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NEO-VICTORIANISM IN RECENT BRITISH AND AMERICAN FICTION

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ABSTRACT

Keywords: neo-Victorianism, steampunk, nostalgia, "new" women, biofiction, femininities, masculinities, identity, melancholy

In this thesis, I set out to investigate the emergence of the neo-Victorian novel in the general context of the development of neo-Victorianism as a cultural fact. The first chapter of the thesis has examined the evolution of neo-Victorianism from the earliest mentions of the term to more recent attempts to draw up a definition flexible enough to discourage the closure of viable channels of research and production, yet permissive enough to allow a reasonable level of consensus regarding its complex identity and a proper canonization of novels recognized as neo-Victorian.

To begin with, the first chapter starts with the diachronic exploration of the term "neo-Victorian" from its coining in 1997 and through the complicated path it followed in the struggle with alternative names, to its relative stability today. This historical exploration of the term has made it possible to verify that each of the proposed titles has responded to the interest aroused by the subject, leading to the renaming of the designated cultural trend. Despite the increasing number of novels of this type, there has been no disciplinary field specifically dedicated to its study, which has also favored the proposal of a new nomenclature to distinguish it. Each new name competed with the one before it and, therefore, when "neo-Victorian" made its debut, the inevitable justification allowed an exploration of both the term and the phenomenon, which helped fill the unnoticed gaps.

The term "neo-Victorian" found its strongest competitor in its peer "post-Victorian", which probably did not prevail because of the unfortunate fate of the prefix "post" as a result of the twists and turns to which the concept of "postmodern" was subjected. Despite the clear predominance of the prefix "neo," its consolidation in the specialized literature and the scientific events organized under its name, is due to mere chance rather than to a promise of intrinsic denotative clarity.

Addressing the theories of Louisa Hadley (2010), Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn (2010), as well as Kate Mitchell (2010), in dialogue with Marie-Louise Kohlke (2008), the lead academic in this field, has facilitated the understanding of divergences in their approach to the phenomenon, which comes from at least two factors. On the one hand, the neo-Victorian novel has developed over three decades, which raises the possibility that it may have mutated along the way, accentuating its conceptual instability. On the other hand, the authors define the genre from partial perspectives that focus on aspects that are present but emphasized as detrimental to others.

Regarding the emphasis on disparate nuances, in *Neo-Victorian Fiction and Historical Narrative. The Victorians and Us* (2010), Louisa Hadley highlights the committed search for historical specificity, an aspect she values more than the hyperreal quality of textual and media constructions. While ignoring substantial elements of the neo-Victorian novel, Hadley's definition applies with considerable rigor especially to pseudo-Victorian novels, in which historical fidelity occupies a central place, though one cannot escape acknowledging the illusory entity of a credible historical reconstruction, the veracity of which could never be fully verified anyway.

In *Neo-Victorianism: The Victorians in the Twenty-First Century, 1999-2009* (2010), Heilmann and Llewellyn specifically distinguish a novel set in the Victorian period, from which a Victorian novel, defined according to Hadley's parameters cannot be separated from the neo-Victorian by the latter's strong self-reflexive investment in re-discovering, re-interpreting and re-visualizing the Victorian era. The use of the term self-reflexive responds to the need to emphasize that neither imitation nor pastiche could give rise to a neo-Victorian

novel. The concept is understood as twofold: on the one hand, it highlights that the return to the past and its reformulations are driven by a critical attitude, and on the other hand, it highlights the dialogue that takes place in the metahistorical and metacultural conjunctions between past and present. Thus, the term implies the specular nature of the relationship between the two temporal framework, as the present perspective from which the past is viewed colours and contaminates it. The past is viewed according to contemporary needs, motivations, shortcomings, and ideologies, while it is reflected, in various ways, in the present. Although this definition is more sophisticated, it suffers from a serious weakness, namely the lack of clarifications of the purpose of the term "self-reflexive," a deficiency that has led to complications in the long run.

Kate Mitchell's contribution in 2010 has been to problematize Linda Hutcheon's concept of "historiographical metafiction" and to gently detach the neo-Victorian canon from the general body of postmodern novels into which it has been historically embedded. This is because Mitchell sees the neo-Victorian novel as a memory text or a technology of cultural memory, more concerned with the construction of memory than with the exposure of the limits of historical knowledge through the pyrotechnic metafictionality that has characterized postmodernism. In her insistence on the novel's possibilities for recovering a part of the past, Mitchell comes close to Hadley, but her focus is not on history, it is on memory. However, by proposing the concept of "memory text" as a paradigm of shock against historiographical metafiction, Mitchell risks departing from Heilmann and Llewellyn's 2010 definition and limiting the possibilities of the neo-Victorian novel to launch an incisive and strident critique of the politics of representation of the past.

