Feminist Awakenings:
Review of Essie Fox's *Elijah's Mermaid* and Stevie Davies' *Awakening*

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Essie Fox, *Elijah's Mermaid*
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Stevie Davies, *Awakening*
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From the outset, neo-Victorianism has been crucially concerned with gender issues, particularly the role of women and the historical discrimination and abuses perpetrated against them, regardless of whether the neo-Victorian novel's beginnings are located in the 1960s with Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) and John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) or pushed further back to Michael Sadleir's *Fanny by Gaslight* (1940) and Marghanita Laski's *The Victorian Chaise-longue* (1953). As such the neo-Victorian novel has been engaged in feminist consciousness-raising, whether directly or indirectly, both of its audience and its often outcast, persecuted, and exploited female characters. Perhaps fittingly – if never conclusively (witness Sadleir and Fowles) – historical fiction itself was once regarded as a peculiarly 'feminine' genre, both in terms of its writers and audience, something like the poor spinster cousin of the more 'literary' novel. In the last three decades, however, not least through the neo-Victorian efforts of such iconic women writers as A. S. Byatt and Sarah Waters, the genre has gone mainstream and firmly established itself at the heart of the cultural establishment. Not least, today's historical novels, particularly those re-imagining the long nineteenth

century, repeatedly win the most coveted national and international literary prizes, most recently Eleanor Catton's *The Luminaries* (2013), which garnered both the Governor General's Award (Canada) and the Booker Prize. Not coincidentally, *The Luminaries* also includes that indispensable element of neo-Victorian gender politics – the fallen woman or prostitute.

The same motif recurs in two other recent neo-Victorian fictions by women writers that more specifically focus on feminist awakenings: Essie Fox's *Elijah's Mermaid* (2012) and Stevie Davies' *Awakening* (2013). Both novels pursue their feminist agendas through the trope of biological or affinitive sisterhood, which as yet remains a comparatively neglected topic in neo-Victorian criticism. This is all the more curious in view of the importance of sisterhood for the second-wave feminist movement, as well as for feminist and proto-feminist literature of the nineteenth century, such as Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* (1856), Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market* (1859, publ. 1862) or, perhaps most famously, Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) with its depiction of psychological sisterhood and *dédoublement* between the titular heroine and the first Mrs Rochester, as per Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979). Fox's and Davies' neo-Victorian novels, however, centralise sisterhood – in its various potential meanings – in such a way that a discussion of their works becomes virtually impossible without it. On one hand, this centralisation of sisterhood could be read as signalling dissatisfaction with post-feminism, constituting a nostalgia for a previous phase or phases of feminism, played out via fictional travel back in time. On the other hand, via the earlier historical setting, the privileging of sisterhood helps focalise the biological inscriptions and potential re-essentialisations of feminism itself – from Woolfean 'thinking back through our mothers' to *jouissance, écriture feminine,* and the in-your-face sexuality/self-sexualisation associated with girl power. Arguably, this latter aspect of neo-Victorian writing tends to be disregarded in favour of concentrating on the genre's liberative aspects.

Fox's novel explores the sisterhood trope in the contexts of Victorian art, publishing, and the asylum industry, while Davies' text does so through the context of religion, specifically the Dissenting Baptist community. Each writer pairs her unconventional 'fallen' protagonist with a second, more conservative female protagonist and double. However, the latter does not merely perform the role of convenient foil (as Ernestina

Freeman does to Sarah Woodruff in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, for example), but instead plays a crucial part in facilitating – and eventually to a greater or lesser extent participating in – the awakening of her more transgressive 'sister'. Though strikingly different in narrative mode, with Fox opting for a Gothic as compared to Davies' realist approach,[1] both novels also contain resonant echoes of Victorian writings and, in the case of Davies' novel, Victorian women writers' lives.

