Neo-Victorian Orientations towards the Fictional Writer: Jane Harris's *The Observations*

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Abstract:
Jane Harris's *The Observations* (2006) narrates the story of Bessy Buckley, an Irish girl who searches for work and finds it in Castle Haivers, employed by Arabella Reid. The novel unfolds an unexpected course of actions, which will shift Bessy's position from being a vulnerable subject to a resilient one through storytelling. Bessy becomes a writer with a voice of her own, but also finds strength. This essay focuses on the character of Bessy, a maid who pens her story, thus becoming a writer, but who also achieves improvement through friendship, bonding, and care. Also, the maid's disorienting voice complicates any reading of the novel as it paradoxically engages with the reader's desire for the truth, as well as with the constructed nature of her piece of life-writing. Ultimately, in *The Observations*, the act of writing (and reading) is then coupled with ethics of care in a Victorian context through a contemporary lens.

Keywords: care, Jane Harris, maid, *The Observations*, orientation, recognition, resilience, storytelling, trauma, women's writing.

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Jane Harris's *The Observations* (2006) narrates the story of Bessy Buckley, a fifteen-year-old Irish girl who finds a position as a maid in Castle Haivers (near Glasgow), employed by Arabella Reid, the mistress of this estate, in 1863. Reviewers of the novel have noticed Harris's novel as well-anchored in the nineteenth century. For example, one reviewer establishes some similarities with other neo-Victorian novels like Sarah Waters's *Fingersmith* (2002) such as "[t]he book's size, its young criminal female narrator, its use of cross-class deceit and Wilkie Collins-influenced layering of plot twists", only to later admit that these similarities are misleading because "Harris's voice is an original one, and her rollicking yet delicate narrative pitch sets the book apart" (Briscoe 2006: n.p.). The novel, structured in five parts, is told by Bessy, a first-person voice and an intradiegetic narrator who dominates and controls the unfolding of the events. In fact, as Liz Hoggard notes in her

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review of the novel for *The Observer*, "the novel is about *the act of writing* – and the escape it represents for women" (Hoggard 2006: n.p., added emphasis). This essay focuses on the character of Bessy, whose past traumas provide the catalyst for the eventful plot, and who finds redemption and improvement through friendship, bonding, and care, penning her story and thus becoming a writer. This act of writing is then coupled with ethics of care, which underlines issues of resilience and recognition in a Victorian context reimagined through a contemporary lens. I will also demonstrate how dis/re/orientations work in this neo-Victorian novel at various levels since the maid's disorienting voice unsettles and complicates any reading of the novel, which ultimately lays bare questions of narratorial voices, readerly expectations and the roles assigned to such an intradiegetic narrator and the reader when dealing with the act of writing. In addition, the text re-orients itself towards the Victorian past, towards one of those unacknowledged figures, the maid, but also illustrates contemporary anxieties and concerns, as well as projecting itself towards the various turns contemporary historical fiction may potentially take in the future, inevitably influenced by the Covid-19 pandemic. Lastly, I will employ conceptual frameworks and notions such as orientation, recognition, resilience, and the ethics of care, explored by Rita Felski, Boris Cyrulnik, Carol Gilligan and Virginia Held, among others.

The Observations is set in 1860s Scotland. Bessy Buckley, a young Irish woman and a prostitute, flees from her mother (also her pimp) and from a life of misery, and finds a post as a maid in Castle Haivers, outside Glasgow, working for Arabella Reid. Bessy is requested to keep a journal of her day-to-day life and of her most intimate thoughts when doing her chores: "I was to write down how I *felt* what I did and what *thoughts* went through my head as I did it" (Harris 2007: 53, original emphasis). In so doing, she finds her voice and gains control of her narration. In addition, Arabella demands that Bessy perform strange and repetitive sequences of obedience training, as part of an experiment that the mistress is conducting about servants: 'The Observations'. When Bessy discovers that Arabella is observing and taking notes of her as part of that experiment (that she also conducted with previous servants, like the deceased Nora), she feels betrayed and resolves to carry out her revenge, pretending that Nora's ghost haunts the attic for retaliation. As Arabella becomes increasingly obsessed with the presence of Nora's ghost, she finally loses her mind and is diagnosed with a mental disease. From that moment onwards, Bessy, guilt-ridden, is determined to find out the truth

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about Nora's death and tie up all the loose threads. Interspersed with this is Bessy's first-person account of her traumatic past of sexual abuse and prostitution, which will have something in common with Nora's tragic life. In the act of writing her story, Bessy finds a way of healing her wounded self, a catharsis which is also achieved through her growing attachment to Arabella, and through care, bonding, and recognition towards her mistress, which will take Bessy to working in an asylum at the novel's close. The title of the novel refers to the multiple ways in which the observation motif is relevant to the unfolding of the events, but also to the act of writing and the act of reading a neo-Victorian novel today, thus highlighting problems of interpretation and challenging readers' desire for knowledge, always conveyed at the mercy of Bessy's disorienting voice.