Marie-Louise Kohlke (2008) enhances the semantic value of the neo-Victorian by incorporating the notion of "fantasy," since it is valid for her in the neo-Victorian project not only to reconstruct as Hadley said, but also to rediscover, reinterpret, revisualize as Heilmann and Llewelyn proposed and to remember the past according to Mitchell, as well as imagining it, for a variety of contemporary reasons, not least of which is the claim of national identity, the struggle for symbolic restorative justice and indulgence in escapism.

The definition elaborated by Marie-Louise Kohlke in her article "A Neo-Victorian Smorgasbord: Review of Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn's 'Neo-Victorianism: The Victorians in the Twenty-First Century, 1990-2009'" highlights, in my view, two important trends. First, the term "self-reflexive," as anticipated, has become problematic because of its connection to the postmodern deconstructivist project of realist criticism. In light of more recent narrative developments in the twenty-first century, as the analysis of the corpus of novels in this thesis demonstrates, the compendium of metafictional strategies and resources that have lasted are those that have been made familiar by their incorporation into literary texts and that refrain from producing the short-circuits with which postmodern strategies used to sabotage readers' expectations. (*Journal of Neo-Victorian Studies*, 2010, 3/1: 210-211) This is, of course, related to the first factor considered above for the discrepancies between the main definitions. It may be that the gradual abandonment of radical metafictional experiment is precisely one of the major mutations the novel has undergone in its evolution. Secondly, just as the temporal limits of the Victorian concept have been extended beyond the strictly chronological period of Queen Victoria's rule to encompass the entire nineteenth century and even the first decade of the twentieth century, so efforts to define the genre have oscillated from stricter characteristics to more flexible and comprehensive criteria, which tend to broaden, rather than narrow the canon.

The theoretical chapter has also focused on the research of the main nineteenth-century novelistic genres, which are natural doubles of the sub-genres of the neo-Victorian novel. When allusions are made to the neo-Victorian novel as a category of novel that returns to its Victorian predecessor, there are concerns to understand what this collective hypotext is and what its

thematic and formal characteristics are. Practically speaking, such a "Victorian novel" appears as an arch-genre for several reasons: the nineteenth century was a century of great expansive development, the long span of the historical period in which it is embedded meant a great variety of approaches to countless historical, social and cultural events, and novelists enjoyed, at least in the second half of the century, an unprecedented freedom of experimentation, free from the constraints of a critical institution that had not yet been established.

The chapter has also reviewed those categories of Victorian novels that stand out as providing topics, characters, narrative and stylistic resources for the processes of rehabilitation and recycling carried out by neo-Victorian writers. It has explored a possible taxonomy at the beginning of the generic alchemies that emerged from the adaptation and appropriation of the Victorian novel. If the collective generic characteristic of Victorian novels turns out to be the considerable size and richness in details, it is expected that their neo-Victorian counterparts match those characteristics. This first chapter has recovered taxonomies of diverse provenance and establishes a correspondence between nineteenth-century referents and neo-Victorian appropriations. The neo-Victorian sub-genres are: neo-Victorian detective fiction, the sensation novel, neo-Victorian biofiction and its subcategories (celebrities' biofiction, biofiction of marginalised subjects and appropriated biofiction); the neo-Victorian Gothic, neo-Victorian uchronia and neo-Victorian *steampunk* novels.

The theorical chapter situates the neo-Victorian novel against the background of the cultural phenomenon of neo-Victorianism, in order to explore the possible causes which, combined, produced the vigour and tenacity with which the contemporary authors turned their face towards the nineteenth century. These metacultural reflections cover a broad spectrum, from speculations on the importance of photography to more pragmatic and even mercantilist questions, such as the various processes that have turned culture into an exploitable economic resource. The main speculations that have been sketched to outline the origins of the phenomenon come from a variety of angles, and have been grouped them under the general headings of political, social, psychological, cultural, economic, and academic factors. In this way, the first part of the thesis fulfils the general objectives outlined in the introductory chapter.