Elijah's Mermaid opens with the report of the suicide of a young woman and mother. Fished from the Thames, her 'found' infant is brought to Mrs Hibbert's House of Mermaids, an up-market brothel on Cheyne Walk, London, where she grows up under the name of 'Pearl' – ironically referencing both the "gleaming and white and innocent" colour of her namesake (p. 94) and the title of a Victorian pornographic magazine. The choice of the brothel's location is itself overtly self-conscious, evoking that most famous of Pre-Raphaelite painters, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, a resident of the same street. However, Osborne Black, the patron who eventually purchases the adolescent Pearl at Mrs Hibbert's auction of her maidenhead, is an artist more in the John William Waterhouse mode, obsessed with the painting of pale mermaids. (Fittingly, Pearl suffers from a genetic mutation, having webbed feet.) At the age of fourteen, the nineteenth-century age of consent for marriage, Pearl is coerced to sign a blank "*entitlement*" deed giving herself into the "*care and protection of*" whichever man signs what is, in effect, her purchase agreement (p. 89, original italics). Pearl's subsequent life as Black's muse and artist's model, posing first as his daughter and later his wife, thus proves little more than a continuation of her former objectification and exploitation, when Hibbert temptingly paraded her before her clients as "the Wondrous Water Child, the Living Jewel from the Oyster Beds", her "petite nymphe" (p. 19), crowned with shells.

Interspersed with Pearl's narrative is that of the putative orphans Elijah and his twin sister Lily, who are adopted from the Foundling Hospital at a young age by Augustus Lamb, a middle-class writer of popular children's books and fairytales, including one of a mermaid (calling to mind Hans Christian Anderson's work). Lamb's intervention in the children's lives follows a letter from his friend and London publisher Frederick Hall, informing the writer of Hall's suspicions regarding the likelihood of the infants being the illegitimate children of Augustus' dead son, Gabriel, and a young Italian woman once employed at Frederick's offices, where Gabriel worked. Yet in spite of the brother-sister twinning and the novel's title,

Elijah's Mermaid actually focuses much more on female than male experience. Apart from actual and invented nineteenth-century epigraphs, and interpolated occasional letters, stories, Elijah's short diary, and newspaper reports, the narrative is told exclusively from Pearl's and Lily's perspectives. It is the implicit doubling of Lily and Pearl – as each girl's fate could easily have been the other's – that drives the plot, while their very names embody the poles of the Victorian feminine binary (or sisterhood) of purity and corruption. Indeed, in Fox's Gothic sensation fiction, respectability and 'fallenness', virtue and vice go hand in hand, with the one risking at any moment to tip over into its correlative. Not least, the twins' beloved 'Uncle' Freddie assumes increasingly sinister overtones, as he becomes implicated in both the pornography trade and in procuring young Magdalenes from "*the Dockside Nightbird Mission*" (p. 22, original italics) as household servants expected to service their master's private needs also. As much is gradually revealed when the twins reach maturity, and Elijah, on account of his artistic talents as an illustrator and photographer, moves to London to work for Osborne Black upon Freddie's recommendation. When Elijah mysteriously disappears some ten weeks later, the ingénue Lily leaves the ailing Lamb in search of her brother – assuming the more traditional role of the fairytale male quester and rescuer.

The early parts of the novel, preceding her investigations, revolve around the two girls' memories of their childhoods, which uncannily mirror one another. Just as Pearl is sequestered in the brothel, Lily is "cocooned" (p. 32) from the outside world at Kingsland House, the Lambs' idyllic country residence, like some sort of fairytale sleeping beauty in her adoptive father's tales, published by Hall, who also issues the sensationalist weekly magazine *As Every Day Goes By*. The magazine is both the twins' favourite reading material and that of Pearl, old copies of which are passed on to her by the brothel's cook without the madam's knowledge. Mrs Hibbert, Pearl reflects, would disapprove, because

> she prefers me to read things like *Woman's World* with advice on fashion and etiquette, all the latest musical arrangements to play on the parlour piano or harp, with pictures of devoted wives who pose as angels of the hearth alongside their perfect children, inside their perfect homes. (p. 45)

In other words, Pearl's advocated reading is that deemed suitable for a refined young 'lady' such as Lily. Prior to a rare visit to London, the Lambs' housekeeper Ellen Page issues a warning to Lily not to "go trusting any strange men", because "there's more than one innocent country lass been flattered and charmed, then dragged to her ruin" (p. 58), echoing the fate of both girls' fallen mothers, revealed by the end of the novel. Uncle Freddie takes the children to see an advertised 'mermaid' at Cremorne Gardens, where they first encounter Pearl when she faints at the horror of the sight of the fraudulent desiccated 'mermaid' display. With Mrs Hibbert's arrival together with that of Uncle Freddie, it becomes clear that he is a client of hers who peruses Pearl as a potential purchase, though eventually quipped to the post by Black, with whom he "once worked together on *The Germ*" (p. 76) – a rather unfair sullying of the Pre-Raphaelite brotherhood's magazine on Fox's part. Indeed, Black 'discovers' Pearl as his muse when Freddie accidentally drops Hibbert's visiting card with a photograph of Pearl in the twins' presence. And akin to Black's incessant painting of Pearl as a mermaid, Elijah, having become fascinated with photography, later takes pictures of Lily posed as the drowning Ophelia (pp. 108-109) and draws her in the same spot by the stream where Pearl had rested on a brief visit with her 'husband' to Kingsland House.

