Putting the 'Neo' Back into Neo-Victorian: The Neo-Victorian Novel as Postmodern Revisionist Fiction

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Abstract:
This article discusses the tendency in recent Neo-Victorian Studies to privilege the influence of the nineteenth century on the neo-Victorian novel at the expense of postmodern or contemporary influences. I explore how such favouritism towards the nineteenth century has produced the pathological framing of neo-Victorian fictional practices as nostalgic, fetishistic and derivative of Victorian fiction, giving the Victorian 'original' precedence over the contemporary neo-Victorian 'copy'. I investigate assertions of the neo-Victorian novel's failure to fulfil postmodern benchmarks, and consider whether this move contributes to a general assertion of postmodernism's dwindling relevance or whether it augurs a neo-conservative shift away from literary fiction's subversive potential. Finally, I proffer the neo-Victorian novel's contribution to recognitive justice as the postmodern revisionist criterion most likely to ensure the fledgling genre's significance to future generations, as well as to politically marginalised groups in the present.

Keywords: *Affinity*, fetish, 'inheritance model', Man Booker Prize, neo-Victorian novel, neo-Victorianism, nostalgia, postmodernism, *The Quincunx*, recognitive social justice, Victorian Studies.

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"Upwards of fifty thousand Victorian novels already exist", writes J. Hillis Miller. "Why do we need another one, and a fake simulacrum of one at that?" (Miller 2004: 134) Although his question is rhetorical, contemporary fiction set in the nineteenth century, or that which mimics the Victorian novel, is fast becoming a genre at pains to defend itself. In Caryn James's review of Peter Carey's *Jack Maggs* (1997), a neo-Victorian novel that supplements Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations* (1860-61), she laments that "[i]t has become common for audacious or self-deluded writers to fill in the gaps of great novels" (C. James 1998: 10). Certainly, a great many neo-Victorian novels *do* re-envision canonical Victorian texts from new points of view, but James's haughty dismissal of the practice recalls Samuel Johnson's derision towards women preachers, whom he reasoned to be "like a dog walking on his hinder legs. It is not done well; but you are surprized to find it done at all" (Boswell 2008: 244).

Yet, these comments raise some important questions. Is neo-Victorian fiction merely nineteenth-century revivalism or homage to the Victorian novel? What value does replicating the style of the nineteenth-century novel add to the field of contemporary fiction or, indeed, to contemporary culture? Will neo-Victorian fiction enjoy longevity or, as Marie-Luise Kohlke speculates, "[w]ill future generations perceive today's superabundance of neo-Victorian fantasies and criticism as a superficial glut?" (Kohlke 2008: 5). How might the investigations into what lies behind the desire to simulate the Victorian period in contemporary fiction be deemed worthwhile? Or, put another way, what representational mechanisms might *prevent* contemporary neo-Victorian fiction from being deemed a useful pursuit and instead earn it censure?

Part of neo-Victorian fiction's dilemma lies in its ready association with retrieval practices that idealise the nineteenth-century (particularly Victorian England). It is an activity whose nostalgic impulse has been deemed retrograde, yet one that persists in neo-Victorian scholarship where the nineteenth century is often expressed as the present's point of origin – an historical parent to whom the present looks for guidance. Hence, I begin by exploring the reputation that nineteenth-century homage has earned neo-Victorian fiction; in particular the pejorative accusations of nostalgia, fetishism and derivativeness with which contemporary returns to the Victorian historical referent are often charged. These criticisms, I suggest, accompany a move by some critics to downplay postmodernism's influence on the neo-Victorian novel. I investigate this trend as part of a broader and increasing tendency within recent public debate to eschew postmodernism altogether.

My central proposition is that neo-Victorian fiction serves not one but two masters: the 'neo' as well as the 'Victorian'; that is, homage to the Victorian era and its texts, but in combination with the 'new' in a postmodern revisionary critique.[1] I contend that neo-Victorian fiction's endurance as a robust contemporary genre depends on its reinstatement as a subgenre of postmodern fiction with its capacity to renovate textual representation. In this context, I examine recent neo-Victorian criticism for trends in the portrayal of neo-Victorian praxis. In particular, I am interested in responding to the foundational arguments mounted by Christian Gutleben's *Nostalgic Postmodernism: The Victorian Tradition and the Contemporary British Novel* (2001),[2] as well as entering into a dialogue

with those positions taken up by survey articles contained in the inaugural issue of the *Neo-Victorian Studies* journal of August 2008.

1. Pathologising the Neo-Victorian

In their introduction to *Victorian Afterlife: Postmodern Culture Rewrites the Nineteenth Century*, Dianne F. Sadoff and John Kucich cite the "recent explosion of postmodern Victoriana", in particular the glut of "rewritings of Victorian culture", as evidence for designating the nineteenth century as the historical focal point for the late twentieth century (Sadoff and Kucich 2000: x, xi). But accompanying this assertion of the present's interest in the Victorian past is, I suggest, a pathological discourse that regards such returns to the past as essentially regressive. Although the preoccupation with the Victorian era shows no sign of abating, such a pastime – "the pastime of past time", as Linda Hutcheon has phrased similar concerns (Hutcheon 1988: 105) – is being framed as something a little suspect.

Mark Llewellyn has drawn our attention to the ambivalence with which Victorian scholar Kate Flint greets the epithet 'Victorian' and the practices circumscribed by the term in the present day (Llewellyn 2008: 167). On the one hand, 'Victorian' carries nationalist connotations that earn Flint's intellectual disdain; but, it is the whiff of "period fetishism" and the "nostalgic tug" elicited by contemporary retrievals of the Victorian past, which extract from Flint a "visceral" cringe landing squarely on *neo-Victorian* shoulders (Flint 2005: 230). As a literary genre that recreates a Victorian setting in contemporary fiction, neo-Victorian fiction must inevitably answer the charges levied at similar species of nineteenth-century revivalism. It is the hint of anti-neo-Victorianism in Flint's account that I should like to investigate further. Although the neo-Victorian novel is notable for its absence in Flint's list of modern-day Victoriana, her allegations of nostalgia and fetishism carry a pathological stigma that neo-Victorian fiction has often been made to bear. In *Victorian Afterlife*, Sadoff and Kucich propose that "[r]ewritings of Victorian culture have flourished […] because the postmodern *fetishizes* notions of cultural emergence, and because the nineteenth century provides multiple eligible sites for theorizing such emergence (Sadoff and Kucich 2000: xv; added emphasis). What do assertions of postmodern 'fetishism' mean for the neo-Victorian novel?

In recent decades, the term 'fetish' has become contemporary 'psycho-babble' for mocking any faddish preoccupation within popular culture. In relation to rewritings of Victorian culture, its use denigrates neo-Victorian fiction's engagement with the Victorian referent as a notably postmodern surfeiting of value. In Freudian terms, a fetish is the "overvaluation" of an inappropriate sexual object choice in childhood that prevents normal sexual maturation (Freud 1977: 65). By alleging the emergence of neo-Victorian fiction as symptomatic of the fetishisation of the nineteenth century by the postmodern age, such concerns are shaped into an unhealthy preoccupation with the past – one that prevents the present's embrace of its own time.