1. The Maid, the Mistress and 'The Observations'

Harris's *The Observations* cannot be labelled as straight neo-Victorian biofiction, defined as the attempt "to 'take the measure' of actual nineteenth-century lives and particularise history through individual existences, promising writers, artists, and audiences a sort of direct entrée into once lived, now vicariously relived past time" (Kohlke and Gutleben 2020: 2). The novel's protagonist, whose life is not the novel's only concern, is entirely fictional. However, it shares with neo-Victorian biofiction the conflation of proximity and distance, as well as the interest in "deconstructing nineteenth-century master narratives into individual 'micro' pasts" (Kohlke and Gutleben 2020: 43). In the case of *The Observations*, the 'micro' past is that of a maid, a Victorian servant. Other contemporary novels that have resorted to this undervalued figure of the maid include Valerie Martin's *Mary Reilly* (1990) and Margaret Forster's *Lady's Maid* (1990), the latter widely discussed as neo-Victorian biofiction in which the attention is shifted from Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Robert Browning "to the poet's personal maid Elizabeth Wilson, whose own obscure life-story is told via her involvement with the eloping lovers and her lengthy service with the married couple in Italy" (Kohlke and Gutleben 2020: 43). In turn, Valerie Martin's *Mary Reilly* (1990) adapts Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886) from the perspective of Mary Reilly, Dr. Jekyll's housemaid who bears some resemblances to Grace Marks, the notorious Canadian alleged murderess, fictionalised in Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* (1990), as Esther Saxey has aptly demonstrated (see Saxey 2010: 58-82).

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Another contemporary novel providing the servant's perspective in the nineteenth century is Jo Baker's *Longbourn* (2013), "a coquel" or parallel text (Parey 2019: 473-85) to Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813). The main characters are the servants living downstairs, while the Bennet family continue their lives, as narrated in Austen's novel with minor differences: Sarah, the housemaid, Mrs Hill the housekeeper, and James Smith, the footman, offer their perspectives on the narrated events, let the reader know the tasks and responsibilities they have, and share their feelings and perceptions. Sarah gives a whole list of first chores for example:

> First chores: fuel and water to be fetched, the hearths swept and the range to be blackleaded, and then her hands scrubbed free of blacking and soot before the day's work could properly begin. Outside, the iron chill of the pump-handle awaited her: she'd almost rather pluck hot coals from the fire. (Baker 2013: 55-56)

In her study of *Longbourn*, Armelle Parey perceptively notices that, unlike neo-Victorian novels, this coquel to *Pride and Prejudice* does not debunk or challenge the received images and perceptions about nineteenth-century figures or events; in other words, "*Longbourn* does not disparage the original characters" (Parey 2019: 87). Nevertheless, there are some similarities worth noting. Firstly, both *Longbourn* and *The Observations* do not glamorise the past, and they show characters covered in dirt and mud, for example, or involved in menial tasks; secondly, both Baker and Harris pinpoint social injustices from the past, particularly affecting women from the lower classes (see Parey 2019: 91).

Unlike *Longbourn*, in which Baker uses free indirect discourse in homage to Austen, however, *The Observations* is written in first-person voice. Harris's novel capitalises on Bessy, a fictional character, who, although she seems to have been modelled on real nineteenth-century servants, departs from any actual reference to a true story. Clearly, Harris has been successful in fictionalising such a female figure in Victorian times. One reviewer of the novel states that "[a]s research, Harris immersed herself in servant diaries of the period" (Hoggard 2006: n.p.), and another commentator notes the same in her review: "Harris's research into the lives of servants in the 1860s is impressive" (Scott 2006: n.p.). From early on in their relationship Arabella

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begins to conduct experiments to train Bessy as a proper servant by making her repeat a set of repetitive sequences to test her obedience with the aim of improving Bessy's suitability as a maid.