Although Black leaves Pearl inviolate, he abuses her in other ways, keeping her, in her own words, as "*no more than some glorified slave to his art … a slave he wants to keep as a child*" (p. 177, original ellipsis and italics). While they reside in Italy, he pinches and bruises her for verbal "indiscretions" (p. 121), half-starves her to maintain her ethereal appearance, and vilifies her for uncleanliness and banishes her from his sight whenever she menstruates. In an evocation of the suppositions surrounding John and Effie Ruskin's scandalous divorce on the grounds of non-consummation, Black also forces her to shave her pubic hair "[w]henever he paints [her] as a nymph", so that her genitals may better "resemble the smooth pudenda of Italian marble goddesses" (p. 123). When the Italian boy who assists Black in his workshop brings Pearl secret gifts of cake and she allows him to draw her, Black mutilates the child in a furious jealous rage, precipitating their return to England. And when Pearl becomes sexually involved with Elijah, Black renders her a literal prisoner in his home, breaking her spirit by actively starving her and forcing her to pose interminably in wet and icy cold conditions in his purpose built underground grotto.[2] Finally, Black has his purported wife committed to an asylum on

grounds of nymphomania and authorises the doctors to perform a clitoridectomy, a procedure they gleefully describe as "ingenious in its simplicity" of "removing the evil at its root" (p. 229). Pearl, in other words, becomes the quintessential Gothic female victim, representing the worst of nineteenth-century (and sometimes present-day) abuses of women's rights and bodies, including sex trafficking, child prostitution, paedophilia and genital mutilation, (inflicted) eating disorders, and (in the asylum) force-feeding – itself a motif inextricably linked to the struggle for female suffrage – compounded by misogynistic false diagnoses of madness and false imprisonment. As Lily reflects: "How easy that imprisonment. How many women were so condemned without access to judge or jury or friend?" (p. 267).

It is not just her brother's disappearance but Pearl's plight and threatened fate that rouse Lily's feminist consciousness. When Freddie and Samuel Beresford, Black's cousin who assists Lily in her quest (in part due to his romantic interest in her), accept Black's insinuation of Pearl's madness, Lily jumps to her defence: "It's him … can't you see? It's Osborne Black" (p. 159, original ellipsis). In a typically feminist reading of madness as a misogynist construction controlling perceived female deviance and rebellion, she attributes Pearl's 'madness' to the gendered trauma of patriarchal oppression and victimisation. Not coincidentally, an asylum attendant later confesses that many a female inmate is "likely […] an inheritance job […]. We get a fair number of them … and the alcoholics … and the syphilitics … and the ones who've gone mad after giving birth" (p. 272, un-bracketed ellipses in the original). Similarly, Lily later contests Dr Evans' assessment of herself as hysterical, following a fever caught while desperately pursuing possible clues to her brother's fate in London's night-time streets. Again she directly mirrors Pearl who earlier defends herself to the madhouse doctors, including Evans, by "point[ing] to Osborne Black, '*he* is the one who should be locked up[']" (p. 227, original emphasis). Yet assumed female madness, in another typically feminist narrative move, also becomes the means by which Lily undoes Black's and his co-conspirators' plot, using the false diagnosis of herself as hysterical to gain access to the asylum and Pearl and effect her fallen sister's deliverance, on which Elijah's life too depends. In a final ironic reversal, foreshadowed by Pearl's accusation, Black is eventually confined to Bethlem Hospital, where, like the patricide fairy painter Richard Dadd (mentioned in an

appendix on 'THE REAL HISTORICAL CHARACTERS WHO HAVE INFLUENCED THOSE IN ELIJAH'S MERMAID'), he is permitted to maintain an artist's studio and spends the rest of his life obsessively continuing to paint his muse.