When Flint places a range of Victorian retrievals into the present on par with the "retro-marketing" of pseudo-Victorian souvenirs (Flint 2005: 230), she invokes another type of fetish, in which the neo-Victorian novel is also implicated. Flint's denunciation of the false allure of Victoriana marketing invokes Karl Marx's appropriation of 'fetishism' from anthropology to explain the production of commodities under Capitalism (Marx 1954: 77). For Marx, Capitalist commodities are abstracted from the labour that produces them and "changed into something transcendent" at the moment of their commodification: the point of exchange (Marx 1954: 76). The base object undergoes a deceptive social transformation that assigns it an exchange-value beyond its actual worth, a process Marx calls "the Fetishism of the commodity" (Marx 1954: 77). Flint's antipathy towards the contemporary "period fetishism" of the Victorian age takes a similar stand upon the surplus of value assigned to the nineteenth century via the neo-Victorian artefact. By promoting an illusory Victorian 'essence', which the neo-Victorian object does not possess (but which increases its exchange-value in the present), modern revivalists are portrayed as fetishising the Victorian past into a commodity for present-day consumers. Jennifer Green-Lewis offers an excellent example of this commodification in her citation of a mail-order catalogue that charges US $295 to produce a faux nineteenth-century heirloom quilt using artefacts from the present. The quilt is treated with sepia effect, printed with the customer's contemporary family photographs and adorned with vintage trinkets designed to invest the images retrospectively and oxymoronically with *Ersatz* (or 'replacement') Victorian authenticity (Green-Lewis 2000: 40).

But can the neo-Victorian *novel* be regarded as a brand of the Victorian retro-marketing, which Flint so derides? In *Nostalgic Postmodernism*, Christian Gutleben attributes a degree of commodity fetishism to the way that the Victorian referent is marketed on the fly-leaf summaries of so much neo-Victorian fiction. Gutleben suggests that these paratactic blurbs frequently overstate the neo-Victorian novel's connection to best-selling Victorian novels or their authors in order to capitalise on (or cannibalise) the Victorian novel's continuing popularity (Gutleben 2001: 183). For Gutleben, a "certain commercial orientation" undergirds the neo-Victorian novel's inflation of its Victorian 'credentials', and such opportunism often comes at the expense of a higher intellectual purpose (Gutleben 2001: 182).[3]

The anti-intellectual charge against the neo-Victorian novel is perhaps nowhere more prevalent than in the accusations of sentimentalism – the "nostalgic tug" Flint deems to attend such neo-Victorian retrievals into the present (Flint 2005: 230). Once denoting the medical condition of homesickness, 'nostalgia' has shifted in meaning to signify a "sentimental imagining or evocation of a period of the past" (OED 2000); however, in its application to neo-historical writing more generally, the term 'nostalgia' shares with 'fetish' the same sense of surfeiting the historical referent's worth, an overvaluation that borders on the pathological. Writing of Lloyd Jones's neo-Victorian novel *Master Pip* (2006), Llewellyn contends that the Dickensian nostalgia present in the novel demonstrates "a kind of cultural sickness that distorts the mind rather than liberates its potential" (Llewellyn 2008: 179). To charge the neo-Victorian novel with nostalgia is to appoint the nineteenth-century past as the privileged site of return for a mal-adjusted present. The novel's homage to the Victorian era is instead converted to an immature longing for an irrecoverable Victorian past – a retrograde activity associated with conservatism and intellectual regression and, finally, a refusal to graduate to more fitting contemporary concerns.

2. The Inheritance Model

The taint of fetishism and nostalgia borne by present-day creative uses of the nineteenth century contributes to a general tendency to elevate the Victorian past to the idealised childhood of the postmodern present. A consequence of such promotion is to theorise the relationship of the Victorians to the present as one of parent to child. In *Inventing the*

Victorians: What We Think We Know About Them and Why We're Wrong, Matthew Sweet writes: "they moulded our culture, defined our sensibilities, built a world for us to live in – rather than being the figures against whom we rebelled in order to create those things for ourselves" (Sweet 2001: 231). The verb "rebelled" invokes a comparison between the present's implied dependence on the Victorians and the customary manner in which teenagers chart a life's course that differs from their parents. If 'rebellion' describes a generation's healthy divergence from its forebears, Sweet's portrayal signals the present's failure to make that maturational step. Framed in this way, the Victorians become the parents from whose legacy we cannot, or choose not to, escape.

Llewellyn casts our relationship with the Victorians in a similar light to Sweet when he cites "our continued indebtedness" to the nineteenth century (Llewellyn 2008: 165). Even after a gap of a century or more, he suggests, we remain tethered to our nineteenth-century forebears as their successors – whether as critics or as writers of fiction. Yet, by marking ourselves as "the new Victorians" (Llewellyn 2008: 180), are we continuing to infantilise the present as we deify the Victorian past? Such an inheritance model does little to individualise the contribution of neo-Victorian fiction and its criticism to the present. Rather, it is such persistent efforts to cast the Victorian referent as our literary halcyon days that garner neo-Victorian fiction's associations with nostalgia and fetishism, endorsing what Raymond Williams has called the "well-known habit of using the past, the 'good old days', as a stick to beat the present" (Williams 1973: 12).

This habit prevails in Christian Gutleben's assertion that our failure to propose a satisfactory model for the present has ushered contemporary writers back in time to the Victorian tradition (Gutleben 2001: 10). Gutleben declares the neo-Victorian novel to be a product of contemporary novelists' belief that they stand in the shadow of the great writers of the Victorian age, "where, according to them, the voice of authority originates" (Gutleben 2001: 18). Such adulation, according to Gutleben, can be gleaned from several features in the neo-Victorian texts themselves. His argument stems from neo-Victorian writers' penchant for including excerpts from nineteenth-century works in epigraphs or indented quotations in their contemporary novels. Giving Victorian authors pride of place in this way, suggests Gutleben, makes a "claim of lineage, kinship, of genealogy" (Gutleben 2001: 17-18). But to reach this conclusion, Gutleben must

disregard the very possibility he proposes at the outset: that these quotations may simply contribute to the *mise-en-scène* (to borrow a cinematic term) that orients the reader towards the nineteenth-century diegesis (Gutleben 2001: 18). He argues instead that the citations perform an immortalising function, indeed that they demonstrate the neo-Victorian writers' "worship" of the quoted texts, confirming the Victorian writers' "eminence and precedence" (Gutleben 2001: 18).[4]

By Gutleben's reckoning, the contemporary writer's inability to rise to the prominence of his or her Victorian forebears results in the creation of an imitative work. Yet, despite apparently being made up of snippets of the masters, the contemporary novel does not approach the Victorian ancestor's skill. In this view, the neo-Victorian novel becomes a totem erected by the neo-Victorian novelist in the shadows of their Victorian literary predecessors, whom they cannot hope to surpass but only to emulate.

Yet when the homage is *not* paid, that is, when neo-Victorian novels vilify rather than sanctify Victorian authorial celebrity, Gutleben does not depict their writers as resisting nostalgia or rising above the anxiety of an influence or inheritance for which they are unfit. Cases like Emma Tennant's *Tess* (1993) and Howard Jacobson's *Peeping Tom* (1984), which both admonish Thomas Hardy for sexism, or Margaret Forster's *Lady's Maid* (1990), which finds fault with Elizabeth Barrett Browning's treatment of her servant, instead become further reasons to diminish the merit of the neo-Victorian novel. It is their *anti*-nostalgic stance towards their Victorian subjects that earns these texts a range of criticisms, which include: "disingenuous" and "intellectually questionable", as well as "parasitical", "warped", and "exploit[ative]" – all in all, bent on a "jaundiced campaign of denigration" (Gutleben 2001: 28, 29, 93). It seems that if the neo-Victorian novel is not venerating the aesthetic achievements of a past epoch or fetishising the Victorian inheritance, it risks chastisement for tearing the totem down. Might Gutleben's vigorous disavowal of neo-Victorian re-creations of Hardy and Barratt Browning demonstrate a protective impulse towards the Victorians, a desire to keep the Victorian heritage unsullied?

