially simplistic or stereotypical use of the American stepfather as the epitome of all that is crass and vulgar, but more fundamentally, 'he [Swift] so fiercely attacks the old illusions without any idea of what might go in their place.'<sup>20</sup> This is Bill Unwin's position. All his searches through the templates for living provided by previous generations leave him with nothing that fits his situation and, additionally, with an awareness that that his forebears also struggled to accommodate themselves to their own times. However, Bill's position may not be the novel's position, nor Graham Swift's. Other critics evaluating

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<sup>19</sup> Craps, *Trauma and Ethics*, p. 18.

<sup>20</sup> Levenson, Review of *Ever After*, p. 39.

Graham Swift's complete oeuvre read his novels as proposing, 'the possibility of salvaging some vestiges of humanity from postmodern anomie by way of 'telling stories' and of 'love', the former itself an equivocal substitute for the discredited 'grand narrative' of 'History'... This 'new humanism'... is embattled, tentative, provisional and uncertain, as Swift is only too well aware.'<sup>21</sup> Like Peter Widdowson, Daniel Lea broadly aligns Swift's novels in a humanist tradition and agrees that the novels are beyond simple categorisation, straddling both postmodern and Victorian realist models. '[C]lumsy categorisations do not... comfortably sit over a body of writing whose individual elements persistently foreground the arbitrariness of semiotic definition and the elusive qualities of any hermeneutic superstructure to life.'<sup>22</sup> All Swift's 'heroes', and his leading protagonists are inevitably men, agonise over the everyday choices that need to be made within the constraints of class, community, profession or nation but the novels never lose sight of 'the conviction in the centrality of ethical commitment to human actions. All his [Swift's] fiction involves characters forced into positions where they have to make ethical choices about the way in which they live their lives, choices which are rendered more difficult by the network of debts and dependencies that tie them to their place in the world.'<sup>23</sup> This is the position made starkly clear in *Ever After* through the use of the double narrative. Matthew Pearce and Bill Unwin both ponder life-changing ethical questions; Pearce acts and Unwin does not. Their varying responses are in part a consequence of the times they live in but what they do have in common is the urge to consider how they should be living their lives.

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<sup>21</sup> Widdowson, *Graham Swift*, p. 4.

<sup>22</sup> Lea, *Graham Swift*, p. 5.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

Placing Swift's novels within an ethical, humanist framework has gathered momentum during the last decade. Written in 2000, Christian Gutleben's article 'La nostalgie postmoderne dans *Ever After*'<sup>24</sup> discusses Matthew Pearce's journal as 'un exercice de reproduction, d'imitation, de pastiche'<sup>25</sup> and of the novel itself he writes: '*Ever After* témoigne pour un large part de l'aporie oxymorique [*sic*] dans laquelle se trouve la fiction contemporaine. Arrivé à la fin de l'Histoire, le postmodernisme se retourne vers ses origines et entreprend d'écrire le passé au présent. Quand on ne peut plus avancer, on recule.'<sup>26</sup> Gutleben's overall conclusion here is that *Ever After*, like much contemporary fiction, is a novel of repetition, forever recycling what was once new because there appears to be nothing new under the sun. However, by 2009 Gutleben discusses *Ever After* in glowing terms as 'Swift's other fictional masterpiece'<sup>27</sup> – *Waterland* being the first – and the early 1990s when it was written, as the time when writers were looking back in order to look ahead, evidently a case of *reculer pour mieux sauter*. Gutleben now firmly places *Ever After*, and the neo-Victorian novel project, within the discourse of the return of ethics.

Because he assumes the role of a historical witness, Swift adopts the ethical position of the bulk of neo-Victorian novelists, who strive to lay bare and voice the various injustices, sexual, social or political, of the Victorian era while constantly urging us to consider the possible parallels or continuations in our own contemporary period. It is through the restitution or fabrication of historical testimonies of trauma that Swift and his generic kindred restore the prevalence of ethics.<sup>28</sup>

In this later, more positive reading of the novel, Gutleben suggests that Bill Unwin's twentieth-century trauma meets Matthew Pearce's nineteenth-century trauma and results finally in Bill handing over Matthew's journal to Katherine Potter, in an obscure gesture of an acceptance of

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<sup>24</sup> Christian Gutleben, 'La nostalgie postmoderne dans *Ever After* de Graham Swift', *Études britanniques contemporaines*, 18 (2000), 33-41.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 33, 'an exercise of reproduction, imitation, pastiche'. My translation.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 41, '*Ever After* for a large part testifies to the oxymoronic aporia that contemporary fiction finds itself in. Having arrived at the end of History, postmodernism returns to its origins and undertakes to write the past in the present. When one can advance no further one turns back'. My translation.

<sup>27</sup> Christian Gutleben, 'Shock Tactics: The Art of Linking and Transcending Victorian and Postmodern Traumas in Graham Swift's *Ever After*', *Neo-Victorian Studies* 2:2 (Winter 2009-2010), 137-156, p. 138.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 145-6.

limitation. Even if Bill will never understand Matthew he has in some sense borne witness to his existence and his struggle. In this reading of the novel, Matthew Pearce's journal takes on totemic significance as the object handed from one era to another, across narratives and which takes on a different meaning with each incarnation.

Stef Craps links Bill's relinquishing of the manuscript to the novel's persistent juxtaposition of the real and the substitute thing. She sees Bill's gift to Katherine as a final understanding that life is ambiguous and that the search for the real and self-completing thing is the search for the non-existent. Fictionalising Matthew's journal with a view to publication, and that is all Bill is capable of doing with it, will bring Bill no nearer to Matthew nor to a sense of achievement. '[T]he promise of plenitudinous presence is exposed as a fallacy, and a harmful one at that. Substitutes being all that is available, the narcissistic search for completion turns out to be a futile and pernicious undertaking.'<sup>29</sup> Craps, like Gutleben, reads *Ever After*, and indeed all Swift's novels, via the insights provided by trauma theory, 'an area of enquiry that emerged on the literary-theoretical and literary-critical scene as one manifestation of the "ethical turn" affecting the humanities in the 1990s'<sup>30</sup>. Her thesis is that Swift's protagonists are men polarised in the present by insidious events from the past, condemned to retell their stories in an attempt to come to terms with crisis. Their mourning and melancholia can only be eased by recognition of the absence of any totalising narrative and a move towards an acceptance of the unknowability of and simultaneous sympathy for others.

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<sup>29</sup> Craps, *Trauma and Ethics*, p. 144.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p.1.

Daniel Lea also makes a particularly compelling analysis of an ethical reading of Swift's novels, linking Swift's engagement with ethics to his indebtedness to the nineteenth-century realist novel. Many critics discuss Swift's novels as an amalgam of postmodern fragmentation and realist storytelling. Lea particularly notes '*Ever After*'s discourse on the loss of faith after the Darwinian revolution,'<sup>31</sup> and the novel's allusive debt to nineteenth-century writers who dealt with its reverberations at the time, George Eliot, Charles Kingsley and Elizabeth Gaskell among others. 'The intersecting of social and private selves and the moral choices that mediate that dichotomy make Swift an old-fashioned writer in one sense...His prevailing questions – ... How do our private and public worlds intersect? How do we go about living in a way that is true to a sense of authentic selfhood? – have long been the stuff of philosophical and creative thought.'<sup>32</sup> Swift's protagonists' sense of deracination, caused particularly by the loss of patriarchal and religious authority post-World War Two, exposes their lack of connectedness to the historical process which they attempt to amend through fictionalised narrative. 'The stories that Swift's characters tell themselves therefore replace the narratives in which they no longer have faith, but this arbitrary displacement is not a morally devoided act because...to sustain a palpable credibility the new stories demand an ethical commitment.'<sup>33</sup> This ethical commitment, according to Lea, depends on an attempt to bypass individual self-centredness and reach out to other people, in *Ever After*, from one historical period to another and from one narrative to another: 'believing in believing.'<sup>34</sup> Viewed from this perspective, Bill's present of the Pearce manuscript is an acknowledgement of the fact that Matthew Pearce is unreachable. 'What does it matter? Who am I to raise Matthew Pearce from the dead?' (*EA* 88). Michael Potter – ' 'The

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<sup>31</sup> Lea, *Graham Swift*, p. 6.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

spiritual crisis of the mid-nineteenth century is *my subject!*” (EA 164).— may well be the man to place Matthew Pearce’s journal in the public domain, an academic reading being the only feasible one in the late twentieth century. What Bill has left is his scribblings, which constitute his attempt in middle age to gather together the scraps of his past and which transmute into the text of *Ever After*.

Gutleben, Craps and Lea all make relevant and convincing arguments for placing Swift’s novels, including *Ever After*, into a storytelling mode which includes the realist and the postmodern and which expresses an ethical concern for considerations of how life is to be lived, including how the individual relates to others and to his own time. All these critics attempt a humanist reading of Graham Swift which addresses the complexities and uncertainties of history. However, because they do not go on to discuss in any detail how these ethical questions are expressed through an emphasis on the importance of the past to the present, in *Ever After* particularly, through the foregrounding of the ‘bones’ of the novel, the split-narrative structure, they tend to underestimate the extent of *Ever After*’s engagement with these complexities and uncertainties. This oscillation between the present and the Victorian in the split-narrative neo-Victorian novel does not allow the reader a smooth, one-time dimensional understanding of events; the constant jostling between then and the present, forces an assessment of the effects of the passage of time and raises key questions about the nature of change and the movement of history. The neo-Victorian novel, in its various forms, addresses these issues, but it is the split-narrative neo-Victorian novel which most obviously foregrounds the gaps in understanding, and knowledge, between experience now and experience then. Most particularly, *Ever After* not only offers two narratives but fragments and elides the telling of each, constantly revisiting moments from the

past, either to add an additional piece of information or suggest a further interpretation of events. Such endless disruption of narrative sequence invites consideration of the reliability of the protagonist's reading of the events of his immediate past and the pasts of his forbears and additionally raises further and more profound issues to do with the continuity or discontinuity of history itself.

The questions *Ever After* asks include: how have we moved from the Victorian past to the novel's twentieth-century present, what is the nature of the connection between us and them, can we have any understanding of the social or religious upheavals of another era, how can the private individual accommodate the demands of the public arena? There is a continuous emphasis on opposites: the past versus the present, including the pre-war and post-war; the real thing versus the pretend thing, including 'real' life and acting. These binaries are most obviously explored through the clashing of the two narratives. Bill Unwin uses Matthew Pearce's journal to try to argue for continuity of the past into the present and understanding of the essential connections between us and the Victorians and fails. He is reduced to filling the gaps in Matthew's narrative with wish-fulfilment padding which reflects his own heartbreak rather than Matthew's, particularly with regard to Matthew's relations with his ex-wife Elizabeth. Bill Unwin tries to make himself feel real by attaching himself to a distant ancestor and where there are grey areas in Matthew's narrative, Unwin invents. Given that Bill has introduced himself, post-suicide attempt, as 'a dead man' (*EA* 1) and that his researches into the lives of his ancestors is a thinly veiled attempt to supply himself with a historical sense of a self to cover over his current emptiness, the reader can have little faith in his attempt to provide a convincing argument for a rapport between himself and Matthew Pearce. If Unwin tries to convince himself that we



can connect with the dead and their times, Swift seems to suggest otherwise, leaving open to interpretation the key question of whether, ‘history [is] a medium which allows for meaningful continuities rather than...a congeries of disparate processes which alienate and dislocate people.’<sup>35</sup> This conundrum, an essential debating point of the neo-Victorian novel, is, in *Ever After*, considered through the metaphorical use of Matthew Pearce’s father’s clock and Brunel’s Saltash Bridge.

