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ELENA ENCIU

**NEO-VICTORIANISM
IN RECENT BRITISH
AND AMERICAN FICTION**



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Theoretical Approaches to the Neo-Victorian Novel

The study of the critical corpus reveals a fertile ground for terms, definitions and concepts that have been coined and developed from different perspectives in order to designate a type of novel written in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, but with deep textual links to the Victorian universe of the nineteenth century. The studies the analysis is grounded on are either comprehensive and aim to explain the metaliterary cultural phenomena or focused on aesthetic projects or attempting to circumscribe the novels in a certain (sub)genre. This chapter aims at exploring the critical evolution of the term “neo-Victorian” during its complicated journey through which it was proposed, questioned, extended, objected to, and rehabilitated before being legitimized by the formal beginning of a new disciplinary field of study, which confers the term a relative stability.

1.1. Theoretical Background: Revising the Victorian Age in Contemporary Fiction

The recurrence of Victorian texts and contexts in contemporary fiction is part of a cultural interest for history that develops throughout the twentieth century which has been described as a fascination with the past. This approach to the past has frequently been achieved through the direct reconstruction of real historical events and of the lives of its protagonists. The terms of “adaptation” and “appropriation” or historical events or characters denote categories of analyses that go beyond the framework of literature, though frequently used in relation to it.

In most cases, such fictional texts do not seek to remain faithful to the original Victorian source, but this does not mean that they are less valid. Critics who take interest in adaptations generally agree with the rejection of the fidelity criterion as an argument for value judgments regarding the quality of an adaptation. Simply remaining as faithful as possible to the writing and the spirit of the literary work is only an option and has not proven to be the best. The deconstructionist approach is a way of getting close to the past and its literature, more analytical rather than

nostalgic and, therefore, more in line with the vision of the past at the end of the twentieth century. In the second half of the preceding century, several contemporary authors wrote narratives staged in the Victorian era. Their adaptation to the print form or to film was meant to reveal both the sociological and the cultural interest of the original works. These stories do not only resume the representation of Victorian characters and themes, but also contextualize them by connecting them with important social and ideological controversies of the historical period to which they are connected.

As to the reasons of recreating Victorian literary characters at the turn of the twentieth- first century, one could mention a certain nostalgia for the past, for a particularly prosperous period for Britain or the celebration of a very important literary tradition. Another reason could be the desire to obtain satisfaction by verifying and comparing the technological and ideological progress that has been achieved over time.

Taking a step further and telling Victorian stories from a contemporary point of view is a more complex process. The influence of the present on the version that these popular adaptations offer to Victorianism is conveyed through the media and invites the readers/ viewers to look back at the past through the flaws of the present. There is no doubt that these two generalizations can hide some trivial approaches and very different justifications for recreating Victorian novels and stories. However, these statements indicate one of the effects of recreating other historical periods: the projection of present concerns in relation to the past provides a critical distance mechanism used to analyse this problem, looking for the causes and solutions of these conflicts.

The ideological and cultural background of Postmodernism contains, among other things, the recognition and affirmation of the importance of history and the ways in which it was represented in the shaping of our cultural identity. Historical narration, both historiographical and literary, has been seen by theorists, such as Hayden White and Linda Hutcheon, as a structure that allows the investment of the past with meaning through the perspective of the present. The narration of the past, therefore, consists in the presentation of diverse and disordered ensemble of events through a discourse that offers them a structure and allows them to be interpreted. The representation of historical reality is debated at the end of the twentieth century, because “facts” can no longer be seen as something predetermined, something given, but rather as something that take the form of a discourse and therefore depend

on power structures and their historical change. Also, a message from a sender to a receiver, which is inevitably influenced by the environment and the context in which it occurs, can be considered a form of discourse. The historical discourse is already conceived not as a vehicle for past events, but as a vehicle for the narration of those events. An important aspect of the configuration of that discourse is based on the selection from all events of those that should be considered as historical “facts.” In one of his earlier works, *The Content of the Form- Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (1987), Hayden White states:

Certain narrative discourses may have arguments embedded within them, in the form of explanations of why things happened as they did, set forth in the mode of direct address to the reader in the author’s own voice and perceivable as such. But such arguments are more properly considered as a commentary on, rather than part of, the narrative. In historical discourse, the narrative serves to transform into a story a list of historical events that would otherwise be only a chronicle. In order to effect this transformation, the events, agents, and agencies represented in the chronicle must be encoded as story elements. (43)

To White, historical events are “emplotted” in a narrative in order to acquire meaning. In *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988), Linda Hutcheon analyses postmodernist historical novels with historical topics such as fictional and self-conscious stories that attempt to dramatize what she calls the paradox of the reality of the past. The action of these contemporary rewritings takes place in a historical era and they are, to a greater or lesser extent, explorations of new forms of representation of history. The fact that the historical narrative is also a narrative and that it is no more legitimate than fiction itself to tell truths about the past is a characteristic point of view of this type of novel, which Hutcheon names “historiographic metafiction:”

[Historiographic metafiction] can often enact the problematic nature of the relation of writing history to narrativization and, thus, to fictionalization, thereby raising the same questions about the cognitive status of historical knowledge with which current philosophers of history are also grappling. [...] Historiographic metafiction refutes the natural or common-sense methods of distinguishing between historical fact and fiction. (1988: 92-93)

For Linda Hutcheon, a common feature of this type of novel is its metatextuality, understood as the awareness of the narrator(s) that the text elaborates and does not simply reflect a representation of the past. Therefore, it represents the awareness of how the formal aspects of the text affect the content of the message. In *The Politics of Postmodernism*, published a year later, in 1989, Linda Hutcheon clearly explains how the debate about the historiographical representation of events is strongly linked to the literary debate that explores the relationship between history and fiction: “there are important parallels between the processes of history- writing and fiction-writing and among the most problematic of these are their common assumptions about narrative and about the nature of mimetic representation.” (1989: 58)

According to Hutcheon’s analysis, the approach of contemporary “historiographic metafiction” is based on not considering the past as something closed and compact, as the totalizing vision of traditional historical narrative, and emphasizes the narrative instead of hiding it under the pretext that the facts “narrate one another” without intermediation:

[...] there is an urge to foreground, by means of contradiction, the paradox of desire for and the suspicion of narrative mastery- and master narratives. Historiography too is no longer considered the objective and disinterested recording of the past; it is more an attempt to comprehend and master it by means of some working (narrative/ explanatory) model that, in fact, is precisely what grants a particular meaning to the past. (1989: 64)

As part of this trend, fictional works belonging to authors such as John Fowles, Antonia S. Byatt or Julian Barnes have approached the recreation of characters from the nineteenth century in stories that try to rethink the anxieties, personal and ideological conflicts of the historical period with reference to the present. The contrast with the writing moment of the work offers the possibility to compare the two periods. This leads to another aspect that Hutcheon considers characteristic of “historiographic metafiction:” the comparative approach. In historiographic metafiction, choosing a historical stage to set a story indicates the adoption of a contemporary perspective to judge that past moment and its representations. In general, it can be assumed that the writers who choose to deal with the past from the present do it either to foreground it or to contrast it to the present.

The metafictional approach is not exactly new (one can also find references to the divergence between reality and its representation in relatively old texts). Yet, the concern for the representation of history is strongly present in the modernist ideologies of the twentieth century:

The question of historical knowledge is obviously not a new one, but the powerful and unignorable conjunction of multiple challenges to any unproblematic concept of it in art and in theory today is one of those intersections that, I think, define the postmodern. [...] Today, postmodernism represents the attempt to re-historicize -not dehistoricize- art and theory. (Hutcheon, 1988: 225)

However, Hutcheon states that there is something strange about the contemporary way of making metafiction and relating it to history that must be included among the identifying features of the novel written in the second half of the twentieth century.