3. The 'Real' Victorian Novel

For much neo-Victorian criticism, the Victorian novel is the hub around which the neo-Victorian novel revolves. Having indentured us to the nineteenth century as "the new Victorians", Llewellyn extends the Victorian

era's grip over the present to encompass the sovereignty of the nineteenth-century novel over the neo-Victorian novel (Llewellyn 2008: 180):

> What the neo-Victorian represents, then, is a different way into the Victorians – for students and faculty alike. This is not contemporary literature as a substitute for the nineteenth century but as a *mediator into the experience of reading the 'real' thing* (Llewellyn 2008: 168; added emphasis).

Llewellyn's designation of the neo-Victorian novel as a "mediator into the experience of reading the 'real' thing" is problematic. Of course, his purpose is to declare neo-Victorian fiction's potential to lure recalcitrant readers to the linguistically denser nineteenth-century novel. And on one level, it may be self-evident to claim that the neo-Victorian novel is no more than a contemporary version of the Victorian novel ("the 'real' thing"); but, on another, such a contention necessarily robs the neo-Victorian novel of its status as an independent – and contemporary – literary artefact. Despite scare-quotes as an ironic gesture of uncertainty towards any concept of the 'real', Llewellyn's declaration establishes a hierarchy that privileges the Victorian novel as more primary and original than the neo-Victorian novel, which is reduced to a secondary and derivative artefact.

To frame the neo-Victorian novel as a primer for the Victorian novel is to characterise the latter as the authentic article against which the neo-Victorian novel (as an inferior 'copy') can only be found wanting. This concern to define the neo-Victorian novel principally in opposition to the Victorian novel – as fake to genuine, replica to original – partakes in the kind of binary logic that must valorise the Victorian at the expense of the neo-Victorian novel. The neo-Victorian novel becomes nothing more than a transitional step, never the destination in itself.

Reading that begets further reading is a positive outcome, but I refute the idea that we read neo-Victorian fiction *faute de mieux* – in the absence of a better original – and to encourage such a view of the neo-Victorian novel is deleterious to establishing the contemporary genre's credibility in its own right.[5] The neo-Victorian novel is, it is worth repeating, a *contemporary* genre. As such, I am suspicious of putting it in the service of promoting the Victorian novel as the locus of literary value. This persistent reduction of the neo-Victorian novel to Victorian simulacra

goes hand in hand with the primacy attributed to the nineteenth century over the present, which I have termed inheritance model.

4. Victorian Studies: Eclipsing the Present

The need to distinguish between the functions of the neo-Victorian novel and the Victorian novel also leads me to consider the implications of Llewellyn's further assertion, that Neo-Victorian Studies and Victorian Studies are "engaged in a similar, if not identical, task": "Is not the locus of [both Neo-Victorian Studies' and Victorian Studies'] dual perspectives an approach to understanding the impact of the nineteenth century and its enduring legacy into the present?" (Llewellyn 2008: 169) Indeed, the significance of the Victorian era and its artefacts are critical to both the Victorian Studies and Neo-Victorian Studies projects. It would be naïve to dispute neo-Victorian fiction's abiding interest in the nineteenth-century setting, which will no doubt continue to be explored. However, I want to suggest that, while the purpose of Victorian Studies may well be to investigate the Victorians and the nineteenth century, placing Victorian periodisation at the heart of the neo-Victorian enquiry disregards the chief distinction of neo-Victorian fiction, namely its contemporaneity.

To state the obvious, neo-Victorian fiction and its writers are *not* native to the nineteenth century, but to the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Certainly, neo-Victorian novels that locate or restore eclipsed narratives of the Victorian past might complicate our understanding of the nineteenth century. However, neo-Victorian fiction's representation of the Victorian past is also the lens through which a variety of *present* concerns are examined: the interaction of advances in cultural theory and developments in postmodern criticism; the deliberate complication of the supposedly separate jurisdictions of history and fiction; metafictional commentary on the mechanisms of fiction and the effect of narrative techniques on the construction of historical discourse; and, the imaginative restoration of voices lost or constrained in the past, with repercussions for the present.

Neo-Victorian fiction creatively integrates these post-nineteenth century insights into a hybrid 'Victorian' discourse for the postmodern era. As Robin Gilmour explains:

> the [Victorian past] exists in dynamic relation to the present, which it both interprets and is interpreted by. Evoking the Victorians and their world has not been an antiquarian activity but a means of getting a fresh perspective on the present. (Gilmour 2000: 200)

A dedicated neo-Victorian criticism requires a reversal of the agency implied by the enduring Victorian influence over the present. This primacy may be suitable for Victorian Studies, but not for Neo-Victorian Studies with its need to explore the "uses to which Victorian history and Victorian fiction have been put" *by us* in the present (Gilmour 2000: 190). As Richard Flanagan says of his own neo-Victorian novel, *Wanting* (2008), "writers have been doing this since the Old Testament, reinventing stories about historical characters and using them to discuss the *here and now*" (Flanagan in Koval 2008; added emphasis).

Where Neo-Victorian Studies diverges most clearly from Victorian Studies is in its concern to examine the impact of this creative commingling of the present with those traces of the nineteenth century to which we have access. That present is the postmodern era, in which twentieth-century cultural studies and postmodern theory colour the cloth from which neo-Victorian fiction is fashioned. This marriage of influences between the Victorian *and* the postmodern (that is, the *Victorian* and the *new*) has all the while been present in the genre's description, 'neo-Victorian'.

If declamations on the neo-Victorian novel range from the nostalgic sycophant of a venerated past to the venomous heretic that dishonours that memory, the heretical portion is the postmodern – the innovative insights produced by the collision of the Victorian with the postmodern present. But while neo-Victorian fiction may be cast as the hybrid child of both Victorian and postmodern parents, I contend that the glorification of the nineteenth-century 'parent' has occurred largely at the expense of the estrangement and/or occlusion of the postmodern one.

5. The Neo-Victorian Novel and the Death of Postmodernism

Described by one university course as "the re-emergence of the Victorian novel in a postmodern form" (Jones and Naufftus 2008), the neo-Victorian novel has been classed as a species of postmodern fiction since its inception. In the late 1980s, both Brian McHale and Linda Hutcheon cited

John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969), regarded (along with Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* [1966]) by many critics as the inaugural neo-Victorian novel, as exemplary of an emergent literary category that triangulated history, fiction and postmodern critical thought. Hutcheon coined the term "historiographic metafiction" to describe this wedding of historical settings and postmodern devices in fiction in ways that blur clear distinctions between historiographic and literary practice (Hutcheon 1988: 5), while McHale initially preferred the term "postmodernist revisionist historical fiction" (McHale 1987: 96), before adopting Hutcheon's term in his subsequent work (see McHale 1992: 152).