As to the next four chapters of the thesis, they have been directed to the analysis of a number of neo-Victorian novels published between 1969 and 2011. Selecting a heterogeneous set of novels ensures the widest possible coverage of the classifications presented by critics, as presented in the first chapter.

The novels in the corpus exemplify the three modes Dana Schiller (1997) identifies in neo-Victorian returns to the nineteenth century: revisions of specific precursors (*Fingersmith* (2002), *Florence and Giles* 2010, *Mr. Timothy* (2006), new adventures for familiar characters (*The Dark Clue* (2001), and new fictions that are based on nineteenth-century conventions (*Fingersmith* (2002), *The Crimson Petal and the White* (2002), *The Journal of Dora Damage* (2008), *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969)). They also cover Louisa Hadley's (2010) proposed classification of the ways in which contemporary texts relate to the past: the return can be explicitly mediated by a Victorian text, either through Victorian conventions or through a specific text, which in turn can be reimagined from the perspective of another character or conceived as a sequel. The engagement with the past can be done through a nineteenth-century historical character, and the return can be through the creation of new fictional texts to deal with themes of great importance to the Victorian writers. The classification formulated by Heilmann and Llewellyn *Neo-Victorianism: The Victorians in the Twenty-First Century, 1999-2009* (2010), according to criteria based on topics has also been given adequate coverage: the novel of loss, mourning and regeneration, the novel that explores imperialism and various constructions of the subaltern, the novel that interrogates the construction of gender and sexuality through discourses of science, the novel that interrogates ideas of faith and conflicts

with science and metaphysics and addresses the topic of spectrality, and the novel that links the relationship between writer and reader to the relationship between magician and spectator.

Chapter Two, entitled "'Under His Eye': Representations of Women in Neo-Victorian Novels" and Chapter Three, entitled "Behind Closed Doors: The Representation of Women with John Fowles, Michel Faber and Sarah Waters," have covered the most important aspects and thematic approaches in the representation of female characters in five neo-Victorian novels and discussed the effect that they might have on the audience. Chapter Two has focused on the concepts of "new woman" and femininity by presenting Sarah Woodruff (*The French Lieutenant's Woman*) in the process of changing from the "Victorian" Sarah to a more contemporary sexualized and mysterious version of woman, and Belinda Starling's Dora (*The Journal of Dora Damage*) who challenges the traditional concept of femininity.

The formal characteristics of this text and its protagonists distance Fowles's novel from the conventional melodrama of Victorian women. In terms of representing women, the novel approaches the thematic conventions of the nineteenth-century novel: the traumatic feminine desire, a woman fighting against a hostile context, a polarized characterization of female characters and the intertextual suggestion of an impossible love story. Nevertheless, in the development of the plot, the protagonist's feelings and trauma are not infantilized, nor fully expressed. Thus, the representation of women through the characterization of the novel's protagonist is closer to the contemporary reader's lived experience than to the Victorian audience. The novels I have analysed show the seduction contexts as moments of great relevance to the plot and to the interpretation of the characters. Clothing, as a means of extolling femininity and feminine beauty, are a source of fundamental symbolic expression in all these matters. The protagonists' desire is adorned with expressions through them and through the way in which they are worn, making them one of the engines of the narration.

Feminization used to shape the exterior appearance and behaviour towards the ideal woman sometimes hides the "female monster". One of the common elements of these works is the iron will of the protagonists represented in the form of spiritual and transcendent powers, through clothing, mirrors, or words as a mask of conventional femininity. In *The Journal of Dora Damage* (2008), the "monster" is a product of patriarchy, a real monster who is frightening by the way in which it hides its "unnatural" behaviour. The conditions of economic oppression of women within marriage and the stormy relationships established within marriage, in which there is no balance of power, constitute a potential source of infidelity and physical or psychological violence. However, this context is subverted in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) as well as in *The Journal of Dora Damage* (2008) and *Mr. Timothy* (2006) by means of female characters who manage to open up the prospects of personal and economic autonomy.

In Chapter Three, entitled "Behind Closed Doors: The Representation of Women with John Fowles, Michel Faber and Sarah Waters," the focus has been on the representation of prostitution and lesbianism, in silent or covered forms, in Victorian literature and in neo-Victorian works that reinvent or rewrite the taboo topics with a view to "rectifying" cultural memory. The other important target is the history of the production and consumption of pornographic literature within the patriarchal market and society, which treated women and the homoerotic subject as objects of consumption and commercialization. Thus, the transgressive energy of the texts appropriates the market and transforms it into a homoerotic romantic literature produced and consumed privately and not necessarily for the pleasure of man in a patriarchal and heteronormative society. The literary texts used to support this view have been Sarah Waters's *Fingersmith* (2002) and Michel Faber's *The Crimson Petal and the White* (2002). The use of the Victorian pattern of the sensation novel genre requires, through the twentieth- and twenty-first century agenda, certain acts of formal subversion, whereby the novels under scrutiny bring it closer and transform it in accordance to their own agenda.