#### 4.6 Totemic Relics

During one of his imaginary perorations about Matthew Pearce’s early life, Bill Unwin invents the scene of John Pearce, the clockmaker: ‘a vaguely magician-like figure, hunched over his little clockwork world, unwittingly miming the classic analogy for the existence of the Creator, and seeming to be engaged not only in the making of clocks but in the manufacture of this vital stuff called Time.’ (*EA* 104). Bill simultaneously registers his twentieth-century disdain for a divine arbiter of human affairs while exposing his need for a fanciful, romanticised portrayal of his ancestor’s working life. The known facts about the clock are that John Pearce made it as a present for Matthew’s and Elizabeth’s marriage, attaching to it the motto *Amor Vincit Omnia*; the clock then passed through various generations of Matthew and Elizabeth’s descendants, including Bill’s mother, finally reaching Bill and Ruth. Not all the marriages are happy. Bill’s mother’s view of marriage is less *amor vincit omnia* than *carpe diem*. Throughout the generations however, the clock has remained wound and for Bill, ‘When I wind the clock, I hold the key which Ruth once held, and holding the key that Ruth once held, I hold the key once held by Matthew.’ (*EA* 47). Bill’s yearning and sense of loss epitomise the neo-Victorian novel’s

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<sup>35</sup> Holmes, ‘The Representation of History as Plastic’, p. 39.

dilemma regarding the importance the present tries to attach to the remnants – artefacts, documents, memories – of the past, knowing all the while that these historical traces cannot bear the weight. In the split-narrative neo-Victorian novel particularly, the value that people in the present place on these relics from the past is brought to the fore for questioning and analysis. Bill is enough of a scholar to know that the clock's Latin inscription 'was the popular misquotation, the word order being inverted in the original.'<sup>36</sup> The full quotation, from Virgil's Eclogue, X, is *Omnia vincit amor et nos cedamus amori*. One translation could emphasise an encouragement to yield to the physical and sexual – and possibly transient – in love and is much closer to Bill's mother's attitude to the reality of relationships than the more spiritual, romantic and shorter version, taken from the inscription on Chaucer's Prioress's brooch, that Bill would like to imagine has sustained his relations over the decades. '[H]is silence [about the full implications of the Latin motto's meaning]...thus becomes a tactical withdrawal to protect the sanctity of his illusion.'<sup>37</sup> The clock fails as a metaphor for the enduring nature of love, its shortened inscription another example of the incomplete and misleading. Bill invests the clock with meaning which it cannot support, willing it, as he does Matthew's journal, to be a means to connect with another time. However, '[I]n the face of ceaseless, often disruptive change, is it delusive to imagine that universal experiences or human qualities serve as links in an unbroken historical chain? Matthew's father's clock may have been passed down continuously for a century or more, but, even within that relatively brief time span, are historical differences between individuals and cultures so easily overcome?'<sup>38</sup> The clock is eventually passed by characters from one narrative and time to the narrator of another narrative and time. In the interim there have been two world wars. This split between the two storylines, represented here

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<sup>36</sup> Graham Swift, *Ever After*, p. 123.

<sup>37</sup> Lea, *Graham Swift*, p145.

<sup>38</sup> Holmes, 'The Representation of History as Plastic', p. 39.

by an artefact which itself expresses time and which has made its precarious way from one century to another, emphasises the mutability rather than the permanence of meaning.

References to Brunel's Saltash Bridge are scattered throughout *Ever After*. Matthew visits the bridge just before he embarks on his fateful journey to America to remind himself of his part in the pre-construction geological survey and the mark he has left on the land he is leaving.

However, Brunel's bridge also stands for all the growing points of dissent between Matthew and his father-in-law and eventually, Matthew and his wife. The old man refuses to see the bridge as a physical possibility but rather as an affront to the natural order and Brunel a man of vainglory rather than of genius. Matthew's attitude on the other hand reflects his admiration for Brunel and his quest for knowledge and progress: 'To build a bridge! Is that not one of the noblest of man's endeavours? To link *terra firma* with *terra firma*; to throw a path across a void. The ignorant say it defies nature, yet it rests upon her co-operation.' (EA 141). The older man desires the status quo, the younger to move forward. Matthew's desire for a link across emptiness, joining two areas of solid ground, is echoed repeatedly in *Ever After*, and specifically through the split-narrative structure which sees Bill Unwin in the twentieth century attempt a return to the past via the bridge of Matthew's notebooks. For Matthew his search for a new solidity to replace the lost world of innocent trust in Biblical truth is repeated but in reverse in Bill's attempt to bridge the present back to Matthew's past.

The phrase 'to build a bridge' becomes a repeated refrain throughout the novel and metonymically suggests the potential for bridge building between Matthew Pearce's and Bill Unwin's narratives. Unfortunately, although the bridge remains, the metaphorical burden it is

expected to bear cannot be sustained: Brunel ‘would never know. Need never know. These happy bridge-builders, these men of the solid world (these level-minded surveyors). He was safe. Safe in his sunset glory. Safe within the limits of an old, safe world. Only seven months after his death, Darwin would publish (some come to fame by building, some by –) his *Origin of Species*.’ (EA 203). It is a commonplace of the neo-Victorian novel to introduce, often obliquely or fleetingly, real and notable personages of the era. In *Ever After* Brunel’s name attached to Matthew’s gives Matthew an added gravitas and also allies him to the world of the sciences and rational thinking. By placing Darwin’s name in juxtaposition to Brunel’s, the pace of change of the times is underlined. Matthew’s father and father-in-law attend the opening ceremony of the Saltash Bridge which already represents for them an alarming future. Brunel, his health undermined by his work is taken privately on a litter to see his bridge and dies soon after. Despite the enormity of his achievements, science in the near future would render Brunel’s world old-fashioned, including the ‘revolutionary changes in knowledge, not the least of which was that effected by Darwin.’<sup>39</sup> *Ever After*, by means of its double narrative structure, though Bill Unwin tries to ignore the evidence, highlights the disconnected, fractured nature of the movement of history. It is not that the present is unrelated to the past, more that the relationship is often surprising or secret, bumpy rather than smooth and full of gaps along the way.

#### 4.7 The Darwinian Imperative

If the clock and the bridge are invested, variously by Bill and Matthew, with more value than they warrant, there is another symbol – or rather, group of associated motifs – in *Ever After* which evokes a more reliable range of association and meaning and is scattered throughout the

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<sup>39</sup> Holmes, ‘The Representation of History as Plastic’, p. 40.

text in a variety of guises. In the opening pages of the novel, long before Matthew comes face to face with the ichthyosaurus, Bill refers to himself and his Cambridge colleagues as privileged dodos, protected against the realities of the world outside the cloistered colleges. He questions whether he and his fellow dons represent some aberrant reversal of the doctrine of the survival of the fittest, natural selection having been sidestepped in their case. From the outset, the novel is steeped in evolutionary, Darwinian language and the plight of both Matthew and Bill is examined in terms of their ability or inability to find an appropriate and comfortable niche for themselves, within their own times. '[M]algré sa connaissance des textes de Darwin, Bill est incapable d'évoluer, de s'adapter, et il ne s'anime véritablement qu'en retraçant le passé.'<sup>40</sup> Christian Gutleben's indictment of Bill is that he is unable to come truly alive except when attaching himself to Matthew's story. After his suicide attempt Bill feels he has shed his previous persona. 'I am changed....I simply feel as though I have become someone else.' (EA 3). The problem now is to discover what he is to do next, how he is to be in the world and how he is to effect a meaningful existence when he is not even sure who he is, when the idea of the self is so malleable.

Matthew's apostasy is caused by a much more physical shock. If Bill's crisis is solipsistic and introspective, Matthew's is rooted in the evidence of the physical world and his diary is his attempt to come to conclusions about the data he has acquired. The first diary entry on the tenth of June, 1854, links the date of what should have been the second birthday of his infant son Felix with the event ten years ago, 'The moment of my unbelief. The beginning of my make-belief.' (EA 101), when, seeing the ichthyosaur fossil, he had to begin to accept the possibility 'that

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<sup>40</sup> Gutleben, 'La nostalgie postmoderne', p. 36. 'Despite his knowledge of Darwin's texts, Bill is incapable of evolving or adapting and he only becomes truly alive when retracing the past.' My translation.

nature is a pitiless arithmetician and gross cozener, hiding behind her bountiful appearance the truth that the greater portion of Creation exists only as a tribute to Destruction.’ (EA 137).

Thereafter Matthew applies the painful lesson that living things are expendable to the changing world around him. If God is not in control then it must imply that man is the final arbiter and must take responsibility for the systems he imposes on his fellow man. Considering the Tavistock copper miners Matthew writes: ‘These toiling masses of our mine-workers trouble me. Because in the habitat of their workplace they do indeed appear as so many termites labouring in the dark and occupying a literal sub-existence, we convert the appearance into substance. But by what perverted definition of common humanity do we pronounce that they are brutes and not we?’ (EA 218). The final showdown between Matthew and his father-in-law comes in a tragic-comical scene, both men dressed in gauntlets and long-veiled straw hats, an argument conducted amongst the bee-hives. The rector hopes to quell the growing dissent between himself and his son-in-law with a discourse on bee society, the structure of the honeycomb and the delectable nature of honey being sufficient proof of the work of a benevolent and intelligent maker. Matthew counters with his understanding from reading Darwin that bees have learned instinctively to adapt their honeycomb structures over time as part of the never-ending struggle for existence. There is no way back from this critical moment and although Matthew bitterly regrets the effects of the schism, he never wavers from his stance that life has to be lived according to the evidence available, rather than through a comforting but ultimately empty myth.

‘I have dipped into Darwin. It’s heavy going. The prose thick, grey, and formidable, like porridge. It is hard to see in this sober stodge the bombshell which tore apart Matthew’s life and horrified Victorian society. Perhaps this proves Darwin’s point. Species *adapt*. Yesterday’s

cataclysm is today's absorbed fact.' (EA 223). This is Bill's judgement from his magpie reading of Darwin. Ironically he is a man less excited by ideas and more excited by poetry and myth, who responds viscerally to what he feels is the innate beauty of literary language. Bill is finally unable to connect emotionally with Matthew's crisis but he too has his Darwinian moment. During a birthday tea outing to Aldermaston, Bill's mother delivers a brief lecture on the Williams pear, crossbred in Aldermaston in the eighteenth century by a local schoolmaster. Bill is shocked to discover, the day before the first atomic bomb is dropped, that pears can be made through hybridisation. He is unwilling however to learn from the lessons that surround him. His search for 'the real thing' and his contempt for anything plastic, particularly his step-father's capitalist products, demonstrate his unassuageable desire for an era of certainties that pre-date Matthew Pearce's time. The evidence of his fundamental emptiness comes out of his own mouth: 'I am not me. Therefore was I ever me?...these *words*, or rather the tone, the pitch, the style of them and consequently of the thoughts that underlie them, are not mine....Is this how I am?' (EA4).

The novel's ambiguous ending is inevitable. It is not clear to the reader – and perhaps not to Bill Unwin – whether his life will continue or not; the past will continue to influence the present in unpredictable ways and choices will be made which will go on to influence events and other choices somewhere down the line. Like *Waterland* before it, the endlessly repeating, overlapping narrative of *Ever After* underscores the lack of straight lines in personal and historical narratives, the evolutionary and hybrid nature of any human interaction. Interestingly, three of the other neo-Victorian split-narratives listed earlier also contemplate Darwinian influences between nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first-century narratives. All the novels weave the events of the

past into the outcomes of the present, feature real or metaphorical fossils, blur the boundaries between storytelling and historical fact and question the legacy of Darwinian scholarship in the present. The most cheerful of these split-narrative novels is Liz Jensen's novel *Ark Baby*, a complex fantasy narrative which marries a modern plot about post-millennial infertility and Queen Victoria's bestiary. The chance, nineteenth-century coming-together of a fairground worker and an ape-gentleman results in the twenty-first-century continuation of the human race, albeit people with hairy feet. The novel's penultimate chapter heading is 'The Celebration of Evolution Banquet'. Hybridity is the only way forward. Jeannette Winterson's magic realist novel *Lighthousekeeping* has Darwin make an occasional appearance to explore a cave of fossils and to try to comfort the nineteenth-century clergyman dismayed to understand that he feels lonely because he is alone. Her present day protagonist sums up the feelings of many neo-Victorian truth-seekers and many neo-Victorian novels. 'We're here, there, not here, not there, swirling like specks of dust, claiming for ourselves the rights of the universe. Being important, being nothing, being caught in lives of our own making that we never wanted. Breaking out, trying again, wondering why the past comes with us, wondering how to talk about the past at all.'<sup>41</sup> Jenny Diski's *Monkey's Uncle* is for the most part even less optimistic. The protagonist, Charlotte FitzRoy, is a descendant of Robert FitzRoy, the captain of the *Beagle* and the novel discusses, among other things, whether we are what we have inherited from our forebears or whether we are formed by our reactions to life events and the political turmoil of our particular day. During Charlotte's breakdown, she is befriended by a version of the orang-utan Jenny that Darwin visited in London Zoo and berates three bumbling old men, Darwin, Freud and Marx who bicker amongst themselves about who was the least to blame for the ills of society that followed them. In *Monkey's Uncle* as in *Ever After* the post-trauma protagonist more or less

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<sup>41</sup> Winterson, *Lighthousekeeping*, p. 133.



accepts that, ‘This was how it was to be. It was, after all, how life was for most people. Usually, in a quiet sort of way, they survived’<sup>42</sup> or as Graham Swift himself describes it: ‘But then – and don’t we all know it? – isn’t life itself always like that? Don’t we all live, more or less, in this perpetual borderland, on this shoreline where the sand shifts constantly under our feet?’<sup>43</sup> In *Ever After*, the borderland is continuously present, its edges being endlessly probed, where one narrative rubs up against, overlaps and influences another.

There are key differences between pastiche and split-narrative neo-Victorian novels. While the pastiche is at pains to create a facsimile of a Victorian world with added postmodern stylistic features, the split-narrative uses the divide created between the storylines to expose and worry at the joins, searching for points of connection and examining their meaning or value. These connections may be represented through parallel situations, the use of literary references and particularly, the iconic document – letters and diaries, physical objects passed from one generation to the next. *The Map of Love* has the trunk containing notebooks, journals and the panel of tapestry; *Monkey’s Uncle*, the seed-pearl and *Ever After*, the clock. The various protagonists come to realise that these artefacts can only tell a partial story and that they are always in danger of loading them with too much significance. The clock may always have been just a clock and to invest it with greater importance in the present is to expose the modern narrative’s fruitless search for ‘the real thing’ by raiding the past for its apparent certainties.