Although regarded less as a cohesive movement than an emerging human condition in the West (see Lyotard 1984: xxiv), postmodernism generally refers to the coalescence of critical theory in response to the disillusioned aftermath of the Second World War (see Jameson 1991: x, Abrams 1993: 120). In this mood of profound scepticism towards metanarratives of 'truth', 'origin', 'progress', even 'God', postmodernism became the "problematizing force" by which conceptual hierarchies could be overturned, ideologies challenged, 'natural' categories denaturalised and received wisdoms revealed as discursive constructions (Hutcheon 1988: xi). Postmodern methods might unsettle, deconstruct, decentre, queer or trouble such seemingly adamantine categories as subjectivity, history, race, gender, sexuality or class, in an effort to reveal their purported 'origins' as narratively constructed.

By mounting its challenge within narrative itself, postmodernist fiction complicates "the ways in which narrative codes […] artificially construct apparently 'real' and imaginary worlds in terms of particular ideologies while presenting these as transparently 'natural' and 'eternal'" (Waugh 1984: 22). In the neo-Victorian context, this complication is foregrounded through the transformation in textual meaning resulting from the confrontation of revisited Victorian texts with the shifts in ideology since their production, especially those brought about by postmodern critical theory. It is a move that J. Hillis Miller locates in Charles Palliser's *The Quincunx: The Inheritance of John Huffam* (1990) for the way that the novel "appropriates and embodies the results of 20th-century scholarship on Victorian novels to bring their features out and to show them as historically conditioned" (Miller 2004: 136).

Neo-Victorian texts expose such ideologies in ways that enrich the narrative without derailing it. This reworking takes the form of an ironic double-coding that splices together nineteenth-century realist representation with a postmodern sensibility. In *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* (1995), for example, Peter Ackroyd poignantly sketches an intimate relationship between Inspector Kildare and his male companion, George Flood, via three oblique gestures that at once signal the pair as homosexual – at least to a modern audience (see Ackroyd 1995: 257-259).[6] However, at the very moment that the postmodern reader recognises the men's closeted homosexuality, s/he is simultaneously aware that the men's sexuality remains unarticulated within the novel's Victorian setting (and possibly even to the men themselves). A relationship such as Kildare and Flood's has been engulfed by the restraint of the Victorian-styled narrative in which such sexual personae were unidentifiable until, Michel Foucault tells us, discourses of sexuality brought such social beings into existence (Foucault 1990: 43).[7] Without the explicit language or concepts to substantiate their emotional reality or physical practices, the men's homosexual love remains both present and absent in the text, the perfect postmodern aporia.

Implicit in Ackroyd's portrayal are the numerous figures of Victorian literature whose same-sex proclivities have dwelt at the level of allusion or subtext until teased out by modern critics for modern audiences – Mr Audley's great love for his friend George Tallboys in Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862), Lucy Snowe's ardent admiration of Ginevra Fanshawe in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* (1853), Basil Hallwood's ill-fated desire for Dorian in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), to name a few. Such reading and writing against the grain has been enabled by recent critical works that denaturalise representation and the invisibility of homosexuality in English literature, including Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985) and *The Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), Terry Castle's *The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture* (1993), as well as Judith Butler's ground-breaking theoretical work, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990).

Yet, despite evidence of such postmodern illuminations of nineteenth-century texts, there have been moves to distance neo-Victorian fiction from its postmodern influences, mainly in two ways. The first move involves the suggestion that, because neo-Victorian fiction frequently

embraces nineteenth-century realism – that epitome of the coherent, teleological narrative structure that postmodernism is said to position itself against – it could not be further removed from the anti-realist experimental and self-conscious fictions that emerged in the post-war decades, which have come to epitomise the postmodern. The second motion (in part building on the tendencies just indicated) argues that the condition of postmodernism in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries has become depleted of its subversive capacity, so that even if neo-Victorian fiction *were* considered 'postmodern', such a label would no longer indicate relevance to cultural criticism. I will consider each of these propositions in turn.

6. The Shift Away from the Postmodern Prototype

During his study of British neo-Victorian fiction, *Nostalgic Postmodernism*, Christian Gutleben argues that few neo-Victorian novels typify the postmodernist historical fiction that originated in Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. For Gutleben, one hallmark text that does, however, is A.S. Byatt's *Possession: A Romance* (1990), which the reviewer Michiko Kakutani lavishly describes as "a hodge-podge of styles and postmodernist pyrotechnics to tackle the daunting themes of history, time, politics, social change and art" (Kakutani qtd. in Todd 1996: 37). Gutleben regards Byatt's novel as postmodern because it fulfils a maximal checklist of postmodernist criteria, whereas in his view the majority of neo-Victorian novels (for example, Palliser's *The Quincunx* and Sarah Waters's *Affinity* [1999]) achieve only a "minimal allegiance" to the postmodern aesthetic (Gutleben 2001: 141).

This distinction between maximal and minimal allegiance to the postmodern, however, tends to privilege stylistic criteria over the postmodern novel's capacity for revisionary narratives. Despite Byatt's stylistic pyrotechnics, for example, she does little to depart from unflattering lesbian stereotypes. *Possession* offers two extreme representations of female homosexuality – from the vacuous impotence of Blanche Glover to the butch predation of Leonora Stern – which did little to counteract prevailing discrimination against homosexuals in Britain in the late 1980s when the text was written (see Carroll 2008: 357-378). Nonetheless, Gutleben takes his criteria for defining what should constitute postmodernist fiction from the benchmarks set by the French avant-garde, American surfiction writers and

Britain's 'Angry Young Men' in the decades following World War II (see Gutleben 2001: 119, 158). Yet, according to Hutcheon, the French nouveau roman, together with American and British examples of the same period, differ from postmodernist fiction because they "do not so much transgress codes of representation as leave them alone" (Hutcheon 1988: 40); that is to say, rather than challenging narrative coherence, they ignore it altogether. Therefore, Hutcheon suggests, such anti-narrative traits are not characteristic of postmodernism but, rather, of late *modernist* "attempts to explode realist narrative conventions" (Hutcheon 1988: xii). Indeed, most neo-Victorian novels will inevitably fall foul of such experimentalist benchmarks. Instead, neo-Victorian fiction (and historiographic metafiction more generally) rejects aleatory modernism's distain for narrative, instead "work[ing] *within* conventions in order to subvert them" (Hutcheon 1988: 5, original emphasis).

It is this brand of subversion that is tailor-made for the neo-Victorian novel by reinstating the classic realism of the nineteenth-century novel at the same time as undermining its certainties. Gutleben laments that "contemporary [i.e. neo-Victorian] fiction has become estranged from the acute sense of angst of the after-war period" (Gutleben 2001: 220). I want to suggest that neo-Victorian fiction's refusal to reproduce the jarring disruptions of more experimental fiction ought not to condemn it to conservative homage or a blind nostalgia for the securities of fictional realism. Rather, it is precisely its rejection of these highly experimental forms that distinguishes neo-Victorian fiction from post-war writing and marks it as postmodern. As much may be illustrated by reconsidering Gutleben's assessment of *The Quincunx* as anti-postmodern in light of these divergent claims.

The Quincunx, a 'baggy monster' in the Dickensian mould, is exemplary of what Gutleben perceives as the neo-Victorian novel's failure as postmodern fiction. Gutleben's position rests upon McHale's designation of postmodernism's dominant mode of questioning as ontological (see Gutleben 2001: 50). In *Postmodernist Fiction*, McHale asserts that, while modernist fiction principally poses epistemological questions, postmodernist fiction breaks down the illusions of fictional coherence and narratorial authority over the conveyed world – the very ontological boundaries that realist fiction had sought to keep intact (McHale 1987: 9, 10).