Fox's novel not only incorporates historical allusions, especially to violence against women and gender injustice, but also intertextual hints of other neo-Victorian novels. Not least, Mrs Hibbert, who claims to love Pearl "as a daughter" (p. 48), is reminiscent of the calculating Mrs Sucksby in Sarah Waters' *Fingersmith* (2002) or the madam Mrs Castaway in Michel Faber's *The Crimson Petal and the White* (2002); the latter, of course, sells her daughter's maidenhead, while the former conspires to trick her adoptive daughter into a lunatic asylum in order to secure her fortune. As the vicious pimp Tip Thomas mocks Pearl, "You know if the price is high enough Mrs Hibbert would sell her mortal soul. She would certainly sell a daughter!" (p. 48). The daring rescue of 'Mrs Black' from the asylum plays on switched identities and substitutions that again recall *Fingersmith*'s plot, just as the Lant Street murder of Gentleman Rivers by Maud Lily, for which Mrs Sucksby hangs, is replayed in Pearl's murder of Tip, for which another guilty parent (albeit this time, significantly, not the resurrected 'dead' mother) will assume responsibility. Meanwhile the theme of the obsessive artist figure and his paedophiliac desires for a muse, forcibly kept in childlikeness, combined with tropes of brothels, murderous plots, and blackmail, may also remind readers of a lesser known neo-Victorian novel by an otherwise prominent historical fiction writer: Joanne Harris' *Sleep, Pale Sister* (1993). Like *Elijah's Mermaid*, Harris' text draws on aspects of Ruskin's life as well as Pre-Raphaelite imagery, Wilkie Collins' *The Woman in White* (1859), and Victorian pornography. Indeed, once the dark secrets, covert familial relationships, and Gothic dealings of the villains and fallen heroes are sensationally exposed and untangled, *Elijah's Mermaid* ends on a sort of queered version of the close of *The Woman in White* (1859): akin to Laura Fairlie, Elijah is initially reduced to a shadow of himself, while Fox's readers are instead left with an impression of the strength of character of the resourceful Lily and her new sister Pearl, who in due course marries Elijah. Hence, although Fox opts for the conventional heterosexual happy ending, this is simultaneously undercut by an emphasis on feminist agency. Not least, Elijah's later success as a photographer is complemented by his sister's successful foray into authorship, as she becomes a children's fairytale writer in her own right besides pursuing

philanthropic works. (In spite of her evident love for Beresford, she does not actually wed him until more than two decades later, opting for spinsterhood until aged fifty-five.) This is not, however, meant to accuse Fox of derivative writing; rather *Elijah's Mermaid* exemplifies the convoluted intricate accretion of insistently remediated neo-Victorian (as well as Victorian) tropes in this subgenre of historical fiction, which is increasingly becoming one of its hallmarks – one evident in Davies' *Awakening* also, as will be seen.

The novel's self-consciousness is rounded off by a twenty-first-century newspaper article from *The Times* on 'THE OPENING OF THE OSBORNE BLACK MUSEUM' in the one-time House of Mermaids, established with the financial donation of a direct female descendent of Elijah and Pearl, which speculates at length on the familial relationships between Black and the Lambs and the true nature of the scandalous rumours surrounding Black and Hall and the crimes attributed to them. The images and props of Fox's story – from paintings, murder weapons, and mermaid automaton to a child's shell-and-flower crown – are transformed into the material traces of the only ever to be re-imagined past, itself a fictionalised fantasy.

As an established historian as well as novelist, Davies has often resorted to the historical fiction genre, even if not, like Fox, specialising in neo-Victorian literature per se – although *Four Dreamers and Emily* (1996) could be regarded as an example thereof in spite of its twentieth-century setting. In contrast to the prevalent Gothic 'Dickensian' mode of much neo-Victorian fiction à la *Elijah's Mermaid*, *Awakening* adopts an (at first glance) atypical, straightforward realist approach. Yet the genre's hallmark self-consciousness still weaves its way through the fabric of the text, evident in Davies' equally strategic selection and deployment of nineteenth-century figures, sources, and discourses for feminist purposes, as well as the novel's re-visiting of one of neo-Victorian theory's earliest critical foci: the crisis of faith posed by scientific advances, particularly evolutionary theory.[3] It is no coincidence that, as Davies notes in her 'Afterword', she "open[s] the story in 1860, the year following both the publication of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* and the outbreak in Wales of a spectacular religious Awakening" (p. 338). The conflict between free-thinking and dogmatic religious 'right-thinking', as it applies to supposedly preordained gender roles and partner selection in the human species as well