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<sup>42</sup> Diski, *Monkey’s Uncle*, p. 245.

<sup>43</sup> Swift, *Making an Elephant*, p. 300.

A further group of neo-Victorian novels develops the idea of the totemic Victorian forebear by appropriating, developing or destroying the canonic Victorian text or author. If the pastiche neo-Victorian novel moves closer to parody in the split-narrative, the neo-Victorian novel which adapts the Victorian novel has an even more political agenda and one which tends to further emphasise fracture. These are the novels which will be discussed in the next chapter, particularly through an analysis of D.M. Thomas's *Charlotte. The Final Journey of Jane Eyre*.

## **5. The Re-Write Neo-Victorian Novel**

There is a wide range of neo-Victorian novels which ‘borrow’, overtly or covertly, and then adapt plots, characters and authors of Victorian novels. The range of method of this group of neo-Victorian novels is diverse. Some Victorian authors are given a fictional biography (Henry James, for example, in Colm Tóibín’s *The Master*), while others are sidelined within a narrative which gives the limelight to an injured spouse (Charles Dickens in Alfred Gibson’s *Girl in a Blue Dress*); either way, the new text involves a re-shaping and re-emphasis – sometimes a distortion – of known material. Further novels give a new life to well-known characters from Victorian Ur-texts (Peter Carey’s *Jack Maggs* or Louis Bayard’s *Mr Timothy*) or develop plots from Victorian novels into re-writes or sequels (Will Self’s *Dorian* or James Wilson’s *The Dark Clue*). The figure of the questing academic is a frequently used literary trope in these narratives, as in split-narratives with which form they sometimes overlap. A.S. Byatt’s *Possession* and Graham Swift’s *Ever After* – discussed in the preceding chapter – make use of the literary researcher into the past whose efforts also carry the weight of a search for personal identity, as does D.M. Thomas’s *Charlotte. The Final Chapter of Jane Eyre*, which will be analysed in this chapter. Two further novels which re-write or adapt iconic Victorian novels are A.N. Wilson’s *A Jealous Ghost* and Justine Picardie’s *Daphne*. Both novels feature Ph.D students whose research into Victorian texts develops into obsession. The former is a reworking of Henry James’ *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) and the latter a compilation of elements from both Daphne du Maurier and the Brontës but particularly heavily influenced by *Jane Eyre*. The general conclusion of many of these novels is that the impetus to re-write a canonical Victorian text and/or author is often an expression of some form of mania and that the past will be unable to fully assuage the longings of the present.

Any of these various efforts at re-writing a Victorian author, text or character can be approached via a modern-day narrative, a pastiche 'Victorian' narrative or a combination of the two. The effects of these novels include homage towards canonical texts and authors, at the same time as a simultaneous desire to undermine their status, as if to emphasise the possibility in the present of negating their continuing power, even while the very fact of re-writing suggests the opposite. It is usually the case that a literary re-write text will take up an oppositional position, in one way or another and to one extent or another, vis-à-vis the originating text or author. The re-write neo-Victorian novel encapsulates the need to reshape history for the present; more than the pastiche neo-Victorian novel or the split-narrative neo-Victorian novel, it frequently attempts to advertise its independence from the Victorian source by critiquing Victorian values, yet by 'lifting' Victorian plots or personnel emphasises its dependence on and debt to Victorian texts and authors. Consequently, the re-write neo-Victorian novel often occupies a more complicated relationship to the Victorian than pastiches or split-narratives. D.M. Thomas's *Charlotte. The Final Journey of Jane Eyre* is an extreme example of a re-write neo-Victorian novel, which not only customises Charlotte Brontë's text for its own ends but additionally references Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*, itself a re-write of the Brontë text.

### 5.1 Pastiche, Parody and Plagiarism

D.M. Thomas's best known novel by far is *The White Hotel* (1981). A serious contender for the Booker Prize and lauded by the likes of Graham Greene and John Updike, the novel also caused huge disquiet. *The White Hotel's* heroine, Lisa Erdman, is treated by Sigmund Freud for hysteria but her symptoms are revealed not to be the result of earlier trauma but a presentiment of her

future fate in a Nazi concentration camp. Add to psychoanalysis and the Holocaust an abundance of graphic masochistic and sadistic sexual episodes and the potential for upsetting the reading public is clear. Additionally, after the publication of *The White Hotel*, D.M. Thomas was accused of plagiarising material about the 1941 massacre by Nazis of Kiev's Jews from Anatoli Kuznetsov's *Babi Yar* (1970) and using it in his own novel with insufficient acknowledgement. Accusations of plagiarism, appropriation of the most violent aspects of twentieth-century history and a voyeuristic concentration on situations of extreme sexuality have dogged D.M. Thomas's writing career ever since. *Charlotte. The Final Journey of Jane Eyre* is much less well known than *The White Hotel* and has been subjected to much less critical scrutiny. However, many of the themes and concerns of *The White Hotel* are present in the later novel: an emphasis on exploitative sexual relationships and issues of race and mental psychosis, suggesting that these areas of human experience are of continuing interest to the author. Most particularly, and of especial interest to this discussion of the novel, Thomas's history of borrowing from other texts is, in *Charlotte*, taken openly and contentiously to another level altogether.

The novel's title indicates not only a dependence on an iconic Victorian Ur-text, *Jane Eyre*, but also glancingly references the Christian name of that novel's author, suggesting the potential for the text's, author's or readership's nostalgia for the Victorian novel and/or an opportunistic commercial appropriation. Neo-Victorian novels frequently integrate episodes from or re-write Victorian novels, while others include the Victorian author as a character in the twentieth or twenty-first century novel. *Charlotte* does both of these while additionally weaving geographical and textual references to Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* into the text. Intertextuality in *Charlotte* is a complex business and can veer off in unexpected directions as, for example, when, early in her

narrative the Jane Eyre character declares: ‘No novel, whether a virile, rumbustious concoction by Mr Fielding, an urbane social comedy by Miss Austen or – dare I say it? – a gloomy, muffled romance by one of the Miss Brontës, can be more than a feeble echo of what actually occurs to all of us. Even though we weep over tender death-bed scenes, do we not read and write novels in order to escape from the sheer terror of real life?’ (C 39). Complicated layers of literary referencing are in place from the outset. Not only does the protagonist of what purports to be a Victorian plot destroy the expected realist conventions by stepping outside the confines of the narrative but she also criticises her own author. Furthermore, the narrator destroys the power of suspended disbelief which assumes that for the time of reading the world of the novel constitutes the world. Here, fiction is exposed as fiction, a literary sticking-plaster against the travails of life outside the book. Contrarily however, the reader who has not read *Jane Eyre* – and to a lesser extent, *Wide Sargasso Sea* – will be without bearings while reading *Charlotte*. Where the reader of Matthew Kneale’s pastiche *English Passengers* can manage perfectly well without knowledge of *The Tempest* or Golding’s *Rites of Passage* and the reader of Graham Swift’s *Ever After* will follow Bill Unwin’s literary ramblings with a little more difficulty without a knowledge of *Hamlet*, *Charlotte*’s reader needs to have read and remembered *Jane Eyre*, in order to be aware of the hooks onto which the twentieth-century narrative is being hung. The raison d’être of the novel is to work alongside and against the earlier novel; while disparaging *Jane Eyre*, *Charlotte* is reliant upon it.

*Charlotte* is a novel written in occasionally oppositional, self-contained and deliberately jarring sections. It is in essence the interweaving of two narratives: a provocative alternative ending and continuation of *Jane Eyre* and the story of Miranda Stevenson, a late twentieth-century academic

whose research specialism is Charlotte Brontë. The links between these two disparate strands are only clarified by the reader imposing interpretation onto seemingly unrelated fragments. A lengthy opening section of the novel immediately unsettles the reader beginning as it does with the line, 'Reader, I married him.' (C 7). This first narrative combines text 'lifted' without quotation marks from *Jane Eyre*, integrated with purple passages which suggest a Brontë pastiche but which stray into territory that Charlotte Brontë would have left alone, including the physical details of Jane's wedding night: 'So pure was my love for this scarred giant of a man that I believed the blood to have come, tainted and sublunary though it was, from the same divine source as that which poured from our Saviour's wounds on the Cross.' (C 15). This telling of Jane Eyre's story has Jane sacrificing her virginity to Rochester in a state of religious ecstasy in a bizarre fusion of the Rochester/St. John Rivers opposition of the originating text. Charlotte Brontë's Jane is both earthier and more silent on the subject of her marital relations with Rochester, suggesting that the writer of this pastiche has either misunderstood or wilfully subverted the original.

Early on it becomes of interest, even of pressing importance, for the reader to divine who the writer-figure of *Charlotte* is, because only then can conclusions be drawn about her/his motives for the re-write. The first clue to a possible narrator of this version of Jane Eyre's story comes with the Jane character's growing awareness that she and Rochester may be sexually incompatible: 'I have observed that such histories as this conclude at the matrimonial altar; and it is because we writers are rightly fearful. In particular, every female writer, I believe, is a girl writing painstakingly, in a silent room, in a bleak, silent house, striving with a sense of desperation to be pleasing to her master.' (C 20). Here, the suspicion grows that *Jane Eyre* the

novel, Jane Eyre the character and Charlotte Brontë the writer are being co-opted in a self-help therapy project by a twentieth-century writer with her own agenda and her own dominant Rochester figure. This is the ‘fictional’ intra-textual manipulation of a nineteenth-century ‘classic’ for uncertain but possibly dubious twentieth-century motives. As the alternative ending unfolds, events become more lurid: St. John writes from India to declare his passionate love for Jane; Miss Temple, now Mrs Maria Ashford, explains to Jane that her childlessness is because she is still a virgin and Rochester is possibly impotent; Rochester is thrown from his horse and killed and Jane, in the company of Grace Poole, embarks for Martinique to try to find Rochester’s son Robert, from his marriage to Bertha Mason.

The soap opera events of the opening section are accompanied by sliding shifts in tone which accumulate to suggest a writer trying too hard to emulate Brontë’s style, with varying degrees of success. In a letter to her cousins Diana and Mary, Jane refers anachronistically to Diana as Di and declares: ‘It is high time you met my better half!’ (C 27). Later, in a nod to twentieth-century feminist attitudes to work and money Jane acknowledges that her legacy has deprived Diana and Mary of occupation and replaced it with boredom. The reader arrives at the end of the novel’s first section aware that the author – and confusion between the roles of author, whether fictional or ‘real’, and narrator has been encouraged by the text – of Jane Eyre’s post-marital journey has a very specific agenda for rewriting but may not be fully in control of her brief. At the same time, the reader may be querying the motives of the novel’s author who probably has a completely different set of reasons for disassembling *Jane Eyre* from his protagonist. All these means of using and abusing, in the present, nineteenth-century authors, characters and text constitute an act of sabotage, but without a clear indication of why the sabotage is taking place.



Echoes of the second novel to be absorbed into *Charlotte – Wide Sargasso Sea* – come in the novel's second section which moves abruptly to the island of Martinique where a second first person narrator, Miranda Stevenson, allows herself to be mistakenly booked in to a conference on feminism under the name Charlotte Brontë and within hours of her arrival has achieved casual sex with two native men, a beach waiter and a cane cutter. If Jean Rhys's novel encourages a feminist reading of the *Jane Eyre* story, the reader of *Charlotte*, trying to get a purchase on the author's 'angle' in appropriating a second iconic, this time twentieth-century, text into his patchwork novel, might wonder whether Thomas is suggesting that feminism, at the end of the twentieth century, is a failed ideology. During the first sexual encounter Miranda conducts a phone call with her husband, the second she tapes along with her musings on the procreating habits of monarch butterflies and self-righteous railing against Clinton's and Blair's Serbian campaign. Miranda's sexual liaisons appear to be more about domination and flamboyant subversion of normative behaviour than lust. The more usual route in the neo-Victorian novel, pastiches particularly, is to place sexually adventurous, non-normative heroines into a social or political situation – often nineteenth century – where they struggle towards and usually achieve a form of independence and fulfilment. *Charlotte* could be read as debunking the potential for or likelihood of such an optimistic outcome, for Miranda is irrevocably damaged.