Although most neo-Victorian novels do not profess to be radical (such as by eschewing realism altogether), many resist McHale's prescription towards ontological violability. Yet it is against such a yardstick that Gutleben measures *The Quincunx* in order to place its postmodern credentials in doubt. Gutleben charges *The Quincunx* with a teleological impulse, because such novels "reproduce the pattern of the novels they are proposing to revise" (Gutleben 2001: 51). However, there are other modes of ontological disruption that challenge the internal coherence of the fictional text.[8] As Hutcheon has suggested, the defining characteristic of historiographic metafiction lies precisely in its "paradoxical inscribing *and* contesting" (Hutcheon 1988: xii; original emphasis), or reproducing and revising, the realist tenets of Victorian fiction from within the fiction itself. As with many neo-Victorian novels, the structure of *The Quincunx* does follow a traditional narrative arc; however, a persistent motif of chaos marks out the novel's rebellion against traditional ordering principles.

The young protagonist John Huffam begins the novel by placing his trust firmly in narrative: "But it says so in the book!" (Palliser 1990: 19). Yet Johnnie's certainty is undermined when his nanny tells him, "[s]tories are lies", and again when Mr Pentecost insists, "[n]ovel-writers are liars" (Palliser 1990: 18, 240). As Johnnie matures, he arrives at the realisation that narrative truth may itself be a fiction: "For I understood now that I could continue for ever to hear new and more complicated versions of the past without ever attaining to a final truth" (Palliser 1990: 671).

The Quincunx may claim Dickensian fiction as its "source-text" (Letissier 2004: 121), but it declaims its internal coherence and determinism by systematically challenging the myth of meaningful interconnectedness and asserting events as arbitrary (see Miller 2004: 139), substantiating the protagonist's fear of such a capricious reality: "I was terrified – as I suppose all children are – of things being random and arbitrary. I wanted everything to have a purpose, to be part of a pattern" (Palliser 1990: 30). The anxiety Johnnie expresses about life's failure to unfold according to a predetermined plan (or plot?) is amplified by the literal and figurative references to games of chance that pepper the novel, such as cards and chess, and the ubiquitous references to the dice game of Hazard by which Jeoffrey Huffam lost the family estate to the Mompessons (Palliser 1990: 51, 67, 52). The chance factor is emphasised by the design of the lost estate's resemblance to "five

dots on the face of a die", which echoes the 5-sided quincunx motif used throughout the novel (Palliser 1990: 53).

Johnnie is mortified to discover that even his own name was chosen randomly – "at hazard" – by his mother, a fact that leads him to articulate the underlying premise of structuralist linguistics, with its ongoing implications in poststructuralist criticism:

> Then if something as important as one's own name which seemed so rich in meaning could be so meaninglessly random, then perhaps all names – and even words, for weren't they merely names? – were equally accidental and lacking any essential connection with what they designated? (Palliser 1990: 62)

The authority of stories, of any narrative structure, even the randomly assigned meaning of individual words themselves, are brought under scrutiny in *The Quincunx*, which insists that "[t]here is no pattern. No meaning save what we choose to impose" (Palliser 1990: 240). The principle of randomness over that of an overarching pattern is affirmed, serving as a constant foil to the authority of teleological narrative (see Miller 2004: 139). On the one hand, *The Quincunx* imitates the nineteenth-century fictional style but, on the other, it frets the corners of the ordered universe that Victorian fiction attempted to impose, thereby undermining the totalising dominant of narrative that Gutleben claims it perpetuates (see Gutleben 2001: 50).

The Quincunx may not demonstrate the frame-breaking that typifies a 'textbook' challenge to ontological levels, but its tactics are far from incompatible with postmodernism. As Patricia Waugh explains in her study *Metafiction*, postmodern fiction employs a deliberate "redundancy" absent from the earlier experimental fictions, which had abandoned their hold on realism altogether:

> Literary texts tend to function by preserving a balance between the unfamiliar (the innovatory) and the familiar (the conventional or traditional). Both are necessary because some degree of redundancy is essential for any message to be committed to memory. Redundancy is provided for in literary

> texts through the presence of familiar conventions. Experimental fiction of the aleatory variety eschews such redundancy by simply ignoring the conventions of literary tradition. Such texts set out to resist the normal processes of reading, memory and understanding, but without redundancy, texts are read and forgotten (Waugh 1984: 12).

Such calculated redundancy may also determine which novels actually gain readership. In an era that Peter Brooks asserts has embraced the enduring appeal of plot (Brooks 1984: xi), postmodernist texts that eschew narrative altogether struggle to gain commercial publication (see Hoberek 2007: 236). Writing of the recent publishing market, Robert L. McLaughlin contends that the chance "for anything of artistic merit to be published without the possibility for profit […] is slim indeed" (McLaughlin 2004: 54). Hence, neo-Victorian fiction that cloaks its artistic merit in a compelling narrative has a greater chance of securing readers and, therefore, publication. Hence, Gutleben's claim that neo-Victorian novels are "still less radical, less subversive, less innovative than [the literature of] modernism and early postmodernism" is perhaps what paradoxically accounts for neo-Victorian fiction's continuing popularity (Gutleben 2001: 161).

A. S. Byatt achieved popular and critical success by producing a "fat, glossy romance", but one "tricked out in new-fangled, self-reflexive style" (Hulbert 1993: 55). This combination won her neo-Victorian novel *Possession: A Romance* the Booker prize in 1990, followed by an ongoing place on bestseller lists on both sides of the Atlantic, the reprint of her entire backlist, and a big-screen movie deal (see Todd 1996: 28). Harking to the success of the same formula, numerous earlier, as well as subsequent, neo-Victorian fictions have won or been listed for the prestigious Booker: Thomas Keneally's *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* (1972), J. G. Farrell's *The Siege of Krishnapur* (1973), Peter Carey's *Illywhacker* (1985) and *Oscar and Lucinda* (1988), David Malouf's *Remembering Babylon* (1993), Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* (1996), Carey's *The True History* of the Kelly Gang (2001), Sarah Waters's *Fingersmith* (2002), Colm Tóibín's *The Master* (2004), Gail Jones's *Sixty Lights* (2004) and Kate Grenville's *The Secret River* (2005). Such a situation confirms Gutleben's observation that, while the earliest postmodern texts were written by an obscure group of writers, today's literary heavyweights have been drawn to the neo-Victorian

form, with Byatt, Atwood, Ackroyd, Carey and Lodge all garnering mainstream popularity and success (Gutleben 2001: 220).

Again, Gutleben expresses scepticism regarding this bridging of critical and popular divides. For, if a glut of literary writers are turning their hand to neo-Victorian fiction (which, as already established, requires a shift away from the earlier, radical forms of postmodern fiction), it necessarily places the genre at odds with postmodernism practices of subverting from the sidelines. The core of the problem appears to lie in this notion of 'accessibility': "By softening the subversiveness of its immediate forebears [i.e. early experimental fiction], the neo-Victorian novel puts into practice a form of fiction more accessible to a British readership" (Gutleben 2001: 161). Neo-Victorian fiction's artistic merit appears to be measured in inverse proportion to its accessibility. By reaching beyond a die-hard coterie of academic radicals, Gutleben suggests, writers of neo-Victorian fiction have capitulated to the demands of the publishing market at the expense of critical credibility. Where literary fiction is concerned, popularity appears to negate subversion and therefore the conferral of postmodernist membership. Yet what places mainstream success at odds with artistic merit? According to another view, neo-Victorian fiction's popular success is just one symptom of late postmodernism's bankruptcy of innovation.