as the wider natural world, is worked out through the aptly named Pentecost sisters, Anna and Beatrice, respectively the younger and older daughters of a deceased Baptist minister and one-time leading light of a Dissenting community in the invented Chauntsey, near Salisbury. Beatrice, a passionate adherent of faith and women's role in its upholding, bemoans that "[o]ld values are everywhere under siege" (p. 9) and approvingly recalls the wry comments of an acquaintance to the effect that "[e]very modern town […] should have a Village Darwin as its idiot, a Lesser Baboon, if one might so phrase it" (p. 18).

Yet in the Christian faith, of course, Pentecost or Whitsun marks the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the Apostles and Christ's followers – thus ironically also sacralising the rebellious feminist spirit that imbues Anna, making her at best an equivocal self-doubting follower of doctrine and tradition. Drawn to her Baptist faith's potential for ecstatic experience and revivalist spectacle, Anna is not above 'performing' belief, just as she occasionally capitalises on her invalidism to escape domestic duties. More often than not, however, Anna appears drawn towards an instinctually pantheistic apperception of the divine, conveyed in stretches of luminous lyrical writing on Davies' part. While this responsiveness to the natural world may serve as a source of strength, revitalising Anna's spirit of resistance, it is not unproblematic in so far as it inadvertently reinforces an essentialist connection between 'femininity' and 'nature'/'biology' in contrast to the traditional 'masculinity' and 'culture' pairing. The neo-Victorian novel here encounters the same dilemma as does much postmodern and postcolonial counter-discourse, namely the incidental re-inscription of ideological positions or metanarratives in the course of their contestation. The same problem applies to Anna's conflation with the (neo-) Victorian stereotype of the sexually 'malfunctioning' female hysteric, also highlighted in Fox's novel.

Plagued by the "billowing madness" of recurrent abdominal pains (p. 6), Anna is an intermittently bedridden invalid reminiscent of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, with Beatrice assuming the role of Browning's belligerent disciplinarian father. Yet Anna also resembles the young Brontë sisters in her childhood habit of writing down dream-inspired stories in minute script "in tiny books fashioned from wallpaper scraps and flour bags" (p. 4), books populated by "matchstick folk [who] would keep rebelling against their stories" (p. 5), akin to Anna's revolt against the script of womanly submission that Beatrice tries to impose on her. "They were

never set to rights in a wholesome way at the end of their adventures, for the writer was nearly as unruly and anarchic as they were" (p. 5). In adult life, this rebelliousness morphs into virulent agnosticism as to the goodness of God and his will, with Anna suggesting that, were God human, he would be condemned as "a criminal", sent "to the penal colonies" or hung as "a mass murderer" (p. 13). Her blasphemous views make Beatrice fear for her sister 'fall' from grace into damnation.

> There's something that comes over Anna that makes one think the word *hysterical*. A word that Beatrice prefers to *heretical*. If truth were known, they're both backsliding daughters. But only Anna seems to reckon this a virtue rather than a sin. (p. 13, original emphasis)

Hence Beatrice becomes her sister's self-appointed zealous controller, "a one-woman Inquisition" (p. 70), paradoxically out of sisterly love and devotion to Anna, and also from a sense of guilty reparation for her childish nastiness to her sister, whom she had sought to punish for 'murdering' their mother, who died in childbed. In particular, Beatrice polices Anna's reading materials, repeatedly seeking out and destroying the hidden stash of "literary filth polluting her soul" (p. 52) sent to Anna by the latter's friend Mrs Mirrie Sala. An eccentric writer self-evidently modelled on George Eliot, Sala is eventually exposed and publically shunned for living unwed with a man, though in this case the woman writer is the already married party, having deserted both her husband and child to be with her lover and be true to herself. To borrow Davies' own description from her 'Afterword', the novel abounds with "virtuous transgressors and transgressive virtue" (p. 338).