By the end of the second section, it is becoming clear that the dominant relationship in Miranda's life has been, and possibly still is, with her father. She confesses that as a teenager she wrote an alternative ending to one of her father's favourite Victorian novels, passed it off as a lost manuscript and hoped he would read it as a warning against second marriages, a potential

situation she feared would weaken her status as her father's favourite. The reader is likely now to make the deduction that the first section of *Charlotte* is this manuscript, Miranda's alternative ending to *Jane Eyre*, but neither Miranda nor D.M. Thomas ever makes this connection. At the end of the second section Miranda begins to fashion a continuation to Jane's story at the point where she embarks for Martinique: 'Well now, Jane...I opened my notebook. Do we want stuff about the voyage? No, I don't think so, this isn't Captain Hornblower...' (C 110). Earlier, Miranda cynically referred to the Millenium Dome as the age's answer to and possible improvement on medieval cathedrals and Sir Chris [*sic*] Wren's Dome; Miranda asks no questions about the status of established classics – architectural or literary – nor is she concerned about dumbing-down *Jane Eyre* while she refashions it in any style or genre to suit a client's requirements. Where most re-write neo-Victorian novels may take pot shots at the iconic nineteenth-century author, exposing his sexual infidelities or her eccentricities, there is still a respect for the nineteenth-century text and often homage is paid through the updating or continuation of nineteenth-century plots or characters' lives. In *Charlotte* it is difficult to assess whether the nineteenth-century novel is being shown to be of little relevance to life in the late twentieth century and so is fair game or whether the late twentieth century is a period of such moral and cultural vacuity that it cannot recognise excellence and so destroys it. Equally, Thomas could be using Miranda as a mouthpiece for an oblique sideswipe at some of the more commercial applications of neo-Victorian writing, even hinting that *Charlotte*, his neo-Victorian novel, offers more; more radically still, Thomas could be satirising neo-Victorian fiction and its academic pretensions in totality.

The novel's final two sections switch to two further narrators and narratives. The first of these is an extract from Miranda's father's Cornish Journal, the second a letter from Robert Rochester, Rochester's son, invented the reader has to assume by Miranda, to Mrs Ashford, nee Maria Temple. The Cornish Journal entries document Miranda's father's account of Miranda's visit to him after the Martinique conference and expose Mr Stevenson's emotional and physical blackmail of his daughter. He admits threatening to commit suicide at the moment of the August 11 eclipse, and describes the ritual of Miranda dressing in her dead mother's clothes, which she does, clearly not for the first time. Mr Stevenson openly encourages Miranda to leave her husband and relishes accounts of her liaisons with Martinican men, barely alarmed that she took no precautions, is probably pregnant and potentially has contracted AIDS. She leaves her father the tape of her sexual encounters; in lieu of a sexual relationship with him, this is the next best present. The journal entries are followed, without preamble or explanation, by Robert Rochester's letter and this closes the novel. It is written by Miranda as part of her projected literary career change. In her father's words, and he has evidently never realised or never wanted to realise that his *Jane Eyre* manuscript is a fake: 'She's had enough of academia; she'd like to write fiction. She has an idea for creating alternative endings to nineteenth-century novels – to bring out some of the repressed issues.' (C 150). Miranda – and her father – see her as an innovator when in fact, ironically, by the millenium, the neo-Victorian novel strands of 'alternative endings' or inclusion of 'repressed issues' were already well under way. The letter certainly does not shy away from 'repressed issues'. Robert Rochester is, in Miranda's version, the son of Edward Rochester and Bertha Mason rejected by Rochester because of his dark skin. He is brought up by a local priest as his catamite. Rochester continued to 'visit' Bertha when she was confined at Thornfield, where she was restrained by Grace Poole so Rochester could enjoy

his conjugal rights and Adèle is the child of this phase of the union. Finally, Jane and Robert enjoy a passionate affair until Jane succumbs to a fever and dies.

It would be all too easy to treat such a desecration – and even if the reader admires *Charlotte*, it is hard to view Thomas's treatment of *Jane Eyre* in any other way – of the text of *Jane Eyre* as bad taste or bad writing. The infelicities in Miranda's writing expose her shallowness and her psychological flaws but, of course, she did not write the novel *Charlotte*. The fragmentation of the novel, the various narrators and the shadowy presence of Thomas contribute to complex questions of authorship and point of view or perspective. A reminder that more is going on here than an inept or inappropriate attempt to jazz up an old favourite is the paratextual use of visual material at the beginning of the novel and between Jane's account of her marriage and Miranda's taking over the narrative voice. Acting as a frontispiece at the start of the written text is an 1847 map of Martinique, French West Indies. (C 6). In the same way that each section of written text stands alone and is not overtly linked by any authorial voice to any other section, so no comment is made about the possible relevance of the map to any written narrative which follows.

However, given that the publication year of *Jane Eyre* was 1847 and the novel's title refers to a 'final journey' the map appears to be part of a teasing clue left by a potentially manipulative author.

The later visual material shocks through its content, its placement in the text and in its contrast to the map. It comes at the intersection between Jane's and Grace's embarkation for Martinique and Miranda's arrival on the island. It is a photograph of two more or less naked black people, one male, one female, perhaps native Martinicans, facing each other on a beach. The caption reads

‘Martinique, French West Indies, 1999’. (C 68). The photograph – which is reproduced on the dustjacket of the 2000 hardback copy of the novel – shocks at a number of levels, some of which may well be intended to discomfit the reader, including the sudden switch from a white, English, supposedly Victorian world to a black, foreign, millennial environment. What is more challenging, however, is the contrast between the world of the map and the world of the photograph. The 1847 map depicts the town and bay of Port Royal, the coast flanked by English and French batteries and the bay itself guarded by squadrons of sailing ships, Martinique depicted as the property of a variety of European colonisers. The black couple facing each other on the 1999 beach, one hundred and fifty years later, provide an interior view of Martinique. The man faces the woman, the pose is sexual, even commercial, and the photograph is cropped at their shoulders. Using a technique borrowed from advertising, these two people are reduced to an assembly of their body parts, commodified and for sale. In both map and photograph some comment would seem to be being made about ownership and commerce, the former related to a nineteenth-century colonial world, the latter to twentieth-century consumerism. By such means *Jane Eyre* becomes linked with the politics of subjugation and slavery and *Charlotte* with a resulting faceless economic imperative.

*Charlotte* makes the reader work hard towards a possible understanding of the connections between the various sections of the novel and between the written and visual texts. At no point in the novel is there any sense of general authorial control over either structure or point of view. Miranda is barely aware of her reasons for writing her alternative ending to *Jane Eyre* and often unwittingly reveals a lack of control over her material. D.M. Thomas seems to presume knowledge of *Jane Eyre* in his reader, who would be somewhat adrift without it, but offers little

guidance as to how that reader should negotiate such a carved up version of the original: ‘le lecteur est destabilisé de façon récurrente par le fait que l’opposition entre les deux niveaux, les deux époques, les deux récits, le vrai/le faux n’est posée que pour être contredite ou remise en question ensuite.’<sup>1</sup> The unsigned and unexplained cutting between two narratives from two time periods and two different countries and the continuous opposition between what might be true and what might be false can only be viewed as a deliberate attempt by the author to upset any attempt the reader might make to construct meaning from the various sections of text. That much is clear; what is much less clear is why the author would want to create so much bewilderment and to what end. Bill Unwin in the split narrative *Ever After* appropriates *Hamlet* and *Hamlet* for his own ends. In yet more radical ways Miranda in *Charlotte* appropriates *Jane Eyre* and *Jane Eyre*. Both Bill and Miranda use a specific literary text as framework for managing their own lives and in both cases the reader understands the limitations or pitfalls of the enterprise. However, in *Ever After*, there is no sense of any potentially derogatory comment being made about the value or status of the hypotext, whereas in *Charlotte*, the violence of the uses to which *Jane Eyre* is put leaves the reader in doubt about what might be being suggested about the worth of the original text.

Thus far, this discussion of *Charlotte* has concentrated especially on the relationship between the twentieth-century novel and its Victorian predecessor, *Jane Eyre*. The intertextual relationships in *Charlotte* are more complicated, however, than this initial comparison would suggest, the polyphonous nature of the novel’s various narrative strands echoed by the variety of precursor

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<sup>1</sup> Armeille Parey, ‘“Et ils ne vécurent pas heureux”’: la fin de *Jane Eyre* réécrite dans *Charlotte* de D.M. Thomas’, *Revue LISA/LISA*, 4:4 (2006), 76-90, p. 80. ‘The reader is constantly destabilised by the opposition between the two levels of text, the two time periods and the fact that the true and the false are opposed only to be contradicted or immediately questioned’. My translation.

texts from which it borrows. ‘To read D.M. Thomas is to be made aware of the web of intertextuality that is literary history: no literary work stands on its own, but is effectively a collaboration between past and present voices...which interact with, contradict and clash with each other.’<sup>2</sup> Contradiction and clashing are to the fore in *Charlotte*. To read *Jane Eyre* is to be guided retrospectively through the heroine’s history, all problems resolved, God and the body brought into harmony. In *Charlotte*, the narrator is unstable and unreliable, the plot apt to spring surprises: Jane’s early mentor Bessie has been reassigned as Rochester’s horse and the saintly Miss Temple is unwittingly the agent of the emasculated Rochester’s accident-suicide. References to *Jane Eyre* are overt but confusing, beginning with the title. References to an equally important hypotext, Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea*, are more covert but still confusing. *Wide Sargasso Sea* had already called into question the sexual and colonial certainties of the world of the Brontë text; splicing together *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* produces a particularly hybrid offspring which borrows text from the former, geographical location from the latter and characters from both.

The Martinican map preceding the written text is the first clue that the narrative could veer off into Rhys’s territory. Miranda’s changeable name – Miranda for her father, Andy for her husband, Mandy for her therapist and Charlotte for her disguise as sexual predator – recalls the way, in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Rochester undermines his bride Antoinette by calling her Bertha after her insane mother. Miranda’s mother was also insane and in the scene where Miranda dresses in her mother’s clothes, she addresses her father as Ben and he calls her Emma, for her dead mother. In the same way that in *Charlotte* one text can slide into the other, so personality

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<sup>2</sup> Bran Nicol, *D.M. Thomas* (Tavistock: Northcote House Publishers, 2004), p. 11.

too is unstable, the boundaries between one person and another open to imitation or mimicry. Thomas not only invokes Jean Rhys's reworking of *Jane Eyre* in his own novel but includes fleeting references to Rhys herself: as a child Miranda 'met' Rhys when she was living near them in Cornwall and she entertains the idea that her father had a sexual liaison with Rhys which he does nothing to confirm or deny. The Caribbean setting of the Martinican sections of *Charlotte* recalls the postcolonial emphasis of Rhys's novel, in contrast to the anglo-centric *Jane Eyre* and provides a base for an analysis of the island's potential progress towards autonomy. Miranda's easy and fashionable assessment is that the country and its population is still enslaved, 'trapped by the state's benevolence, and the petrol stations and the shopping malls, and the car in almost every family (so my guidebook informed me).' (C 80). Given that Miranda is blithely unaware of her own superficial analysis of Martinican society in general and her exploitation of Martinican men in particular, *Charlotte* suggests that the more certain global perspectives of *Jane Eyre* and even *Wide Sargasso Sea* have given way to uncertainty and confusion.

*Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* are the most obviously referenced hypotexts in *Charlotte* and furnish multiple opportunities for a consideration of the implications of such a fusion of two iconic texts, one Victorian, one twentieth-century, one which largely supports a white English status quo and one which challenges such assumptions. Miranda's choosing to borrow text, characters, situations and issues from both novels, then deliberately jumble them and add in her own late twentieth-century neuroses to the mix exemplifies the neo-Victorian novel's contradictory impulses: the desire to retain and change, a combined admiration and disregard for earlier works and the lingering question about whether the past and its iconic works may, or may not, have something to teach a cynical but aimless postmodern generation. It is Miranda who



chooses *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* to cut and paste into her ersatz writing but she makes no mention, overt or covert, of the third intertext in *Charlotte*. Matthew Kneale's *English Passengers*, discussed in an earlier chapter, and *Charlotte*, both use Shakespeare's *The Tempest* as origin for sections of their novels, using the parameters of the island to explore the potential for placing protagonists in a restricted and foreign environment. It is apt that D.M. Thomas has chosen the Christian name Miranda and, as with Shakespeare's heroine, provided her with a manipulative father who is the primary influence during her adolescence, after the death of her mother. In such a reading Ben Stevenson becomes a prurient version of Prospero, avid for detail of Miranda's extra-marital flings and Miranda's adventures on Martinique – including her liaison with the mixed race Juan, a sexually confused version of Caliban – a cynical reversal of Shakespeare's Miranda's sexual virtue. In choosing the name Miranda, giving her a dominant bibliophile father and placing her for part of the narrative on an island, Thomas adds to the already complicated layering of literary forbears and emphasises issues of race, identity and paternity. Where Kneale uses *The Tempest* to highlight the standoff between religious fundamentalism and scientific rationalism in a colonial setting, Thomas uses Miranda's escape to the Brontë conference on Martinique to emphasise postcolonial ennui at home and abroad and, for the characters in his novel at least, the false consolations of literature.