7. Postmodernism's Loss of Relevance

The second argument for divorcing neo-Victorian fiction from postmodern subversion concerns the state of postmodernism more broadly. In this alternate claim, neo-Victorian fiction's alleged diluting of postmodernism's more extreme traits is attributed to the diminishing currency of postmodernism itself as a problematising force in the so-called late postmodern era, and possibly the exhaustion of postmodernism's relevance altogether. In other words, neo-Victorian fiction may well be postmodern, but its very postmodernism may now be equated with a dearth of subversive capacity.

In 2005, when the American historian Minsoo Kang proclaimed "the death of the postmodern", she assigned it retrospectively to the day on which the film *The Last Action Hero* premiered in the United States in 1993. "A thoroughly postmodern work", claims Kang, "employing the standard devices of self-reference, ironic satire, and playing with multiple levels of reality", *The Last Action Hero* starred the ubiquitous action hero Arnold

Schwarzenegger and deployed the same big-budget, action-movie conventions and effects that it simultaneously held up to ironic scrutiny (Kang qtd. in Hoberek 2007: 233). The film's subsequent failure at the box-office led Kang to conclude that "there's no surer sign of an intellectual idea's final demise than its total appropriation by mass culture" (Kang qtd. in Hoberek 2007: 233).[9]

It seems that the very democratisation of postmodernism has become its undoing. The mainstream success of postmodernist artefacts, such as that which neo-Victorian fiction enjoys, is seen as the harbinger of postmodernism's demise. There may be merit in challenging the continuing efficacy of a radical movement once its unconventionality becomes "consensual" (Gutleben 2001: 168). But this proposition might also be viewed somewhat differently, whereby the successful infiltration of postmodernism's devices of subversion, irony, parody, narrative scepticism, and metafictional self-consciousness into the mainstream become a measure of postmodernism's success rather than its failure.

Or, is it that we have we become dulled to subversion? Do "subversive practices become institutionalized and thereby lose their seditious impact and intent", as Gutleben claims of neo-Victorian fiction (Gutleben 2001: 172)? Can we go so far as to label the genre's postmodernism as "neo-conservative" as, citing Jürgen Habermas, Gutleben does (Gutleben 2001: 193)? Or is it once again a question of framing? Might not the paralysis of postmodernist dissent be a means for neo-conservatives to lobby for the return to a genuinely neo-conservative culture? Is the backlash against postmodernism, after all, just a way to usher postmodernism to the door when it still has revisionary work to do?

For all the claims of postmodernism's supposedly dwindling impact, it still garners vocal opposition from its right-wing detractors, suggesting that its radical potential is far from dead. Debates in the Australian public sphere reveal a neo-conservative impulse set on eradicating postmodernism's influence from the national curriculum. For example, in 2006, it was widely reported that then Prime Minister John Howard blamed "the so-called postmodernism" for "dumbing down" the high school syllabus, and the term thence became Howard's 'whipping boy' for all that was controversial in public education:

> I mean when the, what I might call the, traditional texts are treated no differently from pop cultural commentary, as appears to be the case in some syllabus [sic], I share the views of many people about the so-called postmodernism. […] We understand […] that there's high quality literature and there's rubbish, and we need a curriculum that encourages an understanding of the high quality literature and not the rubbish. (Howard qtd. in King 2006)

Rejecting any mode of analysis that problematises accepted hierarchies of literary value, Howard and other conservative public commentators have sought to stamp out the use of postmodernist strategies, those that encourage students to view a text as constructed from within particular discourses and which demonstrate power relationships between different social groups in society. Similarly, when Australian revisionist historians began to uncover tales of frontier violence that overturned the nationalist pioneer narrative, it was postmodern dissenters whom Howard accused of reducing the accepted version of Australian history to "little more than a litany of sexism, racism and class warfare" (Howard 2006).

As this cursory overview suggests, the presence of postmodernist practices in the mainstream continues to engender anxiety at the most public levels. It is a curious position for postmodernism to be in: to be occasioning a fervent backlash against its dangerous relativism, while at the same time being so depleted of subversion as to be touted as the new conservativism. Such a paradox suggests that postmodernism is perhaps still capable of challenging the more conservative elements of mainstream culture after all, which begs the questions: how can postmodernism be dead if it still has the power to cause such unease?

8. Neo-Victorian Revisionism and the Politically Correct

In the current rhetoric, the surest means of dismissing liberal revisionism is to consign it to the trash-heap of 'political correctness'. According to the British commentator Will Hutton, this tactic emerged as "one of the brilliant tools that the American Right developed in the mid-1980s as part of its demolition of American liberalism":

> What the sharpest thinkers on the American Right saw quickly was that by declaring war on the cultural manifestations of liberalism – by levelling the charge of political correctness against its exponents – they could discredit the whole political project (Hutton 2001).

Equating postmodernism with the politically correct provides its detractors with a convenient shorthand for dismissing issues of representative justice as the latest left-wing fad. Interestingly, neo-Victorian fiction has come under attack for the very same revisionist practices: "Repeated from one novel to another, these politically correct perspectives, far from being subversive or innovative, become predictable, not to say redundant" (Gutleben 2001: 169).

Yet arguably to dismiss what is perhaps the neo-Victorian novel's most innovative contribution to contemporary literary culture as 'political correctness' is to capitulate to the very right-wing mechanisms that revisionary fiction sets out to challenge. This important work entails the retelling of Victorian narratives from marginal points of view, a practice that Peter Widdowson describes as "re-visionary fiction":

> novels which 'write back to' – indeed, 'rewrite' – canonical texts from the past, and hence call to account formative narratives that have arguably been central to the construction of 'our' consciousness. (Widdowson 2006: 491)

As well as harking to Adrienne Rich's feminist proposal for women's writing as re-vision (see Rich 1979), Widdowson's definition incorporates Salman Rushdie's account of postcolonial literature as writing from the margins back to the imperial centre in a way that expands upon and/or confronts the dominant narrative (see Rushdie qtd. Ashcroft et al. 1989: 33). The neo-Victorian novels of the types that Widdowson is concerned with are those that contradict or complicate what Raymond Williams has called Victorian literature's "selective tradition" (Williams qtd. Vicary 1989: 168-169).[10]

Revisionary tendencies in neo-Victorian fiction have garnered much critical attention, earning it a variety of descriptors. Anne Humpherys uses the term "aftering" to explain the burgeoning practice in recent decades of

"writing over" Victorian novels (Humpherys 2005: 442). Steven Connor reports an ambivalent critical response to the project he calls "literary reversion" (Connor 1994: 79), in contrast to Christian Gutleben and Susana Onega's use of the visual metaphor "refraction" to illustrate "the ways in which a text exploits and integrates both the reflections of a previous text and the new light shed on the original work by its rewriting" (Gutleben and Onega 2004: 7). More recently, Andrea Kirchknopf cites "adaptations or appropriations", lending a derivative feel (Kirchknopf 2008: 68), while Mark Llewellyn's "critical f(r)iction" encompasses the dynamic tension present in such texts (Llewellyn 2008: 170).

Put simply: if Victorian historical and fictional texts represent the centre, neo-Victorian novels give voice to "the ex-centric, the off-center" (Hutcheon 1988: 41). Neo-Victorian fiction brings to the fore the "trace of the excluded" (Holton 1994: 10) – those voices or events whose overt presence might disrupt the clear path of the narrative with viewpoints that contest the authority of the historical record itself. For example, in its transition to film at the turn of the twentieth-century, Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* (1814) underwent a postmodernist intervention that offered testimony to the unsavoury underbelly of colonial prosperity. Under Patricia Rozema's direction, the oblique references to slavery in Austen's Regency novel are given substance in the 1999 film, becoming an explicit exposé of colonial practices during the early nineteenth century.