The term “representation” is used with different meanings in distinct contexts, whether linguistic, semiotic, audio-visual, dramatic or, for example, in political contexts. In her book, *Vision and Difference, Feminism, Femininities and the Histories of Art* (2003), Griselda Pollock refers to the history of art as a system of representations:

a signifying system, a point of production of definitions and meanings which can be seen both in their particularity and in their relations to other mutually reinforcing discursive and institutional practices, across whose varying processes woman/femininity and man/masculinity are produced, renegotiated and fixed in relative hierarchies. (135)

This conception of artistic representation as interdisciplinary and mobile invites to a constant (re)evaluation of representations, one of its objectives being the contrast between the different forms of staging the same things.

In *Linguistics and the Novel* (1989), Roger Fowler claims that representation “conveys the illusion of a represented ‘reality’ which might have an existence independent of and external to the medium through which it is communicated.” (71) The caution with which this explanation is presented indicates the complex

relationship between reality and its representation. The idea of representing the real in any environment seems to acknowledge a reality pre-existing to the text, which it simply reflects.

However, any representation of reality is not the same as its referent, but involves an intervention, a type of manipulation that gives rise to meaning. In their endeavour to rewrite the Victorian Age and voice the voiceless, neo-Victorian fiction comes down to the paradoxical duality that inevitably lies behind adaptation, while at the same time it re-produces a pre-existing reality and produces a fictional world situated at a certain distance from its model.

Fowler is also aware of this fact and, in his definition of representation, he immediately clarifies that the text is not “simply a transparent, undistorted picture of a palpable reality,” (71) but it involves a selection based on the individual perception of the world and on the interest in social concerns and in the institutions that support it, which is uttered through a certain means and to be interpreted by a receiver. (72) Fowler thus provides two important keys to analysing representation: the point of view from which the text comes and its relationship with the receiver.

The way in which a society, a culture, represents reality conditions the ways of accessing the knowledge of the world. If an artistic text is interpreted as a message from a sender to a receiver, it is normal that the manipulation of the “real” materials represented helps the ideological and narrative message which someone wants to communicate. From the point of view of gender studies, for example, different authors have expressed their concern about the way women are represented, especially because the concept of representation itself, understood as an ideological and textual interpretation of social phenomena, allows a clearer observation of the political implications of art and the use thereof in order to dismantle its negative aspects and to offer alternatives from another political position. In *Vision and Difference* (2003), Griselda Pollock discusses the term “representation” and states:

[...] the term stresses that images and texts are no mirrors of the world, merely reflecting their sources. Representation stresses something refashioned, coded in rhetorical, textual or pictorial terms, quite distinct from its social existence. Representation can also be understood as ‘articulating’ in a visible or socially palpable form social processes which determine the representation but then are actually affected by the forms, practices and effects of representation. [...]

Finally, representation involves a third inflection, for it signifies something represented to, addressed to a reader/viewer/consumer. (8-9)

In this definition, Pollock summarizes the three fundamental aspects that influence a representation. The first aspect is the environment in which it takes place and which determines how it is stated conceptually and aesthetically. Sometimes intertextual connections, which may affect to a greater or lesser extent the final effect, are established. The second aspect is the cultural and ideological environment from which the message comes. The third aspect is the relationship with the person who has the role of receiver: any representation is made for someone and seeks to provoke a response. The type of receiver that comes to an author's mind when approaching a text largely determines the construction of that text.

In her book *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988), Linda Hutcheon appreciates the process of receiving the message of a fictional text and considers this a fundamental aspect of representation, especially when discussing historical contexts:

The text has a context, and form is given sense perhaps as much through the receiver's inference of an act of production as by the actual act of perception. This would be especially true of ironic postmodern texts where the receiver does indeed posit or infer an intent to be ironic. (1988: 80)

Hence it follows that the reader builds the whole representation in his mind, aware that he receives a message and that he must interpret the different codes that configure it as a whole. Hutcheon's perspective on the representation of history opens another field to be added to those that influence the representation of Victorian women: the connection of the text with historical data through the interpretation that the author and his work and the receiver and his reading assign to the past.