Bran Nichol suggests that: 'This practice of mimicking the voices of other authors is the single most striking feature of Thomas's fiction... [he] does not attempt to pass the finished product off as his own, but uses it to create something new.'<sup>3</sup> In *Charlotte* 'mimicking' is added to plagiarism and various other forms of borrowing, particularly from the main source text *Jane*

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<sup>3</sup> Nichol, *D.M.Thomas*, p. 7.

*Eyre*, and creates a disturbing, fractured and hybrid link in the *Jane Eyre-Wide Sargasso Sea* chain. In other words: ‘Thomas explores Brontë’s pretext in a different way, namely by placing the metafictional issue of re-writing at the heart of his hypertext.’<sup>4</sup> The practice of ‘mimicking’ brings with it associations from postcolonial theory, so that *Charlotte* becomes a re-writing of *Jane Eyre* which emphasises the contested position of the colonial subaltern whose mimicry of the discourses of the ex-colonial power places him in a fractured position of ambivalence or double vision. This is the position of the mixed-race Juan, caught between the home and the mother country but also between his homosexuality and a sense of obligation to make a heterosexual marriage. This cut, paste and add method breaks down the autonomy of each of the precursor texts; boundaries are breached and realigned in a disjointed fashion. ‘*Jane Eyre* has perhaps generated more sequels than any other text in the English language’<sup>5</sup> and many sequels – and the prequel *Wide Sargasso Sea* – concentrate on revisioning aspects of the romance plot, including questions of female independence and self-determination as well as issues of class and race but ‘Thomas’s experimental novel is unquestionably the most complex hypertextual version of *Jane Eyre*.’<sup>6</sup> It is also a novel which has generated strong and often widely varying critical assessments.

## 5.2 Disrupting the Canon

Two reviews contemporaneous with the publication of *Charlotte* illustrate the divide in opinion that the novel is capable of engendering. Harriet Lane’s ‘Reader, I had sex with just about

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<sup>4</sup> Ines Detmers, ‘The Second Mrs Rochesters’: Telling Untold Stories of Jane Eyre’s (Im-)Possible Married Lives’, 81-99, in *A Breath of Fresh Eyre. Intertextual and Intermedial Reworkings of Jane Eyre*, eds. Margarete Rubik and Elke Mettinger-Schartmann (Amsterdam-New York: Rodopi, 2007), p. 94.

<sup>5</sup> Barbara Schaff, ‘The Strange After-Lives of Jane Eyre’, in *A Breath of Fresh Eyre*, eds. Rubik and Mettinger-Schartmann, p.35.

<sup>6</sup> Detmers, ‘The Second Mrs Rochesters’, p. 97.

everybody’<sup>7</sup> concentrates on Miranda’s insensitivity with regard to the inhabitants and history of Martinique and the errors in her adaptations of *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*, as if these failings in the lead present-day character must automatically be problems inherent in the novel as a whole. ‘Charlotte...sheds no light on the original, being embarrassingly self-indulgent. At heart, it fails because it does not engage with the characters drawn by Brontë.’<sup>8</sup> This is to assume however that the aim of *Charlotte* is to shed light on *Jane Eyre* or comment on Brontë’s characters. Miranda is certainly self-indulgent, both as a character and as a writer, and that perhaps is the point: by bastardising Victorian texts, either to safeguard her relationship with her father or to provide a future career for herself, Miranda is simply if unwittingly demonstrating her self-absorbed take on both literature and life. Miranda’s pastiche is deliberately exposed as being unable to engage with Brontë’s characters; she is so damaged that she is able to engage only with herself and, through her father, with her past. Whether the implication here is that Thomas’s intervention into neo-Victorian writing is to imply it is written by irresponsible and disrespectful misreaders of the canon is unknowable.

Patricia Duncker takes a completely different line in her review of *Charlotte*. She criticises the novel for its sometimes uneven control over the different narrative voices but takes great pleasure in the debunking of what she suggests is the unsatisfactory, because smugly domestic, ending to *Jane Eyre*. She points to some interesting analogies between the two texts: ‘Like a contemporary female Rochester, she [Miranda] gets stuck into the local talent’<sup>9</sup> and Miranda’s

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<sup>7</sup> Harriet Lane, ‘Reader, I had sex with just about everybody’, *The Guardian*.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2000/may/28/fiction.reviews1>

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Patricia Duncker, ‘Eyre on a G-string’, *New Statesman*. <http://www.newstatesman.com/200005220052>

dressing up in her mother's clothes recalls Rochester attempting to dress Jane in finery as a prelude to the intended bigamous marriage. Duncker's review of *Charlotte* is more measured and nuanced than Harriet Lane's because she understands that the opinions expressed by characters in the novel may or may not be the opinions of the author. She is unafraid to criticise *Jane Eyre* – 'Thomas's idea that Rochester made Grace hold Bertha Mason down while he had sex with her sounds all too plausible', and to be refreshingly irreverent in the face of iconic quotations – 'Oh, and there's one line I wish I'd written: "Reader, I told him to piss off."' The opposing stances taken by the two reviews exemplify some of the difficulties involved in coming to an understanding of the complexities thrown up by a novel like *Charlotte* and D.M. Thomas has lain himself wide open to criticism from a number of directions: in the novel he tackles matters of race and gender and does so by manhandling two well known and well received precursor texts and through a set of not especially amiable characters.

Sue Thomas's detailed critique of *Charlotte*, 'Pathologies of Sexuality, Empire and Slavery: D.M. Thomas's *Charlotte*'<sup>10</sup> accords Thomas's novel a heavyweight status from the opening paragraph: 'A canonical revision of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*, and William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, it features a cross-generational proliferation of pathologised Bertha Mason figures in plots involving "the Hysterical woman, the masturbating child, the Malthusian couple, and the perverse adult."' <sup>11</sup> Sue Thomas suggests that Foucauldian referencing allied to Freudian analysis is used to place the novel's characters in a narrative which considers the results of French imperialism and the legacy of racial slavery in Martinique.

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<sup>10</sup> Sue Thomas, 'Pathologies of Sexuality, Empire and Slavery: D.M. Thomas's *Charlotte*', 101-114, in *A Breath of Fresh Eyre*, eds. Rubik and Mettinger-Schartmann.

<sup>11</sup> Thomas, 'Pathologies of Sexuality', p. 101.

However, despite this acknowledgement of the serious concerns of the novel, she accuses *Charlotte* of exhibiting, ‘the detritus of plantation pornography, the racism inherent in its conventions, and domestic sexual exploitation, all paraded before readers with a tasteless and breathless exhibitionism.’<sup>12</sup> Sue Thomas’s justification for such a harsh judgement is her assessment that despite the playing off of different narratives against each other, expressions of misogyny and latent racism – particularly Miranda’s – are insufficiently ironised or framed within the overall structure of the novel. The problem with such an argument however is that it would be just as easy to argue the opposite: that D.M. Thomas is allowing Miranda to condemn herself out of her own mouth through her meretricious platitudes. It is true that the novel deals in matters of taste but it is not at all clear whether tastelessness is an accusation which can be laid at the door of D.M. Thomas or whether he is suggesting a possible critique of late twentieth-century malaise. As Miranda explains to her father, one of her husband David’s problems with his job at the Millenium Dome is that he can find nothing to put in the Faith Zone.

Christian Gutleben suggests that in *Charlotte*, ‘religious and imperialistic values are rejected and what is celebrated is exotic sensuality’<sup>13</sup> but there could be many readers who find Jane Eyre’s erotic relationship with her husband’s son laughable rather than credible. In other words, any proposition which attempts to sum up the novel’s point of view on sexual, racial or literary matters is immediately open to an opposite standpoint. Gutleben is on surer ground in his overall summing up of the inherent and deliberate ambiguity of the novel: ‘The postmodern text is the sum of the various sub-texts and their ideologies; it superimposes the contemporary, the mock-

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 112.

<sup>13</sup> Christian Gutleben, ‘Palinodes, Palindromes and Palimpsests: Strategies of Deliberate Self-Contradiction in Postmodern British Fiction’, *miscellanea: a journal of english and american studies*, 26 (2002), 11-20, p. 15.

Victorian and the Victorian texts in order to combine their perspectives and messages and to take stock of both anarchy and harmony, to suggest both disorientation and sources of plenitude, to voice at the same time the hopelessness and the hopefulness of human relations.’<sup>14</sup> Here Gutleben’s argument avoids the pitfalls of Sue Thomas’s criticisms of *Charlotte* because it refuses to over-emphasise one aspect of the novel – its potential for a racist perspective – and instead concentrates on the confusions, contradictions and ‘oxymoronic synthesis’<sup>15</sup> of the novel’s juxtaposed narratives.

Thus far, this discussion of D.M. Thomas’s *Charlotte* has established that making any kind of definitive statement about the novel is fraught with difficulty. Any attempt at placement brings with it an intrinsic counter-argument. What is beyond dispute is that the novel is constructed from initially disparate-seeming narratives, some based in the novel’s present, some purporting to be from a Victorian past and unlinked by any overt authorial direction. A map at the start of the novel and a photograph between the first two sections may add to the confusion: no character or author refers to either. The present-day narrative appears to confront issues of postmodern anomie: a world of failed relationships and worthless work. The ‘Victorian’ text offers little comfort, being a bastardised fusion of copyings, borrowings and additions to Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, with a nod in the direction of Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea* and Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*. *Charlotte* is a neo-Victorian novel which provokes tension between the iconic and the upstart text and poses questions about the authentic and the fake, the real and the unreal and the status of authorship, territory covered in a different setting and tone in Graham Swift’s *Ever After*, discussed in the previous chapter. As in *Ever After*, and A.S. Byatt’s *Possession*, the

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 12.

present-day representative is an academic of the Victorian, but whereas *Ever After* and *Possession* approach Victorian texts with something approaching reverence, it is impossible to be sure whether Thomas's parodic treatment of *Jane Eyre* is intended as criticism of the decorum of the source text or of the maladjustment of the contemporary protagonist and her world.

D.M. Thomas himself appeared to express anxieties and mixed feelings about the novel at the time of its publication, particularly in view of the adaptation of the ending of *Jane Eyre* and the 'deliberately unsexy and unengaged [sex scenes], because that's the way my neurotic heroine is.'<sup>16</sup> The ordinary reader's difficulty in deciding how to approach and assess the novel is mirrored by Thomas's similar quandary: 'I reread *Charlotte* for the very last time, and quite enjoy it. I've had to read it many times in the course of revision and proof-reading, and my feelings keep changing. Sometimes I warm to it, sometimes it leaves me cold...I couldn't predict how I would review this book if I weren't its author.'<sup>17</sup> It might well be the case that any writer has doubts about his or her work at different times during the writing process but Thomas's comment about not knowing how he would review the novel had it been authored by another writer is telling and emphasises the novel's resistance to easy labelling. Two comments in Thomas's *New Statesman* interview are, however, revealing of his attitude to both the novel and its time, though this is not to suggest that authors are inevitably the best judges of their novels' 'meaning'. The first comment fantasises about being able to reject reviewers of the novel in the way that jurors can be rejected in a court of law. 'I think I'd read out to them [reviewers] the proposed EU "Charter of Rights" and ask them whether they find it a breath of fresh air or

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<sup>16</sup> D.M. Thomas, 'The journalist's *idée fixe* is that I must have been sexually abused because I slept in my father's bed', *New Statesman*. <http://www.new.statesman.com/print/200006120004>.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

chokingly liberal-fascist. Those who feel choked I'd allow on the jury. Because an underlying theme of *Charlotte* is that every age finds its own attic-room for its own unique madness.'<sup>18</sup>

Thomas seems to be suggesting that liberal-fascism is this age's madness in the attic. The potential awkwardness with this argument within the parameters of the novel would be the potential for Thomas to be ranked alongside the quasi-paedophilic Ben Stevenson with his predilection for bath-time games with his grandchildren and for reliving his relationship with his nymphomaniac wife by dressing his daughter Miranda in her mother's clothes. This is the line Sue Thomas takes in condemning what she sees as the latent racism and sexism in the novel. 'Black female characters are...highly marginal in the scenes of contemporary Martinician life in *Charlotte*, and Thomas's contempt for feminists is palpable' and more specifically, 'Miranda's scenarios, acted out with depersonalised black men, are deeply pornographic.'<sup>19</sup> D.M. Thomas would presumably have found Sue Thomas's condemnation of some aspects of his novel 'chokingly liberal-fascist'. It is this lack of respect for the holy cows of liberal early twenty-first century society that makes the reader of *Charlotte* uncomfortable. The neo-Victorian novel has sometimes been accused of playing to the gallery of the supposedly risqué but actually largely mainstream acceptance of non-heterosexual relationships and an easy abhorrence of the colonial past. D.M. Thomas upsets that politically correct status quo.