In Rozema's film, the source of Tom Bertram's mystery illness originates in his disgust at his father's excesses while visiting the family's sugar plantation. Portrayed in a dreamlike flashback, Tom's horror at his father's abuse of slave women in Antigua explains his malaise. This visual elaboration of the unspoken elements of Austen's text owes its neo-Victorian re-reading to the postcolonial critique on *Mansfield Park* so influentially levied by Edward W. Said in "Jane Austen and Empire" (Said 1993: 95-116). Said's disinterment of the imperialist politics beneath Austen's text is what permitted Rozema's postmodern revising of the literary-historical record. Similarly, the colonial and gender politics of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) cannot be read in the same way after Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) or Gilbert and Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979).

However, just as postmodern devices are said to have lost their innovation owing to their acceptance into the mainstream, Gutleben regards

neo-Victorian fiction's shift from dominant to marginalised points of view as equally retrograde. According to Gutleben's argument, people from formerly marginal groups – non-white, non-heterosexual, non-male, working-class, and others – have now gained greater mainstream acceptance, and therefore the neo-Victorian fictional practice of centralising such figures is no longer controversial. Although Gutleben acknowledges that early recuperative efforts by neo-Victorian fiction were "right-minded", now, he suggests facetiously, the ideal neo-Victorian protagonist has become "a destitute, handicapped, black, female homosexual" (Gutleben 2001: 168)!

Gutleben's concern is to highlight what he perceives as the over-use of non-normative protagonists in neo-Victorian fiction that risks blunting their impact for the purposes of socio-political critique. His position requires some unpacking, however, since it depends on his assertion that such a tendency is a capitulation to the rise – and acceptance – of political correctness in the 1990s, a movement he regards as "consensual", "obliged" and "(almost) universally accepted" (Gutleben 2001: 167, 168). This is problematic on two fronts. In the first place, political correctness is far from universally accepted – a point that is demonstrated by the term's longstanding pejoration into little more than a slur determined to discredit the project of inclusion and belittle attempts to redress socio-political imbalances rather than to describe mass consent towards such a movement. In the second place, this backlash against political correctness has the effect of falsely assigning marginal subjects a political sovereignty they simply do not possess. To claim as "redundant" neo-Victorian fiction's upward trend in representing figures from the margins (Gutleben 2001: 169) is to suggest that there is nothing more to be gained in terms of representative redress for minority groups. Yet, despite neo-Victorian literature's penchant for representing homosexual characters and relationships, today same-sex marriage remains unrecognised in the majority of the world, even in developed democracies like Australia and much of the United States. In another example, the actual political representation of minority groups in the United Kingdom (where neo-Victorian fictions are usually set) also remains resolutely lacking. A report on public appointments tabled in 2002 found that the occupants of positions in government and other public bodies to be overwhelmingly "pale, stale and male" – older white men sourced from the more affluent regions of London and England's south-east (Hencke 2002).

If some neo-Victorian writers' use of formerly marginalised characters as protagonists has indeed become 'conventional', this conventionality has not been converted into actual political representation, or even into the recognition of some basic human rights. Yet, the centralisation of non-normative protagonists in neo-Victorian fiction participates in the gradual expansion of cultural norms to accommodate a diversity of social subjects, with the potential to advocate for transformative changes to the political equality of such subjects beyond the narrative.

9. Neo-Victorian Revisionist Fiction as Recognitive Justice

By revising Victorian narratives to include those figures under-represented by Victorian historical and fictional texts, neo-Victorian fiction makes an important contribution to the model of social justice via recognitive justice. While other models of social justice define equality in terms of people's access to material goods (Connell 1993: 43, Gale and Densmore 2000: 12), recognitive justice claims that the most damaging injustices are "cultural or symbolic" (Fraser 1995: 71). For example, distributive justice models may benefit groups whose needs are mainly economic, because they seek to *eradicate* the very attribute that constitutes the group's collectivity (such as poverty). However, there are other groups whose members *celebrate* their binding characteristic as a source of pride (such as sexual orientation) and do not seek its erasure (Fraser 1995: 74). On the contrary, what such groups suffer from is a lack of positive representation across multiple areas, from political representation to narrative visibility. In order to produce changes to social equality that are transformative and long-term, a recognitive form of social justice must be engaged to destabilise deep-structure inequalities.

Because of its capacity to enhance the representation of marginalised groups, fiction is an important mechanism for meting out recognitive justice. As we have seen, the neo-Victorian novel frequently reassigns prominence from the voices at the centre of Victorian history to the figures at the margins: servants, criminals, women, homosexuals, the colonised races; those political minorities who were vilified or eclipsed by the historical record become its subjects. Speaking of her three neo-Victorian novels, for example, Sarah Waters asserts that lesbianism is "both at the heart of the books and yet it's also incidental, because that's how it is in my life, and that's how it is, really, for most lesbian and gay people" (Waters

qtd. Lo 2006). By making *Affinity*'s protagonist and antagonists alike same-sex-attracted, Waters desensitises lesbianism as a point of difference, making female homosexuality a highly visible yet unmarked case. Lesbians cease to be marginalised oddities in Waters's re-imagining of a Victorian world but occupy centre stage.

A decade earlier, Terry Castle's groundbreaking study on lesbian figures in Western narrative, *The Apparitional Lesbian* (1993), had described the tendency to characterise female same-sex desire "through a blanching authorial infusion of spectral metaphors" (Castle 1993: 34). Such tropes of apparitionalisation made the lesbian love plot unsupportable within the 'real' world of the narrative, resulting in the lesbian's disappearance from the story, or even her death (Castle 1993: 6). In the fashion of postmodernist fiction, Waters's most recent neo-Victorian fiction, *Affinity* (1999), engages the very apparitional tropes used to eviscerate lesbian presence from the Victorian novel; but in this revisionary novel, lesbian presence is fortified rather than occluded. In an ironic nod to the history of lesbian narrative erasure, *Affinity*'s love-plot between the middle-class spinster Margaret Prior and the imprisoned working-class medium Selina Dawes revolves around the practices of nineteenth-century spiritualism – not unlike the famous Victorian proto-lesbian bond between Olive Chancellor and Verena Tarrant in Henry James's *The Bostonians* (1886). However, *Affinity* is in an important sense post-*Bostonians*. Whilst Olive Chancellor was apparitionalised at the conclusion of the Victorian novel, her 'Boston marriage' to Tarrant dissolved by Basil Ransom's triumphant heterosexual intervention (see Castle 1993: 39), at the start of *Affinity*, Margaret has already survived such a dissolution. She has overcome the betrayal of her first female love-interest, Helen, who succumbed to an approved heterosexual union with Margaret's own brother. She has also survived the ensuing suicide attempt. Now as the novel commences, Margaret is ready to find love again, albeit unexpectedly with the Millbank prisoner and mesmerist Selina Dawes.[11]

So, far from erasing lesbian sexuality using apparitional metaphors to disempower lesbians characters, the spectral trope becomes the vehicle by which the female same-sex love-plot is given a fully material reality in the neo-Victorian novel (Hall 2006: 5). Historiographic metafiction "works *within* conventions in order to subvert them" (Hutcheon 1988: 5; original emphasis), and likewise Waters's revisionary neo-Victorian text "works

both within and against the apparitional history of lesbianism" (Hall 2006: 2). Waters abides by the apparitional tradition when issuing Selina's love tokens to Margaret via (apparently) supernatural means. Yet when the spiritualist illusions are revealed as mere chicanery, this revelation also shifts lesbianism from the metaphysical to the physical realm. The keepsakes Margaret believed to be conveyed through the ether from Selina were instead conveyed by the hand of her own maid, Ruth Vigers – actions that confirm the latter woman to be Selina's true lover. Female homosexuality thus becomes de-apparitionalised – and takes its place in the 'real' world of the narrative.