In fact, Bessy is a subject observed by Arabella's 'scientific' gaze, as she is writing a book, 'The Observations', on the servant type, "scientifically to be studied, measured, and categorized into separate sub-divisions through the tools of phrenology and ethnography", seemingly following the method used by Henry Mayhew in his *London Labour and London Poor* (1851) (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 117). Interestingly, the servant type did not easily accommodate to the fixed taxonomies developed by Mayhew since servants "could marry 'up' or 'down', enter service because of family misfortune, a bad harvest, or a poor fishing season, or quit it altogether in order to establish themselves in another line of trade" (Fernandez 2010: 147). That fluid nature of the servant type inevitably affected class identity, and one wonders whether texts written by servants in the nineteenth century could be, arguably, regarded as autobiographical. In this line, Jean Fernandez claims that "Victorian servants could and did practice life writing" (Fernandez 2010: 149), and in Harris's novel we have a reworking of such examples of life writing: Bessy narrates her story in this neo-Victorian novel, but she also pens autobiographical writing. Then, while learning how to become a maid-of-all work, she is asked to keep a record of her daily activities by her mistress, thus providing the raw material for Arabella's treatise on 'the servant type', while registering her thoughts and feelings, too.

Bessy's relationship with Arabella is loosely inspired by the story of Arthur Munby (1828-1910), an upper-class man of letters, barrister, and "collector" of lower-class girls, obsessed with working-class women, and his maidservant, lover and later wife, Hannah Cullwick (1833-1909) (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 265). However, the attachment developed between Arabella and Bessy subverts even as it draws on common servant-master/mistress dynamics, as well as displacing the topic of the object/subject of gaze and observation as the novel progresses. As happened in the relationship between Munby and Cullwick where he commissioned her to write down her observations of her daily life, Arabella asks Bessy to record her daily chores, and, more importantly, her feelings and thoughts while carrying them out. Hannah Cullwick's diaries, written in epistolary form and addressed to her "Massa" (Munby) over the course of twenty years (Atkinson 2003: 39), reveal Munby's obsessions, his acts of fetishism and voyeurism

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against a backdrop of Victorian male desire for Victorian (lower-class) femininity. In his turn, Munby's own diaries, letters and the photographs he took of Cullwick (as much as of other working-class girls) in costumes while role-playing, often covered in dirt, as commanded by Munby, disclose not only his problematic relationship with Cullwick, but also relevant information about class, gender, degeneration, and monstrosity in Victorian times. Scholars have had plenty of material on this relationship, stored in Trinity College, Cambridge: Munby bequeathed his books and two boxes filled with these texts, penned by Munby and Cullwick, to the British Museum who did not accept the legacy; in the case of such an eventuality, Munby had determined that the boxes containing "Hannah's letters to him, her diaries, his notebooks and hundreds of photographs of working women, including Hannah" should be left to his old college (Atkinson 2003: 332-333). Trinity College was entrusted with the custody, but Munby requested that the boxes remain secret for forty years until 1950 (Atkinson 2003: 333).

Much has been written on Munby and Cullwick from various viewpoints. In the growing number of publications,[1] one interesting perspective casts light on acts of writing and reading in Cullwick's diaries, in which references to these activities proliferate. Jean Fernandez discusses the image of the ventriloquised servant since her act of writing is equated to a pornographic act, one in which "the pen is turned into a phallus, taming the master-reader into compliant submission" (Fernandez 2010: 126). In the Munby-Cullwick relationship, Cullwick's writing demands that Munby accept his servant's authorial power over him, if only temporarily: "Hannah's position as submissive to the dominant's gaze depends upon Munby's willingness as reader to obey her narratorial authority and comply with reading positions that her authorial cues dictate" (Fernandez 2010: 127). In turn, in *The Observations*, Arabella uses her manipulative power over Bessy (and over her predecessors, such as Nora) to, arguably, "experiment with the subject positions of scientist, *teacher*, mother, and child" (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 118, added emphasis). Arabella's relationship with her servant taps into the Victorian debates about servant education and literacy, and about the domestic space as offering possibilities for servant improvement and the attainment of respectable literacy, mirrored in literary texts and tracts as well as in nonliterary texts of the Victorian period (see Fernandez 2010: 3). The novel also reflects Victorian debates about servants' "capacity for the use and abuse of reading and writing, staged in narratives

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purportedly and actually produced by the literate servant in fiction, non-fiction and life-writing" (Fernandez 2010: 4). Autobiographical texts, written by servants, or "acts of writing" of servants imitating masters and mistresses help interrogate and destabilise identities of the master class, and they can be understood as a resistance to the "social and narratorial control" exercised by the masters and mistresses (Fernandez 2010: 23). In Harris' novel, Bessy is practically illiterate when she first sets foot in Castle Haivers: "The trouble was I knew how to spell words but joining them together to make correct sentences had me all in a pucker" (Harris 2007: 51). Arabella schools Bessy, teaching her how to command syntax and punctuation, and turning her into a literate servant who records her life story and learns to write beautifully and with a compelling voice, thus suggesting authorship and empowerment.