Davies thus addresses a whole range of major feminist concerns that have become paradigmatic of neo-Victorian fiction's critique of nineteenth-century gender ideology and its insidious legacies in Western culture and/or parallels in developing countries: 'hysteria' as a form of social control (and female resistance); women's education; religious restrictions on female behaviour, political and sexual freedom; women's mental and physical health, especially poor maternity care (Anna too eventually dies in childbed); and the celebration of the empowering possibilities of women's writing. As Anna reflects at one point: "A life without pen and paper would be unthinkable. Pen and paper immortalise your witness" (p. 31). Davies'

novel becomes a form of retrospective witness-bearing – not to the public, often spectacular struggles of the emergent first-wave feminist movement, but rather to the incremental, intimate, and daily assertions, victories, set-backs, and sufferings of ordinary women of the time, who nonetheless assume a quasi heroic status in their quests for self-realisation. Like Margaret Atwood's writings, often critiqued for their refusal to present fully liberated female heroines in a still unequal society, Davies' protagonists are at best unformed or half-baked 'feminists', subject to the stirrings of feminist consciousness without ever fully achieving the awakening longed for in different ways by both sisters as much as the novel's readers.

Beatrice's attempts to discipline her sister's unruly spirit and save her from herself merely fan the fires of Anna's revolt. Like Jane Eyre, the younger sister only longs more keenly for "some urgent scope denied her. Action, Vocation" (p. 19). Even the sermons attended at their chapel stir Anna to imagine herself as the pastor, and she justifies her non-conformity to social expectations on the basis of Jesus himself having been a radical (pp. 19-20 and 26). When a visiting missionary describes the practice of Chinese foot-binding which deems women "more beautiful when deformed", Anna bitingly remarks, "Oh yes, […] we have that here but less blatantly"; silenced by a peremptory kick from Beatrice, she "explode[s] inwardly: our tongues are bound, our brains are bound. Women are not fully awake; never have been" (p. 20). While her sister supports their religious elders' quest to facilitate a great Awakening in Wiltshire comparable to the Welsh revival, so as to bring others to the Dissenting faith, Anna's spirit quests indomitably for her own womanly deliverance. Eventually, as in the case of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Anna escapes her 'controller' through elopement and marriage – with Beatrice's own true love, the vibrant and fun-loving Welsh minister Gwilym or Will Anwyl, whom Beatrice rejected to marry her dead stepmother Lore's cousin, Christian Ritter, also a minister and the man her father intended her to wed. Hence on a number of different levels, it is the women's highly fraught, sometimes destructive, but also indissoluble loving bond that evokes and swells Anna's rebellion.

Reminiscent of Victorian novels' disciplining and punishment of transgressive female characters, it is, unsurprisingly, Anna who suffers most acutely in the novel, although Beatrice suffers the greater loss, initially of her first-born son and then her sister. Anna's traumas include enforced enemas administered by Beatrice (pp. 59-60) and a horrendous sexual violation figured as a form of medical rape by two local doctors (pp. 169-

172) – ironically while Beatrice is away on her honeymoon. Appointed by Beatrice to superintend her sister's care during her absence, the medical men forcibly seek to relive Anna's 'hysterical' symptoms through "pelvic massage" (p. 172), in a narrative subplot that recalls the fate of Agnes Rackham in *The Crimson Petal and the White*. Even Anna's unexpectedly fulfilling marriage to Will only brings short-lived happiness, precipitating her death from postpartum infection. Finally, the end of the novel sees much of Anna's fragmentary legacy of memoirs, letters, and other writings destroyed by Beatrice, who wilfully censors and selectively burns them in order to protect her sister's memory (see pp. 332-333).[4] In another inadvertently essentialising move, Anna's 'true' legacy becomes biological – she lives on through her equally unruly and free-spirited daughter Magdalena.

Admittedly at times Anna, like Pearl in Fox's novel, thus seems expected to bear *too* much symbolic weight for a single figure. This is especially so since no explanation is ever proffered for the formation of Anna's distinctive character. (For instance, unlike Elizabeth Barrett Browning, the Pentecost sisters had a loving and indulgent father rather than a severe Victorian patriarch.) This appears simply to be Anna's given 'nature', which makes her respond differently than her sister to loss and trauma. From one point of view – though I am not suggesting that this is Davies' intention – the novel could even support a patriarchal heterosexist reading, namely that Anna was 'ruined' by her second step-mother, the one-time Lore Ritter, also dead from childbirth complications. Two years younger than her eldest step-daughter, Lore temporarily usurped the resentful Beatrice's place in Anna's life and affections and, as revealed through Anna's memories, initiated the younger sister's 'fall' into lesbianism, as well as political consciousness and evolutionary beliefs. Davies' realism short-circuits the happy ending readers have come to expect from neo-Victorian novels heavily focused on romantic relationships. But this, of course, is exactly the point: in a deliberately Woolfean move, Davies privileges sisterhood and women-women relations – Anna-and-Beatrice, Anna-and-Mirrie, Anna-and-Lore, Beatrice-and-Magdalena – over heterosexual relations as the mainstay of her protagonists' lives.