In the final telling, however, *Affinity* is as much about renovating representations of Victorian class as those of sexuality. It is not for her aberrant sexuality that Margaret is punished, when Selina and Ruth abscond with Margaret's fortune and identity (as Castle suggests is the case when Ransom's rescues Verena from Olive's clutches in the final pages of *The Bostonians* [Castle 1993: 7]), but, rather, for her middle-class hypocrisy. When contemplating how easily she avoided a jail sentence herself, Margaret briefly acknowledges that it was her social status as a lady that protects her from imprisonment following her suicide attempt (see Hall 2006: 8): "[A] common coarse-featured woman might drink morphia and be sent to gaol for it, while I am saved and sent to visit her – and all because I am a *lady*" (Waters 2002: 256; original emphasis). Margaret's outburst does not express sympathy for the injustice caused to the "common coarse-featured woman" (that is, a woman of lower class), nor does she appreciate the privilege her class selectively affords her. Instead, her words lament the limitations placed on herself as an unmarried gentlewoman.

In an ironic reversal of these rights, it is the "common" women of Millbank who openly enjoy same-sex relationships by "palling up" with fellow inmates (Waters 2002: 67). The prisoners are not hide-bound by concerns about social repercussions as was Margaret's first lover, Helen. Yet Margaret is repulsed by the arrangements between the prison inmates: when she is almost duped into passing a communiqué between "sweethearts" Jane Jarvis and Emma White, Margaret feels disgust towards her potential role as "medium" to the women's "dark passion" (Waters 2002: 67). Yet, what makes the sweethearts' passion so unpalatably "dark" is surely connected to the women's class rather than their same-sex desires, which Margaret shares. It is only because Selina is "something of a lady"

(Waters 2002: 42) that she is raised above the "common coarse-featured" women and made a likely candidate for Margaret's affections.

As for the other women at Millbank, their humanity is as invisible to Margaret as her own illegitimate longing for a female companion in the eyes of Victorian society. Margaret does not consider the other inmates fully sexualised, fully realised human beings any more than she does her own maid, Ruth Vigers. To Margaret, Vigers is not actually a person but a function, a word to be uttered when service is required: "…her name is *Vigers*. I shall enjoy pronouncing that, I never much liked *Boyd*" (Waters 2002: 68, original ellipses). Margaret upholds the attitude towards servants reflected in Victorian literature, where the serving classes remained invisible, peopling the background of the lives of the Victorian middle and upper classes like human furniture. *Affinity* continues this premise of servant obscurity by keeping Vigers's role in Selina's life secret until the final shocking revelation that a mere servant girl has whisked away Margaret's beloved Selina from under her very nose. And it is Margaret's insistence of Vigers's relative insignificance that riles her the most: "What was she, to me? I could not even recall the details of her face, her look, her manners" (Waters 2002: 340). Furthermore, in Margaret's anguish at the runaways' betrayal, she turns to fantasies of exerting her social power to punish Vigers and secure Selina for herself: "I'll have them both at Millbank! I'll have them put in separate cells, and make Selina my own again!" (Waters 2002: 342). However, the ultimate triumph of the novel belongs to Ruth Vigers, who, by flouting both the apparitional status of lesbians and the narrative invisibility of the working class in Victorian literature, disgraces Margaret for her middle-class hypocrisy. Although Victorian social mores deny Margaret the freedom to be a lesbian, it is her own refusal to empathise with the women disadvantaged by class in the narrative that denies her happiness at the novel's end.

Like many neo-Victorian novels, *Affinity* broadens the exclusive reach of dead, white (and, one might add, straight and white-collar) males to accommodate a more diverse picture of nineteenth-century social history by revealing how such histories are relayed according to hierarchies of political power. *Affinity*'s portrayal of under-represented social groups, such as lesbians, criminals and the working class, enhances public recognition of the plight of such groups as a significant precursor to substantive political change.

If, as Suzanne Keen suggests, 60,000 Victorian novels have been written (Keen 1998: 179), with most installing a normative protagonist, neo-Victorian fiction's relatively recent reversal of this trend should not make so much as a dent on the canon of politically dominant heroes. To suggest, therefore, that neo-Victorian fiction's habit of plucking its protagonists from the least advantaged groups of society, historical or contemporary, is redundant participates in a false attribution of privilege. Rather, such a reversal valorises diversity and difference among groups and disperses the myth of sameness. It is here that neo-Victorian fiction's postmodernist revisionism still has a vital role to play.

Notes

1. J. Hillis Miller uses these two seemingly incompatible terms, "homage" and "critique", to describe Charles Palliser's *The Quincunx*, and the neo-Victorian project in general (Miller 2004: 30).
2. This original and exhaustive volume made ground-breaking strides into the fledgling field of neo-Vic criticism. As with any seminal work, Gutleben has himself since developed or qualified some of the assumptions and conclusions mounted by *Nostalgic Postmodernism*. Nonetheless, the claims made by this foundational text still bear scrutiny in our continuing to investigate the poetics of Neo-Victorian literature into the twenty-first century.
3. However, this practice is surely less a function of an author's mercenary intentions than those of their publisher's marketing department.
4. Such a process of veneration must by extension permit some neo-Victorian writers to build up their own authorial status by borrowing the limelight of their Victorian authorial forebears.
5. Moreover, might we ask whether the rise of the neo-Victorian novel is the consequence, not the proposed instigator, of a generation already reading more Victorian literature than it has in the previous 30 years? Might not the neo-Victorian novel be responding to a renaissance in the increasing range and number of Victorian novels being published in paperback than ever before (see Gilmour 2000: 198-199)?
6. On arriving home, Inspector Kildare gives his "bachelor" housemate George Flood "a quick peck on the cheek". Flood then presents Kildare with a welcome-home drink, "after gently kissing the top of his head". This casual intimacy continues during the ensuing conversation as Kildare "strokes his friend's mutton-chop whiskers" (Ackroyd 1995: 257, 258, 259).

7. "The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species" (Foucault 1990: 43).
8. In a later article, Gutleben argues that a contamination of forms within the neo-Victorian novel can produce "a contiguity and a similarity between the Victorian and contemporary traumas" (Gutleben 2009/2010: 145).
9. Kang's full text, 'The Death of the Postmodern and the Post-Ironic Lull' is available online (see Goetz 2006).
10. Oft-cited examples of re-visionary neo-Victorian rewritings include: Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), retold from the perspective of the upperhouse-maid in Valerie Martin's *Mary Reilly* (1990); Peter Carey's supplementation of Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations* (1860-61) by reimagining the tale of Pip's convict benefactor, Magwitch, in *Jack Maggs* (1997); and, Emma Tennant's contemporary reworking of Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891) in *Tess* (1993).
11. Although the end of the novel re-stages not only Margaret Prior's self-erasure via implied suicide, but the erasure of her voice via burning of all but the last pages of her diary.

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