Initially, mistress (Arabella) and servant (Bessy) seem to represent a conventional mistress-servant relationship based upon control vs. submission as illustrated in the observations conducted by Arabella. However, their roles will be inverted since Bessy also employs the motif of the gaze and observation in recording her impressions of Castle Haivers and her mistress, as well as her innermost thoughts and feelings. She becomes a writer, but she also uses her powers of observation, and her acts of reading, to discover the truth behind Arabella's experiments. Bessy, piqued by her curiosity about other servants, discovers Arabella's 'The Observations', her mistress's own record of the maids' progress and of her experiment. Arabella includes her scientific examination of Bessy in an entry about the maid, which evokes an angry reaction from Bessy:

> But what was worse was how she thought of me. Hells teeth, how can I explain the wretched despair I felt, except to say that my heart was banjaxed. I was no more than a 'thing' to Arabella, a thing that might be experimented upon, toyed with and cast aside at a whim when it had outgrown its use (Harris 2007: 130).

Reading Arabella's journal, Bessy realises that she has just provided the raw material for Arabella's own treatise and feels betrayed.

The act of reading involves multilevel responses since "[i]n the two-way transaction we call reading, texts pass through densely woven filters of interpretation and affective orientation that both enable and limit their

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impact" (Felski 2008: 18). Bessy becomes disoriented when the truth of the matter is out, that is to say, Arabella's obsession with the notion of the ideal maid. This notion of dis/re/orientation can be best understood through Rita Felski's notion of "a phenomenology of reading" (Felski 2008: 18). In her *Uses of Literature* (2008), she amply discusses modes of engagement with reading, and she is particularly attentive to the idea of reading as a dialogical process, as an intersubjective act that brings about the familiar and the strange, proximity and distance, and calls for recognition in the act of reading, intrinsically doubled:

> because of its fundamental doubleness, its oscillation between knowledge and acknowledgement, the epistemological and the ethical, the subjective and the social, the phenomenology of recognition calls for more attention in literary and cultural studies. (Felski 2008: 49)

If orientation can be defined as the physical and temporal proximity of objects and others in space, as well as "making the strange familiar through the extension of bodies into space", disorientation takes place when "that extension fails" (Ahmed 2006: ii). Bessy's disorientation is enacted when she cannot reinhabit the familiar. At first, she had succeeded in making the strange (Castle Haivers and, especially, Arabella, her mistress) familiar by projecting upon her mistress a maternal image, turning her into a kind of surrogate mother figure: "She was smiling fondly like a mother in a story book, her eyes were bright" (Harris 2007: 28). However, as Bessy has not had any experience of maternal love (as discussed below), it is noteworthy that the maid must resort to the fabricated image of the figure of the mother, drawing on a text, not on her life experience. Bessy had placed her trust in and oriented her attachment to Arabella, whose position as respected mistress and surrogate mother figure is overturned when Bessy reads Arabella's tract.

Following Rita Felski, Bessy then becomes an embodied and embedded reader of Arabella's book on the servant type, and consequently, she re-orients her position in the relationship between mistress and servant. Bessy is now endowed with both knowledge and narrative power, assuming a different vantage point that strips power and control from Arabella and transfers it to Bessy. Crucially, it is when the maid feels Arabella's betrayal that her painful past comes to life. Thus, Bessy takes control of the narration

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and she really becomes a writer, a writer in her own right, "with the effect of undermining the imperative of obedience [Arabella] otherwise seeks to inculcate" (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 118). In so doing, Bessy records her feelings and thoughts in compliance with Arabella's instructions, as well as providing key information about her past life as a wounded first-person narrator for the reader(s) of her narration, which is not shared with her mistress.

2. Trauma and Wounded Subjects

Bessy represents the 'Other' of Victorian fiction, the prostitute, and Arabella knows this since she catalogues Bessy in her book under "*The Most Particular Case of a Low Prostitute*" (Harris 2007: 103, original emphasis). In Bessy's narration dealing with her past life as a sex worker, the reader witnesses a tragic story of child abuse and maternal sexual exploitation. *The Observations* is a trauma narrative, too, as Bessy's identity is deeply affected by her childhood, and as much is reflected in the fragmented five-part structure of the novel, a non-chronological first-person testimony of her own life. Trauma "is understood as a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind" (Caruth 1996: 3). The field of trauma studies developed in the 1980s and 1990s, inextricably linked to Holocaust studies and the work carried out by Shoshana Felman, Cathy Caruth, and Dominick LaCapra, among many others. But theories of trauma are also indebted to Sigmund Freud (with Joseph Breuer), who concluded that "the origins of hysteria" had to be ascribed to the traumas of "child rape or incest" (Horvitz 2000: 13). Even though Freud and Breuer's studies on hysteria and Jean-Martin Charcot's early work can be traced back to the 1890s, Freud developed his theory further into the twentieth century. In the inaugural issue of *Neo-Victorian Studies*, Marie-Luise Kohlke already signalled the nineteenth century as precursor of our own trauma culture as "the period is configured as a temporal convergence of multiple historical traumas" which "include both the pervasive traumas of social ills, such as disease, crime, and sexual exploitation, and the more spectacular traumas of violent civil unrest" (Kohlke 2008: 7).