D.M. Thomas's dislike of the prescriptive attitudes towards individual expression and restrictions placed on individual freedom tends, within the context of *Charlotte*, to further complicate the novel's moral and political compass. It is not surprising that reviewers and critics of the novel, striving for some purchase, concentrate on potentially racist or anti-feminist

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Thomas, 'Pathologies of Sexuality', p. 108.



attitudes expressed either by the characters themselves or perceived to be present in the author, or, if seeing the novel in a more positive light, grasp at the idea of self-actualisation through sexual abandon, as though the novel is, in some respect, suggesting a way of managing to live in an era without clear ethical codes and dimensions. With this sense of absence or lack of fixity in mind, another of D.M. Thomas's comments in his *New Statesman* interview seems especially pertinent: 'How hard it is...to get at the reality of a person. It's hard to get at one's own reality.'<sup>20</sup> The fluidity and unknowability of others and even oneself is expressed in *Charlotte* structurally through the disjointed and fragmented narrative with its switchback oscillations between the present and past. The certainties of the original *Jane Eyre* text are replaced by a cannibalised version constructed by a present day inadequate narrator who looks to the literature of the past for some form of salvation. In *Charlotte* as in many other rewrites, '*Jane Eyre* does not exactly provide a role model but rather a point of departure' which demonstrates, 'that meaning is always a process of interaction between the original text and its historically specific readers.'<sup>21</sup>

## 5.2 The Politics of Appropriation

For D.M. Thomas, contemporary society's attic room contains the repression of liberal-fascism but it is possible that for many readers what the textual fragmentation of *Charlotte* nails best is our age's socio-political uncertainty which renders individuals unsure of their own reality or their standing in the world and inadequate in relating to the reality of others. The political dimension of the neo-Victorian novel, a hazy and amorphous concept, is a nonetheless a subject which is beginning to exercise a number of academic studies. The idea of the political in these

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<sup>20</sup> Thomas, *New Statesman* article.

<sup>21</sup> Patsy Stoneman, *Brontë Transformations: the Cultural Dissemination of Jane Eyre and Wuthering Heights* (Hemel Hempstead, Herts.: Prentice Hall/Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1996), p. 231.

kinds of discussions is necessarily catholic and could include any or all of the following: a consideration of the ethics of appropriating the lives of actual Victorians; the inevitable skewing of the facts through the inclusion of real people, characters from iconic literary texts and historically specific events in fictional situations; the selectivity necessitated by a concentration on the allegedly overlooked of the Victorian period, especially women and homosexuals; the concentration on the effects of a colonial past, often from an attitude of *mea culpa*. A discussion of these matters at this point is particularly timely. All neo-Victorian novels attempt at least one of these categories. D.M. Thomas's *Charlotte* includes them all and does so through the adaptation of an iconic Victorian novel which the author shreds both in content and form. The novel includes references to real people, notably Charlotte Brontë and Jean Rhys, both of whom are given unlikely and even demeaning plotlines. Fictional characters from the two hypotexts are placed in geographical, societal and sexual arrangements which would have been unthinkable in the original texts. The colonial issues raised obliquely – and probably unintentionally – by *Jane Eyre* and overtly by *Wide Sargasso Sea* – are re-examined in *Charlotte* through the conversations between a present-day Martinician cross-dressing homosexual and Miranda's casual racism portrayed as tourism. Many commentators who tackle the idea of the political in the neo-Victorian novel argue that neo-Victorian novelists are attempting to come to an understanding of the present by using the past as a lens through which to consider our society vis-à-vis our recent ancestors and their world. '[N]eo-Victorian adaptations have challenged Victorian constructions of empire, gender and sexuality...But more than this, our sustained engagement with the past signals our continued attempts to make sense of the contemporary moment.'<sup>22</sup> Bowler and Cox suggest that neo-Victorian novels such as *Charlotte* frequently involve some form of critique,

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<sup>22</sup> Alexia L. Bowler and Jessica Cox, 'Introduction to Adapting the Nineteenth-Century: Revisiting, Revising and Rewriting the Past', *Neo-Victorian Studies*, 2:2 (Winter 2009-2010), 1-17, p 3.

destabilisation or revision of antecedent texts and ideologies of the past, thereby allowing ‘a simultaneous recognition of and departure from that past, allowing us the space in which to grapple with the renewed crises we face in negotiating our (post)modern identities.’<sup>23</sup>

Undoubtedly, *Charlotte* recognises the past world of *Jane Eyre* – and *Wide Sargasso Sea* for that matter – and departs violently from them both. The novel also provides a space for the consideration of present day crises, personal and cultural. What it does not do, however, is suggest any definitive value to either the past or the present. Given the novel’s iconic status, the bastardising of *Jane Eyre* by Miranda is a political act even if she is not aware of this but whether *Charlotte* is a statement about the superior value of the past and its works compared with a meretricious present is never certain.

An apposite discussion of the political impetus of the neo-Victorian novel is given by Peter Widdowson in his wide-ranging article ‘ ‘Writing Back’: contemporary re-visionary fiction’.<sup>24</sup> Widdowson’s article sets out to, ‘focus down onto a specific sub-genre of ...contemporary historical writing: ‘re-visionary fiction’, novels which ‘write back to’ – indeed, ‘rewrite’ – canonic texts from the past, and hence call to account formative narratives that have arguably been central to the construction of ‘our’ consciousness.’<sup>25</sup> Widdowson concedes that at the more commercial end of the scale authors of such historical novels pander to the public’s desire for pastiches providing a ‘good read’, which feed into the current popularity of period drama on television and in film and provide a haven of temporary certainty in a more uncontrollable present. Widdowson goes on to argue, however, that other novels debunk the idea of a glorious

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Peter Widdowson, ‘ ‘Writing Back’: Contemporary Re-visionary Fiction’, *Textual Practice*, 20: 3 (2006), 491-507

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 491.

past, are sceptical about the concept of shared national myths and use the past to uncover its continuing influence in the present. The effect of such rewriting is to de-stabilise received ideas about a shared history and to offer alternative versions through the looking-glass of fiction. ‘A true historical novel will offer an account of the past which purports to be true – often, indeed, one which claims to correct, amplify or substitute for authorised History – but which is simultaneously sharply self-conscious about its own representation of that ‘truth’.’<sup>26</sup> *Jane Eyre* has been subjected to innumerable re-writes, some commercial, some quirky and some, like *Charlotte*, determined to upset both through the treatment of subject matter but also through methods of representation.

Split-narratives by their very construction draw attention to their fabrication. *Charlotte* is both a historically split and chronologically fragmented narrative, offering no signposts between the novel’s various strands, the narrator is unstable on a number of levels and the one fixed point of reference for the reader – the text of *Jane Eyre* – is subject to various forms of mutilation. ‘Truth’ is in short supply in *Charlotte*. Widdowson’s central thesis in his article is that novels like *Charlotte*, writing back to Ur-texts which have helped construct a dominant national perspective focus ‘on the politics of texts.’<sup>27</sup> Such novels use former novels not just as source or adaptation material nor simply with parodic intent, though all of these elements are likely to be present. Rather, for Widdowson, re-visionary novels ‘take an historical text which carries a burden of cultural authority and ...bring into view both the features of it which have *made* it canonic and those discourses in it suppressed or obscured by historically naturalising readings.

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 495.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 497.

The contemporary version attempts...to replace the pre-text with itself, at once to negate the pre-text's cultural power and to 'correct' the way we read it in the present.'<sup>28</sup>

The opening sentence of *Charlotte* – 'Reader, I married him.' (C 7) – brings with it instant recognition and, in a traditional reading of *Jane Eyre*, an assertion of female emancipation coupled with a promise of romantic fulfilment. In *Charlotte* this reading is destabilised initially by the plagiarising of such a headline quotation and swiftly afterwards by the debunking of Rochester as a Byronic hero, and the emphasis throughout the novel on unsatisfactory sexual couplings and ongoing misunderstandings over race. *Charlotte* certainly highlights the canonical in the pre-text *Jane Eyre* and exposes its apparent stability to ridicule. To further examine Widdowson's thesis, it is impossible to imagine that *Charlotte* would ever be able to replace the pre-text with itself or negate its power but it would not be possible to re-read *Jane Eyre* in the same light having read *Charlotte*. In this way, the pre-text becomes a new text, shorn to an extent of the received conventions that have bolstered it and allowing it to be read afresh as a fiction, bound by its time, but which had come to be absorbed into something more akin to historical fact. In other words, the 'truth' of *Jane Eyre* is revealed to be as unstable as the truth of *Charlotte*.

Given that 'contemporary fiction is at the same time paradoxically nostalgic, critical and cynical about the Victorian tradition'<sup>29</sup> a complicated nexus of power relations exists between hypertext and hypotexts. *Charlotte* deploys Miranda's Brontë pastiche as a plot device with parodic effect

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 499.

<sup>29</sup> Gutleben, *Nostalgic Postmodernism*, p. 218.

since it simultaneously – and perhaps disingenuously, depending on whether the reader regards Miranda or Thomas as the author of the pastiche – comments on and critiques its Victorian forbear. Whether D.M. Thomas is nostalgic for the world represented by the earlier text is unknowable but Miranda and her father certainly are. *Charlotte* disrespects an iconic Victorian text while also acknowledging Miranda’s nostalgic and backward-looking yearning to be enclosed by such a text. Christian Gutleben has applied the concept of refraction to the way in which a contemporary text like *Charlotte* integrates and exploits ‘both the reflections of a previous text *and* the new light shed on the original work by its rewriting...refraction involves the assumption of a dialectic relation between the canonical and postmodernist texts, affecting the result as well as the source, the new text as well as the old one, the modern product as well as the original prototype.’<sup>30</sup> Gutleben uses the terms ‘prototype’ and ‘product’, tying the Victorian text into an age of originality and novelty while the modern novel – and this would include Miranda’s attempts at re-writes of canonical Victorian novels – is linked to the worlds of commerce and niche marketing. Additionally, like Widdowson, he acknowledges that parodic neo-Victorian fictions are a *mélange* of received opinions of the source text and any new ways of seeing it provoked by its re-writing, so that a complex re-visionary text like *Charlotte* becomes an amalgam of potential ways of reading. ‘Thus, there is no longer such a thing as writings; there are only rewritings which reorganise previous cultural discourse.’<sup>31</sup> The re-write *Charlotte* deliberately reorganises *Jane Eyre*’s cultural hegemony but equally deliberately, presumably, refuses to offer an alternative discourse for our own time.

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<sup>30</sup> Susana Onega and Christian Gutleben (eds), *Refracting the Canon in Contemporary British Literature and Film*, (Amsterdam-New York: Rodopi, 2004), p. 7.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

Gutleben utilises the concept of refraction as a means to assess the neo-Victorian novel as a creation of the present which is embedded in the past, often written in the light of a previous work and ‘which contributes to a better understanding of both the present and the past, the text and its hypotext, modernity and tradition.’<sup>32</sup> This may be the case with some re-write neo-Victorian novels which take a less drastic or destructive attitude towards the Victorian original. With regard to *Charlotte*, Gutleben argues that ‘the refracting text presents facts, certainties and definitive closure whereas the refracted text remains implicit, uncertain and open, so much so that the Victorian novel appears to be the more ambiguous, contingent and unresolved – in other words, the more postmodernist-text.’<sup>33</sup> Gutleben comes to these conclusions on the grounds of the definitive facts the reader of *Charlotte* is given about Rochester’s and Jane’s deaths. It is not a convincing argument and it is more tenable to make the case that even while *Jane Eyre* has remained open to numerous continuations and adaptations, one of its attractions for many readers is the sense, after all the vicissitudes of the plot, of closure at the end of the retrospectively told and therefore managed narrative. So, while refraction is an interesting means by which to examine the neo-Victorian novel and, in particular, ‘political’ examples of the genre which demolish and re-assemble canonic Victorian novels, where *Charlotte* is concerned refraction does not emphasise closure so much as uncertainty, disruption and socio-political malaise.

### 5.3 *Charlotte*: the Palimpsestuous Text

The emphasis in novels like *Charlotte* is on self-contradiction, selectivity and the deliberate opposition of contrasting ideological positions. The ambiguity of a novel which cuts between time periods and previous and contemporary fiction but always leaving the traces of the one

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

within the other, suggests the analogy of the palimpsest, exercises in layering which never quite achieve grafting or synthesis. The traces of the original show through and opposing versions of related texts are presented to the reader who is left to attempt to construct a relationship between literary forebears and contemporary narratives. Picking up on these evolutionary connotations, Mark Llewellyn has commented: ‘Perhaps we could do with a new neo-Darwinian novel, a *French Lieutenant’s Woman* for the twenty-first century.’<sup>34</sup> He makes this observation in the context of a review of a text whose final chapter concentrates on Fowles’s seminal novel and alongside remarks about the novelistic potential of Richard Dawkins’ anti-God movement and the 2009 Darwin bicentenary. The importance of John Fowles’s novel to the neo-Victorian novel has never been in doubt and it is not the contention here that D.M. Thomas’s *Charlotte* is *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* for our time. There are other novels within the neo-Victorian movement which take on Darwin’s legacy in more overt ways and many are discussed elsewhere in this thesis. Several novels deal with Darwin the man, people who worked with Darwin or are novels of exploration; other novels pit religious evangelists against nineteenth-century clergymen in a battle between faith and science; yet others uncover artefacts, including fossils, from previous eras in order to indicate the layering effects of human memory and knowledge.