The neo-Victorian novels discussed in this chapter influence the general idea that the reader receives information from the characters before the reading begins. By knowing that the story is adapted from, or inspired by, Victorian novels and set in the nineteenth century can be an important starting point for the preliminary analysis of the characters, since it determines a series of previous expectations. The models of female characters in the Victorian narrative, both from the realistic novel and from the Gothic narrative have found some continuity in neo-Victorianism through the large number of filmic and textual adaptations, but they reappear transformed, often as areas of conflict. The representation of Victorian female characters as "angels of the house" has been used by the neo-Victorian novel as a starting point in the denouncement of the disproportionate distribution of power and the damaging influence of patriarchy. Directly represented or by implication, the hegemonic model of masculinity also creates an ideal, a set of "natural" gender roles, to which few (or any) could live up.

In Chapter Four, titled "Neo-Victorian Representations of Private and Public Spaces with James Wilson and Michel Faber", Wilson's neo-Victorian detective novel *The Dark Clue* (2001) questions the traditional biographical enterprise, which claims that the essence of a life or an individual is a problem (the paradox of human existence) that can and must be solved. The neo-Victorian hyper-text questions the Victorian hypo-text, its conventions and the characterization of J. M. W. Turner, a Victorian celebrity.

The nostalgic representation of the public and private man in James Wilson's *The Dark Clue* is often subversive and has specific targets. The novel inverts the use of epistolary documents as it is known in Victorian literature and the basic principle of a sequel, which is to provide a different ending to a known story. Wilson also changes the characters of Marian and Walter, which leads to the transformation of a detective novel, with a logical and coherent ending, into a failed attempt of two idealistic characters, embarked on an ethical and spiritual crusade, to penetrate the mysteries of a life and try to right the wrong by writing Turner's biography. Although the investigation was announced as an easy task, it degrades gradually as the boundaries between the biographer and the subject of the biography merge. The basic pattern of a biography is subverted by a biophilic text with anti-detective and anti-psychoanalytic elements.

Although the initial objective of the subchapter entitled "Masculinity and Domestic Spaces in Michel Faber's *The Crimson Petal and the White* (2002)" has been to investigate how Michel Faber represents masculinity in relation to the concept of domesticity in *The Crimson Petal and the White* (2002), the conclusions reached have shown a complex and, to some extent, a surprising reality. In addition to the way masculinity was examined in Victorian novels and in the nineteenth-century cultural context, it has been noted, with some irony, that the current debate about what constitutes masculinity is not different from the one that sems to have been accepted then.

Masculinity has been approached in both Wilson's and Faber's novels from different theoretical perspectives, outside or part of the gender order, in which power relations occupy a central place in the explanation of society, identity and relationships. Thus, both *The Dark Clue* and *The Crimson Petal and the White*, as neo-Victorian texts, reassess both the present and the past representation of nineteenth-century masculinity, which is interrogated in a variety of ways, providing the necessary tools for the contemporary readers to review not only the Victorian past and its relationship with the present, but also the ways in which writers relate to their readers and explore the need to re-establish emotional experiential bonds.

In Chapter Five, entitled "Neo-Victorian Elements in Recent Steampunk Novels", steampunk has been intertwined with the recognition of the historical nineteenth century, imaginary places and the peculiarity of the *novum* in order to meet contemporary readers' expectations. The supernatural introduced in the Victorian period and the nineteenth century infiltrates into the secondary worlds of fantasy, sending the reader from a world to another,

both in the past and at present. Furthermore, the frequent use of "uchrony" relies on the narrative crossroads and the what-ifs of what could have happened and of what actually happened somewhere in the universe. By doing this, the steampunk novels from *The Parasol Protectorate* (2009), *Perdido Street Station* (2003), *The Difference Engine* (2011) and Kate Locke's *The Immortal Empire* (2012) have revealed the flaws, unspoken problems and failures that allow for the roots of these new worlds of fantasy to grow.