Bessy has had first-hand experience of child rape and sexual exploitation, so in telling her past, she attempts to reconstruct her fragmented self and bears witness to her trauma: "When it came to it, I could not bear the thought of his dirty great jack anywhere near me and so I imagined in its place

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nothing more sinister than an umbrella" (Harris 2007: 237). Being a child of tender age, she creatively uses her imagination to cope with the pain of paedophilic abuse. Her account lacks sentimentality; on the contrary, it offers a matter-of-fact tone that undermines Bessy's trauma since, remembering the traumatic event, she describes it in a detached manner, and thus, manages to avoid the overflow of feelings. Moreover, Bessy is subject to her mother Bridget's manipulation and emotional blackmailing: as she could not rely on anybody else for help, her mother took advantage of the child's vulnerable position. When the mother threatens to leave her daughter behind as she plans to go away across the water with her lover, Joe Dimpsey, the child desperately clings to her parent. The threat of abandonment prompts Bessy to accept anything her mother proposes, only to keep her parent close, being as she is a nine-year-old girl who, emotionally deprived, craves for love:

> '[…] the passage costs a flipping fortune and Joe says we can't afford to take you. But sure you'll be all right if we leave you here on your own, won't you?' [...]
>
> I am sorry to say that at this point I began to cry.
>
> My mother laughed. 'Och,' she says. 'Don't be such a big baby. You can look after yourself for a change. […]'At this prospect, I fell wailing at her feet. She let me weep many hot and bitter tears into her lap, while she stroked my hair and told me to 'Shhh'.
>
> 'Don't—leave—me—mammy!' I sobbed. 'Please—don't—go—away!' (Harris 2007: 151)

Bridget sexually exploits her daughter, Bessy, who finally finds a way out of prostitution by advancing to the position of kept mistress, sharing her life with Mr Levy in Glasgow, a rich old man who provides her with some stability. Bridget will make a last appearance when she goes to Castle Haivers to reclaim her daughter as a source of income, only find her tragic end there.[2]

Clearly, Harris's *The Observations* follows the neo-Victorian (and the neo-sensation) narrative about personal experiences of sexual trauma, in this case, sexual abuse and rape. Simultaneously, the text is concerned with "the prevalence and representation—or rather, the lack of representation—of sexual abuse in Victorian literature and culture" (Cox 2019: 146). As Jessica Cox suggests in relation to contemporary reworkings of Wilkie Collins's *The*

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Woman in White (1860), those narratives engaging with sexual traumas of the past bring to light what has remained obscured and silenced, but they also offer

> a commentary on contemporary concerns and anxieties, as well as suggesting possible parallels between Victorian and contemporary literature and culture in terms of the problems of representation inherent in narratives of sexual trauma from both the past and present. (Cox 2019: 147)

As in many trauma narratives, Bessy's act of writing is symptomatic of her wounded self and demonstrates how those memories affect her emotionally and physically:

> But perhaps that is enough of my past for now. Much of what went on in these days is a source of great shame for me. It is difficult to write about and I am sure not a very pleasant read! Indeed it makes me feel queasy to remember some of the terrible things that followed and I dread writing about it. (Harris 2007: 152)

This excerpt from the novel illustrates the impact Bessy's trauma still has upon her body ("it makes me feel queasy"), since past and present coalesce in the remembering of the events that led to her trauma. Indeed, Bessy's re-telling of the events testifies to the fragmented nature of her identity, while simultaneously providing a space for her to work through her trauma and, finally, to start her healing process. This healing process becomes more noticeable when Bessy replaces those painful memories with a bonding experience with Arabella, who becomes extremely dependent on Bessy after being diagnosed with a mental disease.