The ways in which *Charlotte* deals with ideas connected to the principles of evolution is, however, more subtle and at the same time more pervasive than in more overt examples which attempt to construct a picture of Darwin the man or his life on *The Beagle*. The key to a view of *Charlotte* as a text about literary evolution is the use of *Jane Eyre* – and *Wide Sargasso Sea* – as foundation texts. The phrase ‘survival of the fittest’ comes to mind – *Jane Eyre* being one of the

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<sup>34</sup> Mark Llewellyn, ‘On the Turn’, p. 156-7.



most continually re-worked Victorian novels – despite the chequered history of the term. First coined by Herbert Spencer in response to reading *The Origin of Species*, Darwin himself later substituted the phrase for his original phrase of ‘natural selection’. The ‘survival of the fittest’ as a concept has subsequently become associated with right-wing politics and Social Darwinism and used as a justification for allowing weaker members of a society to go to the wall so the stronger may flourish. Darwin’s original idea of ‘natural selection’ is more allied to the idea of adaptability to a local set of circumstances at a particular time. A mix of all of the above associations of the idea of natural selection is at play in *Charlotte* but none offer any hope for the progressive development of the species, rather the opposite. D.M. Thomas engineers Miranda to a conference in Martinique to give a paper on Charlotte Brontë. Here, despite mouthing platitudes about sharing the historic pain of a slave nation, she eventually colludes in continuing exploitation and justifies her actions on the grounds of the local men’s willing acquiescence in a post-colonial version of subjugation. She watches dispassionately while a monied Afro-American couple ignore a local beggar: ‘it’s not wise to encourage beggars, even for ex-slaves it’s not wise to encourage beggars – and the man gave up and wandered out.’ (C 90). Miranda’s instinct for survival is not just racially biased and extends to her fellow academic Yvette. When the news of Yvette’s husband’s fatal car crash comes through Miranda’s reaction is purely self-interested: ‘But suddenly all that huge weight had lifted from me; my heart was flying and singing...It wasn’t one of mine!’ (C 97).

The union between *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* has spawned *Charlotte*, a novel which, like its forebears, examines the legacy of an alliance between colonial adventures and a romance plot. *Jane Eyre* examines the outcome of Rochester’s first marriage through Jane’s biased

narration, subsequent to the events themselves and from an English cultural perspective. *Wide Sargasso Sea* reverses the process, telling the events more closely to their unfolding, in a West Indian setting and giving Rochester's first wife a voice. *Charlotte* adapts and integrates both these texts to a different time and a balance of settings and situations between the colonisers and the colonised, as though to test the continuing influence and power of the originating texts and to assess the world that their union has conceived. The results are not especially uplifting. *Charlotte* challenges the possibility of perpetual human progress with a cast of characters who act predominantly according to self-interest in a world of valueless artefacts and moral vacuity. The novel questions the intrinsic worth and stability of all human experience and of human beings themselves. Personality is fluid and unstable. In events at home and abroad the virtual impossibility of knowing another human being in any permanent or profound way is constantly underlined through misread signs and blatant lying. The novel's title itself is a reminder of the Christian name of the author of *Jane Eyre*, the name Miranda deliberately allows to be mistaken for her own at the Martinician conference and the name adopted by Juan in his transgendered incarnation. Miranda's postcards home to family and her therapist underline contemporary assumptions about multi-faceted lives and an acceptance that role shapes character. On the level of plot the reader of *Charlotte* is left with an uncomfortable awareness of unfinished business. The contemporary characters are left in limbo: will Miranda stay with her husband and her despised poly/versity job or will she decamp to Cornwall, her roué father and a new career as a reshapener of the Victorian canon? The overwhelming emphasis is on impermanence and instability, in part because none of the protagonists demonstrate any positive way of living in a post-colonial and apparently post-ethical world.

*Charlotte* depends on mix and match. The character Jane Eyre becomes in *Charlotte* a potential modern incarnation in the character Miranda Stevenson, various madwomen from various attics are morphed into Miranda's mother and Grace Poole reappears on the scene to explain Bertha Rochester to Jane Eyre and to have a life of her own for once. Mix and match extends further than character however, to the novel's construction. Through a mix of plagiarism, pastiche and parody, the juxtaposition of journals, letters and visual material and the layering of one text upon another the inescapable conclusion is that this modern text relies on copying, adapting and building upon an older text. A pastiche of *Jane Eyre* forms the opening section of the novel, a concocted letter from Robert Rochester explaining Jane Eyre's death closes the novel. Miranda's story is tucked into the interstices between the bastardised versions of *Jane Eyre*, bastardised of course by Miranda. Miranda's life may in future be lived through the agency of canonised texts which she will reshape according to her own needs and, she believes, to reflect her own times.

The neo-Victorian novel, and *Charlotte* is a particularly extreme example, depends on layering, referencing and making new. In both form and function it expresses, in a generalised way, the effects of literary evolution, at least for one strand of the novel at the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty first: the continuing influence of key texts from the Victorian canon and their realignment to suit a contemporary version of the world. The neo-Victorian novel which appropriates text or characters from or authors of Victorian novels – and *Charlotte* does all these things – chooses an especially extreme route to express conjunction with or disjunction from Victorian referents. It would be simple to suggest that neo-Victorian novels which expose the documented peccadilloes of Victorian authors or invent their fictional failings or expose an apparent Victorian rigidity or prissiness are assuming an anti-Victorian stance

and/or adopting a commercial approach to publication. Neo-Victorian novels which adapt Ur-texts undoubtedly exploit a readership's knowledge of the original material and apply contemporary and sometimes risqué elements to the mix. There is however a risk involved in such a distortion of canonical texts, especially when the fracturing of the original is as great as it is in a novel like *Charlotte*. Not only does such a novel break down the perception of a sense of containment or wholeness of the foundation texts, it offers no possibility of ideological completeness in the present. The re-write neo-Victorian novel may disparage the Victorian text or the Victorian author but its use of pastiche, parody and plagiarism can also serve only to emphasise a sense of loss and discontinuity.

## Conclusion

History is our lost referential, that is to say our myth.<sup>1</sup>

This thesis has examined the phenomenon of the neo-Victorian novel during the twenty year period, 1990-2010, in order to ask questions about the notable quantity of such novels being written during these twenty years, to consider the areas of subject interest of these novels and to examine the different forms that the novels take. 1990 was used as a starting point because so many neo-Victorian novels were published during the final decade of the twentieth century causing debate about the merits or demerits of literature that looked backwards into the nineteenth century rather than forwards into the twenty-first. The critic Natasha Walter, writing on the eve of the millennium, accused historical writing of avoiding tackling the difficulties of contemporary life and challenged writers ‘to search out the present too, to walk into the mazes around us, to find words and images for things that have only just begun to come into existence.’<sup>2</sup> More than a decade later, one consensus on the neo-Victorian novel, ironically, is that these novels do walk into the mazes round us, in an attempt to find words and images for things that have not necessarily just begun to come into existence but for things that are now particularly relevant and pressing. As Samantha Carroll explains it, ‘neo-Victorian fiction’s representation of the Victorian past is also the lens through which a variety of *present* concerns are examined.’<sup>3</sup> Carroll goes on to outline other key characteristics of the neo-Victorian novel which explain its emergence as a literary phenomenon of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century: its underpinning of cultural theory and postmodern criticism taught in British

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<sup>1</sup> Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, p. 43.

<sup>2</sup> Natasha Walter, ‘The Seductions of the Past’, *The Independent*, 30/08/1999.

<sup>3</sup> Samantha J. Carroll, ‘Putting the ‘Neo’ Back into Neo-Victorian: the Neo-Victorian Novel as Postmodern Revisionist Fiction’, *Neo-Victorian Studies* 3:2, (2010), 172-205, p. 180.

universities in the later decades of the twentieth century; contemporary questioning of the boundaries between historical and fictional narrative, the emphasis here being especially on ‘narrative’ and the various forms it may take; and, dependent on all the former, the desire to resurrect the voices or lives of history’s and fiction’s marginalised or forgotten. Carroll’s summary of the features of the neo-Victorian novel illustrates what a complex set of characteristics these novels demonstrate. Her final item, the construction of voices missing from the archive, has become a staple of neo-Victorian fiction in the imagined lives of the dispossessed or disenfranchised – slaves, servants, women, the poor. At the same time, the neo-Victorian novel adapts, develops and alters the lives of the Victorian famous, real or fictional, to highlight possible connections between contemporary and historical concerns but, at the same time, to advertise awareness of the fluid boundaries between history and fiction, and fact and fiction. The various forms that the novels take further complicate attempts at connection between the Victorian and the present. Historical narrative becomes, in the neo-Victorian novel, the desired means of connection to the nineteenth-century past, an attempt to regain a sense of continuity with a historical era perceived to represent forward and continuous momentum but this is a desire which is consistently undermined, to a greater or lesser extent, by the various metafictional and structural devices which the neo-Victorian novel adopts.

The introductory chapter of the thesis outlines the development of the neo-Victorian novel, addressing, among other issues, the means other commentators have used to catalogue and categorise the novels, and charting the development of a body of critical work on the neo-Victorian novel, including the establishment of the *Journal of Neo-Victorian Studies* in 2008. The introductory chapter also acknowledges and examines the importance to the neo-Victorian

project of three key twentieth century novels – John Fowles’ *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*, A.S. Byatt’s *Possession* and Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea* – which suggest not only thematic areas of interest for later novels, but which also express twentieth-century theoretical standpoints, as later novels would do, and provide a variety of structural templates for the neo-Victorian novel proper to improvise upon.

Chapter 2 of the thesis goes on to classify more than a hundred neo-Victorian novels written during the period 1990-2010. Apart from underscoring the fact that the neo-Victorian novel became a publishing phenomenon during this period, the cataloguing of so many novels allows conclusions to be drawn about the subject areas deemed by neo-Victorian authors to present a convincing connection to the Victorian and at the same time, to be of contemporary relevance, a version of Foucault’s ‘notion of “spirit”, which enables us to establish between the simultaneous or successive phenomena of a given period a community of meanings, symbolic links, an interplay of resemblance and reflexion.’<sup>4</sup> This thesis examines these novels under various sub-headings: varieties of sexual experience, the female protagonist, crime and the London experience, colonialism and race, fictional biographies and systems of belief, while acknowledging that other, though probably overlapping classifications would be possible. Such organisation of material depends, amongst other issues, on the number of novels read, and the order in which they are read, as well as the influence of other commentators who might be reading and commenting on some of the same novels. One of the original contributions to knowledge of this thesis is its comprehensive – though not definitive – consideration of a large percentage of the neo-Victorian novels written during this twenty year period. No other example of critical assessment of the neo-Victorian novel has attempted to classify such a broad range of

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<sup>4</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, p. 24

examples of these novels. As a result, both the emerging neo-Victorian canon and neo-Victorian novel theorising have tended to rely too heavily on a select number of novels. Canon formation is still too dependent on some of the earlier neo-Victorian novels which surprised and teased with their exposés of ‘hidden’ ‘Victorian’ sexuality or crime.

The collating of the novels into subject interest groupings exposes how the neo-Victorian novel is being used to explore current sites of anxiety through the medium of a historical correlative. Additionally, the novels express contemporary ideas and beliefs about us as descendants of the Victorians: the Victorians shied away from detailed expression of sexual relations in their own literature, so the neo-Victorian novel revels in situations of sexual deviance; the Victorians are assumed to have idolised their great men and women so the neo-Victorian novel depicts Charles Dickens or Charlotte Brontë with a more jaundiced and cynical eye. Victorian colonial expansion, even in novels which are embedded in the time, concentrates on victims and dispossessed native people. A particular neo-Victorian favourite – the stand-off between religious faith and the development of scientific knowledge – tends to focus on the vacuum left in its wake. The neo-Victorian novel is at pains to emphasise our indebtedness to the Victorians yet also to endorse the perception of contemporary society’s rather more sophisticated take on common issues, while additionally admitting that these common issues are often still common problems. More than anything, the neo-Victorian novel questions ‘What we believe in now’, without for the most part supplying any answers.