In some ways, it is actually the conservative Beatrice who is the more interesting, if less likeable, of *Awakening*'s sister protagonists, as she struggles with her sense of duty while subconsciously aware of her

complicity in her sister's and, indeed, her own oppression. A sort of closet feminist, refusing to come clean about her womanly dissatisfactions with her lot, Beatrice beats down her own transgressive thoughts, which she likens to "a rat in the cellar", the "vermin down there stealthily multiply[ing] into a colony" (p. 25). Resorting to the age-old technique of keeping busy to avoid thinking, she efficiently manages the household and farm at Sarum House, which their father left to her rather than the sisters' half-brother Joss. Even as she longs for a sensuous life, Beatrice despises the "carnal slime" encasing the "immortal soul" (p. 29). In the end this irresolvable inner conflict – and, one could argue, cowardice – makes her acquiesce to marriage with the overbearing Ritter, in a sort of perverse re-writing of *Jane Eyre* that has the heroine abnegate herself in a union with the St John Rivers figure rather than the Byronic hero.

In spite of her wealth of children and her social status as the wife of a prominent minister and "celebrated man" (p. 315), Beatrice's sacrifice is hardly rewarded. She denigrates herself as "a broodmare", "flag[ging] under the endless childbearing" (p. 324), and never appears to find true fulfilment, not even in her faith which she maintains as more of a barricade. At best she comes closest to a sense of resigned contentment when living vicariously through and for the wild-child Magdalena. Anna's sisterhood and her legacy invariably change Beatrice in spite of her priggishness; towards the end of the novel, instead of condemning a young girl as, "disgracefully" (p. 314), she "skips and whirls, flinging arms and legs about, giddy skirts spinning" in Salisbury Cathedral, Beatrice find herself silently urging her to "go on, dance" (p. 315). Even following Anna's death, their sisterhood remains the focal point of her existence. Beatrice visits the cathedral on an official dinner dedicated to "consuming" the "exclusive treat" of "[t]he last Great Bustard in England" (p. 315), its skin turned into a glass-encased taxidermist's exhibit. Ravenous on account of another advanced pregnancy, Beatrice tucks in with gusto – only to encounter her spectral sister's condemnation and immediately lose her appetite: "Anna turns her head, looks into Beatrice's eyes. The last of these creatures on your earth and you are devouring it" (p. 316). And when Beatrice can no longer bear her husband's over-solicitous attentions to pubescent girls, re-enacting his own hateful behaviour to Beatrice when she was young (pp. 86-87) – actions clearly meant to be read as grooming and paedophilic transgression – Beatrice "locks herself into the room Anna used as her study" (p. 319). No one besides her sister ever truly knows Beatrice in all her complexity,

including "the dark corners where I hide even from myself", as she puts it (p. 101).

In spite of its sometimes elegiac tone, however, *Awakening* is by no means a dark or dreary text. There are frequent comic touches, often deriving from deliberately manipulated reader response, primed by present-day knowledge of the Victorians' vagaries and dubious predilections. At one point, for instance, Beatrice recalls how her brother Joss listened in spellbound admiration to his friend Arthur Munby, as he "expatiated, with relish […] on collier-lasses soot-black […]; London dustwomen in their filth; […] and the Flither-lasses of Filey who scale the cliffs", accompanied by the silent Mrs Munby whose "hands were like shovels" (p. 12). This recalled scene mocks Beatrice's earlier concern for Joss' "indulgence" of their servant Sukey, which "teaches her to live beyond her sphere", along with Beatrice's self-righteous, Jane Eyresque inflected justification that "[s]piritual equal she may be: who could dare deny it? But social equal, of course not" (p. 8). The reader in turn 'relishes' Joss' habit of "sidl[ing] off to sit amongst the servants" (p. 18) and is unsurprised when, close to the novel's end, he eventually reveals Sukey to be his lawful wedded wife. In other words, the humour of the text derives from the discrepancy between the characters' apprehension of their world and the reader's extra-diegetic historical knowledge. Yet it is also one of the wonderfully pointed ironies of Davies' text that the sisters' strife amongst themselves and against restrictive gender expectations is played out in the context of a Dissenting community that views itself as inherently progressive, radical, and socially reformist. This introduces a self-reflexive strain into *Awakening* that undermines any readerly smugness with regards to our present-day superior understanding or more 'liberated' attitude towards gender relations and women's rights. Not least, the character of Beatrice makes us question to what extent we are all products of our time, and wonder at the degree of real freedom we possess to genuinely transform ourselves, our immediate communities, and wider society at will.

