A Partial Panorama:
Review of Louisa Hadley's *Neo-Victorian Fiction and Historical Narrative: The Victorians and Us*

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Louisa Hadley, *Neo-Victorian Fiction and Historical Narrative: The Victorians and Us*
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Louisa Hadley's monograph is a short and accessible work intent on demonstrating that neo-Victorian fiction represents a specific branch of historical fiction which strives to reflect the historical specificity of the Victorian era, while simultaneously taking into account the contemporary culture from which it stems. In order to illustrate her central thesis that neo-Victorian fiction is historical fiction Hadley explores four types of neo-Victorian novels, which also constitute the four chapters of her work. After a study of biographical narratives (that is, Peter Carey's *Jack Maggs* [1997], James Wilson's *The Dark Clue* [2001] and Janice Galloway's *Clara* [2002]), she considers the conventions of the detective novel in Julian Barnes's *Arthur & George* (2006) and Colin Dexter's *The Wench Is Dead* (1989). She then moves on to examine the fictions featuring Victorian spiritualism (A.S. Byatt's 'The Conjugial Angel' [1992], Michèle Robert's *In the Red Kitchen* [1990] and Sarah Waters's *Affinity* [1999]), before turning to A.S. Byatt's *Possession: A Romance* (1990) and Graham Swift's *Ever After* (1992) in order to show how contemporary novels read and interpret the textual remains of the Victorian past. Hadley concludes her study with a Coda in which she synthesises the textual strategies used by neo-Victorian fiction to recreate and revisit the historical specificities of the Victorian epoch.

What is praiseworthy is the persistence and coherence with which Hadley demonstrates that neo-Victorian fiction evinces a remarkable "understanding of the historical conditions" of the Victorian era (p. 160). What is baffling, on the other hand, is that a whole volume should be dedicated to that idea, which can hardly be called new in the ever-expanding

field of neo-Victorian criticism and which is certainly also present in another volume brought out by the same publisher in the same year: Kate Mitchell's *History and Cultural Memory in Neo-Victorian Fiction: Victorian Afterimages.* Not only does Mitchell cover the same epistemological field as Hadley, but she also focuses on the same authors: A.S. Byatt, Graham Swift and Sarah Waters. These authors have already been amply dealt with in neo-Victorian studies and, unfortunately, the analyses in Hadley's book do not throw any particularly new light on them. The range of neo-Victorian novels that is actually covered constitutes one of the book's main shortcomings. Hadley bravely provides, at the end of her study, a list of neo-Victorian texts; but this list is so manifestly incomplete, omitting so many set neo-Victorian novels, that it just cannot be recommended to critics or even students of our ever-expanding field of research. The main problem with this study, which is restricted to ten well-known neo-Victorian works, is that it does not do justice to the vitality and variety of contemporary neo-Victorian novels. While Hadley frames her discussion almost exclusively in terms of 1980s cultural heritage debates and education policy, she actually treats numerous novels from the late 1990s to post the millennial turn. When she studies Peter Carey's *Jack Maggs* for example, Hadley does mention that it has a post-colonial agenda but she does not compare it with – and does not even signal the existence of – other post-colonial works also set in Australia or in one of many other cultural contexts. The teeming Indian sub-genre of neo-Victorian fiction, for instance, is never mentioned and does not even find its way into a footnote, although its interest as revisionist historical fiction is considerable, especially as one of the major Victorian sites of empire building. Besides, the presence of Janice Galloway's *Clara* raises yet another problem, a problem concerning the very definition of neo-Victorian fiction. Can a work entirely set in a nineteenth-century Germanic context be called a neo-Victorian novel, without some sort of qualification or proviso? If the answer to that question is positive, then any reconsideration of the nineteenth century, be it set in Germany, France, South America or China ought to be called neo-Victorian – a generalised homogenising inclusiveness, which has been hotly debated at recent neo-Victorian conferences. This problematic at least would have needed to be registered somehow.