Not only is Bessy psychologically scarred by her painful past, but Arabella feels traumatised and is haunted by the memory of Nora, her former maid, whose story will likewise uncover sexual abuse (as well as unwanted pregnancy). Feeling betrayed after reading Arabella's tract, Bessy sets out to wreak havoc and carry out her revenge against her mistress by making her believe that the house is haunted and ghost-ridden by Nora. "She was scared of ghosts, I realized. And in that moment the idea formed in my mind, a way

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to get my own back. It was only a childish prank. How could I ever have foretold the terrible consequences of what I was about to do?" (Harris 2007: 199). This will precipitate Arabella's mental deterioration, and even after Bessy confesses that it was just a plot she concocted out of revenge, Arabella still imagines that Nora is alive, progressively deteriorating, until she breaks down. Interestingly, in their attempt to restore her mental health, Arabella's husband and the family doctor use the same scientific method as she used with her housemaids, albeit to no avail. The doctor "obsessively examines [Arabella's] stool for external, physical markers of insanity, and writes her up as a case study to further his career" (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 118). Arabella's husband fails in understanding what Arabella needs at that point; it is Bessy who, initially because of her sense of guilt, will take on the maternal role now and will protect and care for Arabella, psychologically damaged. Cathy Caruth suggests that "one's own trauma is tied up with the trauma of another", noting "the way in which trauma may lead, therefore, to the encounter with another, through the very possibility and surprise of listening to another's wound" (Caruth 1996: 8). Bessy's trauma becomes intertwined with that of Arabella, as on one occasion, when Bessy is cuddling her mistress:

> At one point, I lay down next to her on the coverlet and cradled her in my arms. I meant no disrespect by it, I only wanted to comfort her. At least she had somebody to look after her. Even if it were only me– a bad girl that was trying to turn over a new leaf. I kept making excuses for myself about being wicked. […] I could not help getting long-lippit about the way I was brought up. 'If only' this and 'If only' that. If only my mother had not been what she was &c. As I lay there next to missus I was reminded of the old days when Bridget and me used to pig together in the same bed in Dublin. (Harris 2007: 233)

The women's traumas are tied up with one another, and as seen in the above excerpt, Bessy easily transitions from the present moment to the past, when she lacked true maternal care and comfort. Interestingly, this shows how present and past traumas are connected through the changing relationship between Arabella and Bessy, whose roles and positions shift and become re-oriented. Discussing phenomenology, Sara Ahmed describes how

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"[o]rientations are tactile […] [and] [b]odies may even take shape through such contact, or take the shape of that contact" (Ahmed 2006: 54). Therefore, Arabella and Bessy become affected by their tactile (re-)orientation when they lie side by side, and this leaves an impression upon them.

Arabella's condition makes Bessy change her attitude towards her mistress and leads her to search for the truth, i.e. what lies behind Arabella's obsession with the deceased Nora, unveiling another story of sexual abuse and rape: assaulted by Reverend Pollock , the local minister and a frequent guest at the estate, (who is known to make advances at young girls), Nora got pregnant. Guilt-ridden, the girl committed suicide, masking it as a train accident. Made aware of the situation thanks to a suicidal note by Nora, Arabella experiences a sense of bereavement and feels riddled with remorse and guilt. In contrast, the culprit, Reverend Pollock's reputation and political ambitions remained untouched. As Arabella's husband explains, "Arabella hated me for covering it up. She thought [Reverend Pollock] should be made to face up to what he'd done, to carry some of the guilt" (Harris 2007: 493). Bessy's suggestion that Castle Haivers is haunted by Nora rings true to Arabella's weakened mind, the mistress now believing that Nora's ghost is there to take revenge for her past sufferings. This has a triggering effect, and Arabella shows symptoms of trauma such as sleeplessness, loss of appetite, hallucinations, etc., which fills Bessy with sympathy for her mistress. Then, in caring for the other, Bessy changes her mood, steps outside herself and also realises that in the face of unspeakable suffering, there is also resilience, which means finding strength in adversity to adapt and develop a meaningful life despite hardship, trauma or social disadvantage. Resilience also involves the ability to resist disorder and disruption, as happens to Bessy after having suffered from such as a distorted mother-daughter relationship, punctuated by poverty and shameful behaviour.

The psychologist Boris Cyrulnik's extensive work on resilience, a landmark in psychology, more specifically discusses the treatment of child survivors of different types of trauma, not only excruciating physical wounds, but also psychological pain. According to Cyrulnik, resilience takes place when "the restored adult can at least come to terms with the chaos of her childhood" (Cyrulnik 2009: 13). Furthermore, "[t]he notion of resilience represents an attempt to understand how, when we are hit, we can roll with the punches, react in various ways or even bounce back" (Cyrulnik 2009: 50). Bessy excels at resilience, as she manages to bounce back and dispel the ghost

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of her traumatic childhood and that of a distorted mother-daughter relationship. Bessy succeeds in coming to terms with her trauma using art, imagination, and the power of the word, that is to say, through the act of writing, which is necessary for any survivor to work through her trauma, according to Cyrulnik: "[i]n order to feel coherent and at ease with themselves, wounded souls must turn their ordeal into a story" (Cyrulnik 2009: 184). This is precisely what Bessy achieves: she transforms her trauma, and she shapes and reintegrates her fragmented self through the process of writing coupled with the ethics of care, which underlines issues of resilience in a Victorian context, but is also relevant to the contemporary readership in the face of the recent COVID-19 pandemic. During the pandemic, temporal and spatial disorientation prevailed, and individuals resorted to art-based activities to cope with uncertainty, chaos and fear. Particularly, acts of reading contributed to fostering resistance and resilience when suffering from lockdown, stress or pandemic fatigue.