The following three chapters of the thesis (Chapters 3-5) isolate three individual neo-Victorian novels – Matthew Kneale’s *English Passengers*, Graham Swift’s *Ever After* and D.M. Thomas’s



*Charlotte. The Final Journey of Jane Eyre* – in order to examine three key structural forms that neo-Victorian novels take. If Chapter 2 constitutes the ‘what’ of the neo-Victorian novel, Chapter 3 indicates the ‘how’, an area of neo-Victorian criticism which has so far been largely overlooked. It was a deliberate decision to choose three novels which have either been ignored by neo-Victorian criticism for the most part, or are less well known examples of the genre, by authors who have had notable critical success with other novels. It is still the case that neo-Victorian criticism tends to concentrate especially and repeatedly on a few examples of the genre, the novels of Sarah Waters for example – *Tipping the Velvet*, *Affinity*, *Fingersmith* – or Michel Faber’s *The Crimson Petal and the White*. These novels have all enjoyed critical and popular success; all three have been broadcast as television adaptations, tapping into a seemingly insatiable public interest in neo-Victorian crime, prostitution, spiritualism, sexual licence and scenes of squalid streets teeming with colourful characters in a perceived updating of Dickensian social realism for the twenty-first century. The three novels chosen for analysis in this thesis move away from such easily identifiable neo-Victorian tropes; the three novels have also been chosen to represent three different structural forms that the neo-Victorian novel takes, which have a profound effect on the reception of neo-Victorian material and which produce widely varying relationships between the neo-Victorian present and the Victorian past. In the same way that the thematic ‘types’ of novels catalogued and discussed in Chapter 2 overlap and are open to interpretation from many standpoints, so the three novel forms discussed in Chapters 3-5 equally do not represent discrete or unrelated structures. A pastiche neo-Victorian novel may also be a re-write of a Victorian ‘classic’, for example. However, by categorising and comparing the three forms chosen, the potentially dislocated nature of the neo-Victorian novel is progressively exposed. Given that the neo-Victorian novel, especially in its pastiche form, which constitutes by

far the majority of novels, is at pains to collaboratively ease the reader into an acceptance of the actuality or reality of the fabricated past, the increasingly fragmented forms of the three novels analysed in Chapters 3-5, indicate that some neo-Victorian authors wish to express our dependency on the recent past as a failure in the present.

The pastiche neo-Victorian novel, represented in Chapter 3 by Matthew Kneale's *English Passengers*, has, in many ways, the hardest job. The pretence, a collusion between text, author and reader, is that an authentic Victorian world is being presented. Author and reader also understand that this false premise requires a covert acknowledgement of a twentieth or twenty-first century world either through the combination of contemporary issues and a 'Victorian' setting and/or through paratextual flourishes which could include prologues, epilogues and postscripts; visual material including family trees, maps or photographs or varying typefaces. In *The Crimson Petal and the White*, Michel Faber achieves a jarring effect through the interjections of an apparently omniscient but disruptive narrator and through the disintegration, at the end of a long novel, of any anticipated plot resolution. More playfully, in *The Meaning of Night*, Michael Cox, signals the metafictionality of his novel from the beginning: an Editor's Preface by J.J. Antrobus, Professor of Post-Authentic Victorian Fiction, University of Cambridge. In *English Passengers*, Matthew Kneale addresses the essential contradiction of the pastiche neo-Victorian novel through a combination of researched historical material, the device of a multiplicity of narrative voices and barely concealed contemporary attitudes to England's colonial past. The result is a novel of considerable scope which nevertheless does not quite escape from a sense of the present preaching to the follies of the past, thereby rendering

Victorian characters stereotypes and missing the opportunity for connection to the complexities of the past.

The desire of the neo-Victorian novel to connect with the Victorian can only be managed, it would seem, through an acceptance of the strength of that desire and the simultaneous acknowledgement of the impossibility of its satisfaction. This is the territory that the split-narrative neo-Victorian novel exploits and explores. What the pastiche neo-Victorian novel may attempt to conceal, the split-narrative probes. There are far fewer split-narrative neo-Victorian novels, perhaps because they expose the faultlines that the pastiche may attempt to hide. Split-narrative neo-Victorian novels are often about families, the genetics and artefacts that one generation leaves to another and the struggle in the present to understand how to deal with what is inherited. Documents – journals, letters, diaries – take on a mythic importance in these novels, bequeathing to the living the task of deciphering and comprehending fragmentary material in an attempt to piece together an understanding of past lives and their relevance to a contemporary world. However, even in the most optimistic of split-narrative novels, A.S.Byatt's *Possession* or Adhaf Soueif's *The Map of Love*, for example, the reader is aware, if the protagonists are not, that knowledge and understanding are at best piecemeal and frequently biased. Graham Swift's *Ever After*, through its meandering narrative strands which move ceaselessly between past and present, suggests incrementally that the past is not recoverable in any personal sense nor does it offer any lessons for how to live in the present. The past is just that, past, even if protagonists in the novel's present cannot shake it off or stop believing that it has some form of didactic message for understanding how to manage their own lives. It is not joined in a seamless line to the present, it is fragmentary and partial like the narrative structure of the novel.

Many neo-Victorian novels imitate Victorian novels, novel genres or Victorian writers in one way or another, in a complex mix of pastiche and parody. They may include Victorian authors or fictional Victorian characters. The impetus of this type of neo-Victorian novel is often a combination of homage, resurrection and criticism. Famous Victorians are often pushed to the margins to allow the stories of the unknown poor to take centre stage; where Victorian authors appear in novels it is often to emphasise their failings. Here too, the neo-Victorian novel wants things both ways: to trade on the cachet and enduring pull of the Victorian greats and to simultaneously give them a bloody nose. As with all neo-Victorian novels, the underlying impulse is towards connection, to Victorian novels, Victorian names and the Victorian past through a modified reading relationship. At the uncontroversial end of the spectrum there are novels which poke fun at the idiosyncrasies of Victorian famous – Lynne Truss’s *Tennyson’s Gift*, for example, which lumps together not only Tennyson but also Julia Margaret Cameron, Charles Dodgson and Ellen Terry in a muddle of poetry, photography and phrenology – or novels which imaginatively reconstruct actual situations in order to examine them within their own time but also against our own – Julian Barnes’ *Arthur and George*, for example. Even here, however, there is an uncomfortable disconnect between facts and fiction, the known and the imagined and an awareness, on the reader’s part, of a particular spin being applied. Connection is undermined by the inability in the present to contemplate the Victorian author or his/her work without the accompanying distortions demanded by the present.

This anomalous position is brought to an exaggerated conclusion in the novel examined in Chapter 5, D.M.Thomas’s *Charlotte. The Final Journey of Jane Eyre*. The novel is an extreme

choice to represent a third category of neo-Victorian novelistic forms, the re-write novel. *Charlotte* takes one of the most re-written neo-Victorian novels, Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, includes reference to *Jane Eyre*'s most famous re-write, Jean Rhys's prequel *Wide Sargasso Sea*, confuses authors and their characters, giving both disturbingly inappropriate outcomes and combines these disparate strands with an equally unpalatable contemporary narrative. The result could be a debunking of twentieth and twenty-first-century glorification of the Victorian novel; contrarily, homage to a Victorian masterpiece which can no longer be emulated in a vacuous present; a critique and annihilation of the neo-Victorian novel itself, or none of these things. What Thomas's novel does encapsulate is the endless desire to recapture the Victorian past and Victorian literature through one of its most iconic exemplars, whether this is an act of homage or criticism, and the inherent difficulties in the present in doing so. What *Charlotte* expresses instead through its fragmentary, disconnected narrative threads, both 'Victorian' and modern, is the endlessly repeated attempt to make the Victorian text or author relive in the present despite the impossibility of the venture.

The three novels discussed in Chapters 3-5 of the thesis represent three different structural forms that the neo-Victorian novel adopts: the pastiche, the split-narrative and the re-write. While it is evident that there is overlap between these forms, isolating them in this way indicates the importance of the structural underpinning of any neo-Victorian novel in its covert or overt dealings with its own fictionality. That the majority of neo-Victorian novels opt for the pastiche mode suggests that the neo-Victorian novel genre expects a willing suspension of disbelief from its readers, even while these novels demonstrate a wide variety of postmodern techniques which act to dismantle the credibility of the 'Victorian' world they are constructing. Thus Matthew

Kneale's use of polyphony in *English Passengers*, and even more the novel's barely disguised anti-colonial stance, play in somewhat contradictory ways to a modern sensibility, but unintentionally perhaps, leave the reader at odds with the Victorian past. The split-narrative and re-write novels discussed above – Graham Swift's *Ever After* and D.M. Thomas's *Charlotte* – progressively examine the chasm that the pastiche novel tries to disguise. Where the split-narrative actively probes the rift between past and present storylines, making this gap the *raison d'être* of the novel, the re-write novel which attempts to do more than produce a commercial version of a canonic Victorian novel, usually has to take issue with the originating novel in some way. This can be achieved by highlighting the peccadilloes of a Victorian author's life or by disassembling and reconstructing his/her work, either of which exposes the shift from the Victorian to the modern. *English Passengers*, *Ever After* and *Charlotte* between them express many of the political or ideological stances adopted by the neo-Victorian novel in general, in all its forms, including the tendency to impose contemporary attitudes onto historical facts or historical people and the application of the consequences of Victorian scientific discourses to the present.

Neo-Victorian criticism continues to concentrate largely on issues of theme and genre but, so far at least, has largely eschewed the importance of structural form. In fact, neo-Victorian criticism still appears to be searching for a solid base and currently is poised between two, not necessarily or not totally, disassociated positions. The main outlets for neo-Victorian criticism are the journal of *Neo-Victorian Studies* based at Swansea University in Wales, which issued its inaugural edition in 2008 and the Rodopi series of edited collections on, sometimes allied, aspects of neo-Victorianism. In recent years the journal of *Neo-Victorian Studies* has issued

special editions on Steampunk and technology (2010), representations of visual and material culture in neo-Victorianism (2011), the importance of representations of the child in neo-Victorian arts and discourse (2012) and the forthcoming 2013 edition will discuss new approaches to feminism in neo-Victorianism. The Rodopi neo-Victorian series has already published collections of articles on trauma in neo-Victorianism (2010), neo-Victorian families (2011) and the gothic in neo-Victorianism (2012). A future collection will concentrate on the neo-Victorian city.

Both *Neo-Victorian Studies* and the Rodopi series adopt an interdisciplinary or multi-disciplinary approach to, ‘contemporary re-imaginings of the nineteenth century in Literature, the Arts, and Humanities.’<sup>5</sup> At the same time as *Neo-Victorian Studies* and the Rodopi collections continue to take an eclectic and catholic view of what might constitute neo-Victorianism, there is a contiguous line of enquiry which continues to suggest the need for discussion about the desirability of parameters being set to define less freely what is neo-Victorian or, more pertinently, what is not. In 2008, in the inaugural edition of *Neo-Victorian Studies*, Mark Llewellyn was asking questions which included:

What is a neo-Victorian engagement? What is a neo-Victorian text? Can it be any text published after 1901 which is set in the Victorian period, or is it about characters from a Victorian text, or about real life Victorians? Can it be a text set in the contemporary period but with recognisable allusions to Victorian texts, characters, people? Where does conscious and deliberate appropriation begin and general awareness of accidental echoes of the Victorian end? <sup>6</sup>

The current edition of *Neo-Victorian Studies* (2012) posts in its announcements page, information about a conference in Boston, USA, in January, 2013, on Neo-Victorianism and Marginal Voices. Papers are requested to address, among other things: ‘What is neo-Victorian

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<sup>5</sup> *Neo-Victorian Studies*, e-journal homepage, <http://www.neovictorianstudies.com/contents.htm>.

<sup>6</sup> Mark Llewellyn, ‘What is Neo-Victorian Studies?’, *Neo-Victorian Studies*, 1:1 (2008), 164-185, p. 175.

literature? What are the genre's boundaries? What are its defining characteristics? Are there exemplary texts? What time period forms the boundaries of neo-Victorian literature? When can it be written, and when must it be set?'<sup>7</sup> The similarity between the questions posed in 2008 and those to be discussed in 2013 suggests that fundamentals about what does and what does not qualify as neo-Victorian are still of pressing relevance. These seem to be the apposite questions for neo-Victorianism in the near future: should neo-Victorian criticism remain inclusive and encouraging towards research in all media and in any tenuous associative fields or should the development of a neo-Victorian canon be the way forward to further establish neo-Victorianism as a worthy discipline in academic study? Since the neo-Victorian novel, in particular, has been open to varieties of thematic material, has utilised any novelistic genre and expressed itself through novels from the commercial to the highbrow, this is clearly a watershed moment.

Concentrating solely on neo-Victorian fiction, it is the contention of this thesis that the neo-Victorian novel is likely to have been written in the later decades of the twentieth century onwards because it is highly susceptible to the influence of literary discourses which emphasise self-conscious awareness of metafictionality. It can be written in any form, adopt any or a combination of genres, cover any thematic material and be written in the present with reference to a version of a Victorian past or be embedded in that past. Some neo-Victorian novels will continue overtly to echo or parody Victorian predecessors – novels or people – while others will suggest Victorian associations or nuances. Finally, too great an emphasis on the need to form a neo-Victorian canon could result in a concentration on those novels which easily lend themselves to televisual or filmic representations and which appeal to a more clichéd or sensationalist

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<sup>7</sup> Conference Announcements, *Neo-Victorian Studies*, 5:1 (2012), p.274-5.



‘Victorian’ agenda. Neo-Victorian studies is poised on the horns of a rather Foucauldian dilemma, between the academic drive to classify, regulate and order against the populist proliferation of neo-Victorianism in the culture at large. This point of potential divergence could provide a fruitful area of study for neo-Victorianism in the immediate future.

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