In the central thesis of Hadley's study can be found another bone of contention. That the neo-Victorian novel has a crucial historical dimension

is of course undeniable, but to suggest that the whole of neo-Victorian fiction must be considered primarily in the light of the genre of the historical novel again amounts to ignoring the multiplicity of other generic frames (such as fictional autobiography, romance, Gothic fiction, sequels and prequels), ideological priorities (in particular the political agenda of postcolonialism), ethical paths, thematic concerns, and ontological possibilities explored and illustrated by neo-Victorian fiction. Admittedly, as when discussing the 'Victorian novel', any account of the 'neo-Victorian novel' will be necessarily selective, but, almost inevitably, readers are invited to draw some sort of generalisations from the specific texts discussed. Ideally, then, these wider implications should have been more clearly delimited or qualified in a study that implicitly presents itself as an interim survey of this still youthful field of critical enquiry. Besides, it seems very debatable whether some of the novels chosen by Hadley actually belong to the genre of 'straight' historical fiction. It is of course out of the question to challenge the importance of the historical dimension in these works, but the axiological and generic priorities of the works by Swift, Byatt, Dexter and even Carey and Galloway – ranging from romance and ventriloquism to pastiche and postmodern experimentalism – are not to be found in, and certainly not to be limited to, the epistemological focus of the historical novel. So, to insist on neo-Victorian fiction's keen awareness of its double historicity seems amply justified, but to argue that "neo-Victorian fiction's commitment to the historical specificity of the Victorian era determines **all** aspects of the genre, and particularly its position as historical fiction" (p. 163, emphasis added) is clearly an overstatement, which cannot explain the multiplicity of the movement's historical, ideological and literary influences and models.

What might also seem surprising in a study focusing on the importance of the historical context is the absence of investigation into certain historical assumptions. Hadley's demonstration that the surge of the neo-Victorian movement coincided with "Thatcher's promotion of the Victorian era" and "the cultural reclamation of the Victorian era that was being undertaken by the Heritage Industry and the 'Laura Ashley look' in the 1980s" (p. 9) is very convincing and well-argued, but it does not explain why neo-Victorianism should still be thriving today to the extent that it is. The parallel between the contemporary situation of crisis, linked to our economic system, and the socio-economic problems of the Victorian

system, for example, is never considered. Likewise, the conjunction of neo-Victorian fiction and trauma discourse is never mentioned, although the implications of trauma studies for a study of the historical dimension seem crucial: what trauma theory highlights is precisely a double perspective – and how can one not think then of the double perspective of neo-Victorian fiction? – which places on the same level and in the same historicity the belated reverberations of historical catastrophes and their persistent traces in the present.

Moreover, Thatcher's Victorian values, crucial as they may have been, might not have been the only factor in the development of neo-Victorianism in the 1980s. Could one not, or should one not, draw a link between the advent of New Historicism and the success of neo-Victorian fiction? Does not New Historicism's dual interest in the historicity of texts and the textuality of history reflect, encourage or explain neo-Victorian fiction's mixture of historical documentation and postmodernist metatextuality? Above all, what Hadley's study of historical narrative fails to conduct is an examination of neo-Victorianism in the context of literary history. The rise of neo-Victorian fiction in the 1980s corresponds to a particular period in the evolution of literary trends, since it occurs at the end of the first wave of postmodernism. The early form of postmodernism of the 1960s and 1970s essentially pursued the quest for innovation launched by the modernists. By the 1980s the logic of experimentation seemed to reach a sort of dead end: when all the typographical experiments had been dared (particularly by the movement of Surfiction), when all the narrative ingredients had been undermined (particularly by the Nouveau Roman), when all the ontological subversions had been effected (particularly by the magic realists), what further innovations could the novel dream of? It is in this context of escalating experimentation, the logical culmination of which would have been the blank page, that the neo-Victorian novel, with its logic of hybridisation (of the past and the present, of experimentation and traditional narrative), represented a new novelistic branch. Neo-Victorian fiction has, then, a specifically historical function in the 1980s, that of suggesting a new novelistic path and providing a way out of the aporia of endless experimentation. Put differently, it combines the experimentation of its direct literary antecedents with the more traditional modes of its more distant literary ancestors.