3. The Ethics of Care

Harris's novel clearly mobilises the vulnerability of a wounded self whose past injuries have left a trace that erupts in Bessy's relationship with Arabella, a relationship that is based upon control, first, and then upon need and care once Arabella is diagnosed with a mental illness by the family doctor, who represents the medical gaze and patriarchal observation with her husband's connivance. The novel will close with Arabella's internment in an asylum as her condition fails to improve. Bessy's position is shifted from being a vulnerable subject to a resilient one, precisely by the act of writing her story, but also through friendship and bonding with Arabella; in other words, she develops an ethics of care, in her face-to-face encounter with Arabella.

Carol Gilligan's pioneering *In a Different Voice* (1982) developed the notion of "the ethics of care", with Gilligan basing her research on Nancy J. Chodorow's 'self-in-relationship' concept, drawing on intersubjectivity and object-relations theory (Gilligan 2003a: 66; also see 66-68). Chodorow theorised women's development as being different from men's growth, which had a powerful impact upon personality development (see Gilligan 2003a: 7-8). This was at a momentous time in the 1970s, when the masculinist bias dominated the Anglo-American psychoanalytic field. Gilligan took some of Chodorow's findings as a starting point to develop her notion of the "different voice", which, for her, is "a relational voice: a voice that insists on staying in

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connection and most centrally staying in connection with women" (Gilligan 2003b: xiii). According to Jean-Michel Ganteau, Gilligan's idea of interdependence and connection has become "the cornerstone of the ethics of care", displacing the Freudian paradigm that privileges separation and disconnection, with "[Gilligan's] vision based on such values as solidarity, solicitude, interconnection, and the promotion of relation, a far cry from the prevalent model privileging autonomy" (Ganteau 2015: 8). Gilligan's concept of "different voice" provided the groundwork for the ethics of care as it has developed into a more general application of the notion to various fields and disciplines, including literature. Furthermore, Ganteau affirms that the ethics of care is to be understood as a "relational model […] premised on the observation that psychological or physical dependence is common to all subjects" (Ganteau 2015: 9), a model which has been expanded by critics following in Gilligan's steps, such as Virginia Held. Held asserts that the ethics of care "characteristically sees persons as relational and interdependent, morally and epistemologically" (Held 2006: 13), and she sees the ethics of care as more systemic than previous critics. In the 2000s, Held and other theorists on care were intent on showing that "caregiving is a crucial practice fundamental to a functional society" (Schaffer 2019: 523), and not necessarily dependent on women's actions or personalities.

Along these lines, Talia Schaffer has recently discussed care and care communities in Victorian literature, establishing the relevance of the ethics of care not only for the emergence of new critical ways to analyse Victorian texts, but also for a feminist political theory that should be embraced when dealing with migration, refugees, and legislation (see Schaffer 2019: 523). I concur with her in discussing care as "meeting another's need" (Schaffer 2019: 525), and in this sense, Harris's neo-Victorian text opens up new forays into the relevance of care beyond the nineteenth century when "[t]he care-community structure is most visible" (Schaffer 2019: 536). Bessy spends most of her time at Castle Haivers trying to meet Arabella's needs, and when her mistress is confined to the asylum, Bessy decides to visit her, first, and then, to apply for a post as kitchen maid to care for her and to live alongside her, since Arabella, though mentally ill, remains emotionally attached to Bessy:

> 'Bessy!' She opened her arms and I stepped into them without a word and nestled against her. 'Look at you!' says

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> missus, stroking my hair. 'Have you been in the wars?'
>
> 'No, marm.' I wanted to cry but didn't wish to upset her. I almost felt we should dance (Harris 2007: 504)

Bessy states that this position begins a new chapter in her life, achieved through caregiving and bonding with Arabella. In forging this bond with her mistress, Bessy builds up a care community in which caring for the other, and securing their needs, becomes prioritised.