Of equal interest is what I take to be often unconscious intertextuality on the author's part. As in the case of Fox's novel, this intertextuality not only engages with nineteenth-century sources, but just as readily with prior neo-Victorian re-imaginings, which appear to be increasingly assimilated into our notions of 'the Victorian'. When Beatrice reflects on her lingering girlhood loathing of Christian Ritter, she describes

him as someone "who so possessed her childhood as to deprive her of it; who fashioned her like a clay pot" (p. 29). For me the imagery immediately evoked Byatt's *The Children's Book* (2009), with its incestuous potter Benedict Fludd, who abuses his own daughters and then casts pornographic pots of their naked bodies. Both Christian's relation by marriage to Beatrice prior to their own union and his paedophilic interest in young girls align with Byatt's plotline. Similarly, Anna's ghostly silhouette of Lore in her locket – "she likes to feel the warmed oval of metal against her throat" (p. 30) – obliquely echoes the portrait kept locked up by Waters' Maud Lilly in *Fingersmith*, which commemorates another transgressive 'mother' whose fate acts as a warning, while actually depicting a woman who is not the protagonist's real parent.[5] But perhaps most evocative of neo-Victorian intertextuality is the already mentioned Great Bustard scene, figuring the very same bird (also, supposedly, the last in England) unknowingly shot by Fowles' Charles Smithson in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and enshrined in a glass dome by his aristocratic uncle, until thrown out by the uncle's new wife, whose children disinherit the hapless Charles, rendering his aspirations as obsolete as the extinct fowl.[6] Hence, Davies' novel also invites an awakening on the readers' part to the genre's increasingly multi-temporal palimpsestic intertextuality. In a sense, the Pentecost sisterhood becomes an apt emblem of the formative tension between tradition and change, preservation and transformation, repetition and renewal, history and futurity, which constitutes the basis of the neo-Victorian project itself. Meanwhile neo-Victorian fiction's obsessive replaying of historical gender iniquities seems to reflect our own niggling dissatisfactions with the age of post-feminism, as we worry about the true extent and potential fragility of any progress made towards securing full equality.

Notes

1. Prior to *Elijah's Mermaid*, of course, Fox published another Gothic neo-Victorian fiction, her debut novel *The Somnambulist* (2011).
2. There are evident allusions here to Lizzie Siddall posing as the drowning Ophelia for John Everett Millais, who became so engrossed in his painting that he failed to notice the candles burning out under the bathtub which stood in for the stream, leaving Siddall submerged in freezing water.
3. Unlike many neo-Victorian fictions, including Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, A. S. Byatt's 'Morpho Eugenia' (1992), and Graham

Swift's *Ever After* (1992), which chronicle the dissolution of faith resulting from confrontations with evolutionary theory, and despite Davies' own "path" via Baptist "Dissent into humanistic agnosticism" (p. 338), at times her novel proves strangely affirmative of the very faith it interrogates. *Awakening*, as its title suggests, also makes readers conscious of the potential of faith in its manifold forms to sustain and enrich as well as help endure life, describing an implicit loss in faith's sacrifice on the altar of postmodern capitalist secularism.

4. This questionable reactionary female censorship of women's private histories is also a prominent trope in Davies' earlier historical novel, *Impassioned Clay* (1999).
5. Waters' imagery, of course, in turn draws on the locket confirming the titular protagonist's identity in *Oliver Twist* (1838).
6. It should be noted that, in a research seminar at Swansea University, Wales, UK, 16th October 2013, Davies expressly denied any *conscious* evocation of Fowles' Great Bustard.