This lack of hindsight in the field of literary history is linked to another shortcoming: the author's lack of enlightenment in the field of postmodernism and recent critical theory. As her bibliography clearly indicates, Hadley's engagement with postmodernist criticism is of a distinctly limited kind. In the course of her study, she mentions Jameson, Hutcheon and McHale (the latter with a wrong date of publication) and only refers to their works of the 1980s, without taking into account the significant theoretical developments and reassessments of postmodernism since then (including by later publications by both Hutcheon and McHale, such as Hutcheon's 'The Post Always Rings Twice: The Postmodern and the Postcolonial' [1995] and 'Postmodern Afterthoughts' [2002] and McHale's *What Was Postmodernism?* [2007], and '1966 Nervous Breakdown, or, When Did Postmodernism Begin?' [2008]). In spite of this lack of specialisation, Hadley insists again and again on neo-Victorian fiction's divergence from, and even "backlash against" (p. 151), postmodernism. When Hadley evokes "the ahistoricism of postmodernism" (p. 18), when she asserts that postmodernism is "divorced from its historical referent" (p. 159), she merely repeats stereotypical considerations derived from Jameson and limited to a very early form of postmodernism. Contemporary studies of postmodernism, on the contrary, insist on the presence of the past and the historicist concerns linked to the principles of recycling, rewriting and reprising. So when Hadley wants to show neo-Victorian fiction's departure from postmodernism by invoking "its dual approach […] as a two-step process of adoption and transformation" (p. 151), she misses her point, because this dual approach is precisely (also) postmodernism's hallmark.

Neo-Victorian fiction, then, has more similarities with postmodernism than Hadley is prepared to admit. The acknowledgement of this fundamental affinity (rather than divergence) would have prevented her from pursuing a few wrong tracks. When she states that neo-Victorian novels adopt "realist narrative modes" in order "to confidently assert the reality of the past they narrate" (p. 151) and that "[b]y adopting a realist narrative voice, neo-Victorian fictions ground their imaginative reconstruction of the Victorian past in the historically specific forms of Victorian fiction" (p. 154), Hadley seems to ignore the numerous postmodernist features which create a crucial critical distance within such "realist narrative mode[s]". Can the extracts from a TV script, the fragments of psychoanalytical criticism, the passages of stream of consciousness, the

inclusion of a fifteen-page poem, all present in the novels of Hadley's corpus, really be considered as, or rather reduced to, "realist narrative mode[s]"? Can the fragmentation of narratives, the shuffling of chronology, the multiplicity of perspectives be considered "realist narrative mode[s]"? Neo-Victorian fiction does not adopt Victorian realist voices; rather, it integrates them into a postmodernist patchwork of narrative modes.

Hadley's concluding remark, specifying that she has "positioned neo-Victorian fiction within its Victorian context" (p. 164), almost represents a logical impossibility. The context of neo-Victorian fiction cannot be Victorian; it is, *pace* Hadley, inevitably postmodern. The Victorian context is irretrievably lost, and this leads to a fundamental aspect of neo-Victorian fiction's historical narratives: their hyperreality – never acknowledged in this study. Whenever neo-Victorian fiction recreates a historical context or document, it takes as a model Victorian texts and not Victorian reality; it reproduces the *discourse* of the real and not the real itself; it is based on a signifier not a referent, reflecting the *word* of the past and not the world of the past; it is the sign of a sign, the representation of a representation. In other words, it fundamentally partakes of hyperreality – and not of realism. The historical archives included in neo-Victorian fiction are then most often fabricated; they create a hyperreality at the same time as they reflect it. The exploration of history through these hyperreal fabrications raises fascinating questions of an epistemological and ethical nature that deserve an in-depth analysis which, regrettably, is not carried out in the study under consideration.

So, although Hadley claims that she has "sought to respect and mimic the dual approach of neo-Victorian fiction" and that she "has not valued one historical context over another" (p. 164), her study of the contemporary context, which is one of late postmodernity, is not satisfactory. On the other hand, it must be stressed that her presentation of the Victorian context and ethos is well-informed, cogent and useful. Hadley is perfectly right to highlight the Victorian eagerness to produce written evidence, to accumulate documentation, "to leave behind physical records of their time", a series of practices which "at least partly accounts for their continued presence in the contemporary cultural consciousness" (p. 7). The Victorian practice of biography and its relations with the *Bildungsroman* is also aptly illustrated, just as the study of Victorian detective fiction and its affinity with the realist project, as well as the exploration of Victorian

spiritualism and ghost stories, are well-documented and full of relevant information.

If the neo-Victorian novel can be considered as a form of re-contextualisation and a part of the literature of rewriting, then this (limited) survey of neo-Victorian fiction can be praised for its thorough investigation of the Victorian hypotext – although the same cannot be said for the study of the contemporary hypertext.