In the second half of the twentieth century, feminist critics looked at new perspectives on female characters in Victorian literature. This reinterpretation of iconic characters from the Victorian era had a special presence in all intellectual and creative circles. Since representation cannot avoid the ideological position from which it is enunciated, it is fair and convenient to use that critical approach to expose the patriarchal norms that have been transmitted, sometimes in a veiled manner, in the traditional, cultural phenomena, clearly recognizable in the type of

social structuring in force in Victorian England. The neo-Victorian point of view has been able to offer a positive alternative to women, offering the current reader a nostalgic, ironic view on those nineteenth-century women and allowing us to reinterpret them from a historically present standpoint.

The novel represents through language characters and places in a world in which they move, interact with other characters and their environment, thus offering the modern reader an introspection into their thoughts, physical and mental space as means of representation of their particular world. Despite the efforts to build credibility and authenticity, what the reader sees and senses is not “real,” but a copy, a textual reproduction. Therefore, the representation of characters in neo-Victorian fiction is double because they both play the role of their Victorian source of inspiration and a version of reality that makes them relatable to contemporary audiences. This aspect has important implications: on the one hand it indicates a more radical manipulation of the sources that make up the text and it disguises the character as something natural that the reader sees without being seen. These novels present now what happened before, not in a pure, but in an elaborate manner, while it directs the reader’s gaze through the eyes of the author, at a certain agenda that the author wishes to promote.

In her work *Adaptation and Appropriation*, published in 2006, Julie Sanders makes a clear distinction between the two terms. An adaptation may contain omissions, rewritings, and additions, but even so, it is recognized as the work of its original author. Unlike adaptation, in appropriations the original point of the statement may change, and although the characteristics of the original work remain, the new text belongs more to the person who adapted or rewrote it. (Sanders, 26). In turn, Linda Hutcheon announces in the preface to *A Theory of Adaptation* (2006) that her work represents a challenge to the traditional denigrating concept of adaptation that degrades it in a subsidiary condition compared to the original, the source of the monolithic truth of a text:

There are many shared lessons taught by Kristevan intertextuality theory and Derridean deconstruction and by Foucauldian challenges to unified subjectivity and the often radically egalitarian approach to stories (in all media) by both narratology and cultural studies. One lesson is that to be second is not to be secondary or inferior; likewise, to be first is not to be originary or authoritative. (2006: xiii)

Hutcheon defines adaptation as an “extended, deliberate, announced revisitation of a particular work” (2006: 170) in which “the pleasure of the audience [...] relies on the ‘palimpsestuousness’ of the experience, on the oscillation between a past image and a present one.” (2006: 172) Therefore, Hutcheon’s definition is intended to avoid the hypertext prioritization as a source or original over the hypertext as a mere reproduction or subordinate repetition.

Indeed, the neo-Victorian novel adapts and appropriates, has characteristics of aftering, establishes refraction relationships between hypotexts and hypertexts and behaves as a revisionist type of fiction in projects with politicized agendas. It can be analysed from more nostalgic (retro) perspectives, which frame it in the complex relations of dialogue between the nineteenth and twenty-first centuries, and has an extraordinary multiform nature, because it can be a natural historical novel, a novel that simulates the Victorian language and universe without inducing a rupture or suspension of discredit, and can contain Victorian texts made in imitation of authentic texts to the point of continuing to recreate the past with varying degrees of *ventriloquism*. To a different extent, all the terms align and converge towards the central point represented by the neo-Victorian novel.

1.2. The Battle of Prefixes

Since Linda Hutcheon coined the term “historiographic metafiction,” it has often been used to encompass, in an extremely broad but unclear conceptual sense, various rewritings of Victorian texts. One reason could be that the term establishes an intimate dialogue with history, but this relationship is paradoxical in that the texts interact simultaneously with the past and declare the textualized nature of historiographical knowledge. It actually claims historicity while destabilizing it. Even when it has been admitted that, in a broad sense, neo-Victorian novels are metafictional historiographies, the nomenclature is not adequate or sufficient to highlight the rewritings of Victorian texts and distinguish them from reformulations or other recreations of texts from other times. For this reason, towards the end of the twentieth century, other names began to appear.

In her article “The Redemptive Past in the Neo-Victorian Novel” (1997), Dana Shiller introduced the term “neo-Victorian novel” to refer to a subcategory of historical novels, which she described as “characteristic of postmodernism and