China Mieville's novel, *Perdido Street Station* (2003) may be compared to windows, postmodern windows, sometimes heavily ornated with peculiar objects that make it hard for the reader to distinguish the history behind the fictional text. Like most of the novels discussed in this chapter, Mieville's novel shows that steampunk fiction, with its neo-Victorian elements of fantasy, cannot achieve the transparency of a classic window into the past. On the other hand, reading a novel written by Gail Carriger's *The Parasol Protectorate* does not require a considerable effort: the reader is carried away by the humor, the characters and the adventures presented, despite the fact that the hybrid language employed by the author in her novels is not invisible and marks the "otherness" of the text. The process of reconstructing history is provided by the reader, and it is mainly reduced to the fictional world and its xeno-enciclopedia. Although the intertextual and uchronic dialogue is subtle and complex, it is equally accessible: the humor, the whimsical adventures, the colorful characters, the sentimental intrigue envelop the neo-Victorian dimension of the texts in order to deliver a very entertaining product. However, *The Difference Engine* risks to discourage a readership that has not been familiarized with cyberpunk or with historiographic metafiction.

The novels written by Gail Carriger, China Mieville, Kate Locke, Sterling and Gibson, as well as those authored by other steampunk novelists, move beyond the limits of paraliterarity as the immersion in the fictional universe is doubled by speculation and the added neo-Victorian elements bring out more formal and ideological postmodern characteristics of fantasy. Also, neo-Victorianism relies on the reader's familiarity with recycled histories and literatures of the nineteenth century. Therefore, imaginary writings make use of intertextuality since each text, as part of a sufficiently exploited sub-genre, must justify its commercial visibility.

As it is revealed by this synthesis of the structures and systems to which the novels of the chosen corpus have been included in, they are shifting their subversive potential, they do not distance themselves too far from the postmodern paradigms, while they adhere to some of the main lines of questioning what the various postmodernist critics have called the dominant cultural certainties. Indeed, the novels cite, or allude to, recurring themes of the postmodern agenda: encoding and producing reality under the law of the sign system and the production of simulacra; challenging the notion of reality as a given fact and reconstituting it as fiction to which us, human beings, collectively subscribe; cannibalizing historicity leading to the chaotic and superficial over-imposition of past images and styles; imposing a falsifying sense of totality and universality on isolated ideas, actions and events.

It is obvious that discourses from various currents of postmodern thinkers, theorists and philosophers have been appropriated by academia in general and have deeply penetrated into mainstream literature and literary criticism with various orientations, such as feminist criticism, gender studies, postcolonial criticism, ecocriticism and others. Thus, if this appropriation of the subversive postmodern by the academic world is to be seen as a domestication of the edges and seductive sharpness of such discourses, the neo-Victorian novel may be interpreted as a novel that reiterates politically correct and academically polished speeches. In this way, it creates another conservative narrative that dictates scenarios that guarantee that the novel will not offend any group that advocates for identity politics or restorative justice issues, neither will academic critics who judge literary works or select the canon of texts be allowed to prioritize any of them for study.

Moreover, if the neo-Victorian novel, through its noisy damnation of hegemonic systems and monological discourses, is interpreted as attempting to appropriate the suffering caused by various oppressive structures and to disable and disseminate possible guilt for complicit participation in such instances, by transmuting the guilt into a collective and shared human trauma, then, rather than being a subversive piece of writing, the novel is geared toward the conservative reaffirmation of the status quo. Once again, the neo-Victorian novel pulsates with the hesitations of the silhouettes and the chromes characteristic to a hologram. As in other cases, it is up to the reader to decide the angle of the light source that will reinforce one reading or another.

If, from a thematic point of view, the alleged subversion of the neo-Victorian novel could be questioned, in this thesis we have read its subversion of the metafictional strategy, which consists in the constant breaking of the frames created for the fictional world, especially starting from the explicit incursions of the author figure to the depth of the texts, as a systematic nostalgic gesture in the chosen corpus that tries to recover certain authorial powers. In addition, each novel offers generic, formal and thematic peculiarities of a broad spectrum.

The analysis carried out starting from the theoretical-methodological system presented in the first chapter has led to a series of conclusions. The neo-Victorian novel has great energy and skills to perform symbolic subversive acts designed to dismantle, destabilize and question hegemonic systems and monological structures of thinking, corresponding to the postmodern agenda.