The ethics of care also involves recognition, and Bessy's act of writing brings to the fore self-recognition and recognition of the other, as well as interconnectedness and relationality. Importantly, it is Doctor Lawrence (from the asylum) who asks her "to write this history of missus and how we met and all that, for he thought it would be an interesting and useful document for him and his colleagues to read since they are still intrigued by her case" (Harris 2007: 516). When Bessy finally discloses the recipients of her story, namely "Gentlemen" (Harris 2007: 520), she lets the reader know that they belong to the medical field who will use Bessy's narrative to further their investigations into the female mind. Arguably, "working-class women are able to appropriate the mistress's tools; disentangle themselves from the master's observation, however, they cannot" (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 120). Yet the book is never actually published, and the publishers who read the manuscript think it has been penned by a man, pretending to be a woman (see Harris 2007: 518). The unpublished manuscript fails in seeing the light of day, and this might be understood as a way of depriving Bessy of authorial control. Nonetheless, her unpublished text succeeds in taking ownership over the female voice, in developing ways to understand trauma and resilience in a Victorian context through the act of writing, through relationality, and through the ethics of care.

4. Conclusion: Writing, Care and Recognition

The character of Bessy, whose past traumas provide the catalyst for the eventful plot, finds improvement both through friendship, bonding, and care, and through writing. Her act of writing conjoins with ethics of care, facilitating resilience and recognition in the Victorian setting revisited from a contemporary perspective. The male reader/s (the doctors who ask her to write her story) are listeners to her traumatised past and function as recipients of the story, and if we understand that Bessy is using this narrative to work

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through her trauma, this allows her to confront her painful past and heal. The novel stages how to work through trauma by means of storytelling and writing: "[s]torytelling, listening (bearing witness), and writing are acts of catharsis which redeem the past" and "bring about a profound transformation of the protagonists' lives" (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 37). In recounting the story of Arabella, Bessy experiences such a transformation, but also engages the reader in "a logic of *recognition*", following Rita Felski, as "we are called on, in other words, to do justice to how readers respond to the words they encounter" (Felski 2008: 17, original emphasis). That Bessy is concerned with the reader's response is made clear when she affirms that *The Observations* has "met with tremendous approval everywhere it has been sent" (Harris 2007: 516). This communal experience of reading the same text helps achieve "an awareness of forming part of a broader community" (Felski 2008: 33), which contributes to Bessy's sense of integration in the community, albeit never fully achieved since the manuscript remains unpublished at the novel's end. In addition, this emphasis on intersubjective recognition (that between Bessy and Arabella, and that between Bessy and the potential reader), "of perceived commonality and shared history" (Felski 2008: 39), calls for a more embodied experience when reading. This means that "we are fundamentally social creatures whose survival and well-being depend on our interactions with particular, embodied, others" because "[w]e are embodied and embedded beings who use and are used by words" (Felski 2008: 31).

Nevertheless, Bessy ends the novel by suggesting that her narrative, *The Observations*, is true to life, is a piece of life writing, and she anticipates feeling urged to write something else in the future that she will make "up out of [her] own head" (Harris 2007: 521). As she re-orients the reader's attention and position to the veracity of her account, one wonders whether Bessy's text has been fabricated, and whether Bessy is, in fact, an unreliable narrator, whose disorienting voice unsettles and complicates the knowability of the narrated events. In this sense, she might have been manipulating her mistress, the doctors *and* the readers who do not question the authenticity of her story until, perhaps, the very end. But, in taking up the pen, the protagonist expresses what has been silenced and unacknowledged by the male rational discourse and brings out nineteenth-century traumas that need to be addressed, re-orienting her twenty-first readers to pressing issues of today's society also. In addition, Bessy's narration shows how to find resistance and

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resilience in the face of utter despair: through recognition, care and bonding, as well as through the act of writing and reading, particularly topical in the context of the recent pandemic caused by Covid-19, when reading has been especially comforting and when caregiving has come to the fore in every possible way. Acts of reading unlock moments of recognition, and this was especially relevant during the pandemic, as reading became, more than ever, an affective experience, offering consolation and re-orientation. Therefore, Harris's *The Observations* opens new forays into the Victorian past, but also speaks to us today – and into the future – by means of "[the text's] ability to traverse temporal boundaries and to generate new and unanticipated resonances, including those that cannot be predicted by its original circumstances" (Felski 2008: 10). Harris's *The Observations* is one of these texts where temporal boundaries become fluid, and where the reader is inevitably re/dis/orientated towards the past, towards the present, and towards the possibility of generating new responses in the future.

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Notes

1. Among them are Anne McClintock's *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (1995), Diane Atkinson's *Love & Dirt: The Marriage of Arthur Munby & Hannah Cullwick* (2003), and Barry S's *Watching Hannah: Sexuality, Horror and Bodily Deformation in Victorian England* (2002).
2. Bridget is killed by a train, while drunk, and instantly dies.

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