Along the analytical trajectory of the corpus, it has been demonstrated that neo-Victorian novels contain certain elements of nostalgia. An essential one lies in the narrative act, in the context of reading as rewarding experience, which seeks to promote emotional connections between authors and readers and which stems from a renewed faith in the very power of a good story, separated from the knowledge of the arcane and complicated theories of the double palimpsest visions, immersive experiences favoured by the illusion of verisimilitude, lost innocence and utopian visions of other places and other times. I have also recognized a commodifiable reconstruction of the past, articulated from a present that invests in images of the past, postcards in sepia colours, retro fashion and revival styles. Not without a trace of complicity, the neo-Victorian novel participates in the commercialization of the past. Often, the novel takes advantage of the stereotypical images of the era to create an interest in it, to provide excitement and amusement (e.g. the countless evocations of Gothic spaces), and to contrast past views with more precise and tolerant views of the present.

As memory texts or cultural memory technologies, the novels of the corpus demonstrate that they can reformulate the past in ways that go beyond simply questioning mainstream methodologies for seeking a supposedly transparent historical truth. In other words, the novels have been read, spurring their possibilities to go beyond the limits of historiographical metafiction, and have illustrated Marie-Louise Kohlke's view on how neo-Victorian writers imagine and fantasize the Victorian past.

I demonstrated that the texts of the corpus are crossed by a nostalgic desire to recover empty or lost certainties, such as undermining of the author figure, dismantling poststructuralist structures through which degrees of disappointment with uncertain position in the present are determined. Such uncertainty is compounded by strong and often contradictory pressures, such as the academic world's demand for specialized knowledge in literary theory and criticism, whose management and unfolding in writing practice is one of the points in their horizon of expectations. This demand is complemented by pressures from the mercantilist publishing world, which asks for the exploitation of certain historical periods as part of the orchestrated exploitation of culture seen as a new and profitable economic activity. Often, requirements

conflict with one another and there is plenty of pressure to sell and therefore to draw the attention of a mainstream reading audience.

I have emphasized that the novels in the corpus were published in the context of strong pressure and in a setting in which the reading appetite does not necessarily include the same tastes as those of an elite public, but writers must also respond to a request from an audience tired of reading sometimes arid or extravagantly complex or lacking in structural logic like typical postmodernist writings, which may produce disappointment in the common reader. In this sense, by turning to the past, transformed into an object of desire and recovery - not just an object of subversion and dispute - the Neo-Victorian text, with its nostalgic affective gestures, may also be read as subversive to the present.

What unifies the corpus, apart from the cultural conditions of production, are, on the one hand, the systematic subversion of the metafictional strategy defined as paradigmatic, and on the other hand, the various author strategies for recovering control and authority that depend not on textualizing the author's autocratic and autotelic figure, but on alternative strategies, such as, among others, over-plots in the narrative, the restoration or remodelling of the novelistic genres and transgressive and rebellious aesthetic styles in their natural historical contexts. Such strategies that we have identified in our analysis as well as the recurrent metafictional strategies in the corpus, intertextual fecundity, self-awareness of the characters of being incorporated into various narratives, migration of characters from various ontological levels do not manage to prevent the immersive experiences associated precisely with the much-desired powers invested in the figure of the Victorian author.

Various theorists have discussed the term "double coding," regarding the postmodernist novel. Among them, Linda Hutcheon has rehabilitated the concept and incorporated it in her definition of postmodern parody, referring to parody as double-coded because "the ambivalent doubleness of the parodic encoding can easily be resolved into a single decoding." (1989: 117) Christian Gutleben has an implicit reference to the double encoding of the novel when he discusses its hybrid or oxymoronic form in "Hybridity as Oxymoron: An Interpretation of the Dual Nature of Neo-Victorian Fiction" (2011). For Gutleben, the hybridisation does not lie in the heterogeneous juxtaposition of a Victorian text in Victorian language with a contemporary text in contemporary language. On the contrary, it is present in the same apparently homogeneous text, but possessing a system of double enunciation, as in the case of the Neo-Victorian novel, which, on the one hand, strives to preserve the coherence of the Victorian world, and on the other hand, addresses a contemporary audience with contemporary concerns. In other words, according to Gutleben, the novel is double-coded, oxymoronic or hybrid, because it has a Victorian code and referent, but a contemporary recipient and message. (62-63)

Following this study, it has been revealed that the postmillennial Neo-Victorian novel presents a new double coding, which consists in preserving a postmodern thematic agenda and in adopting a hybrid form that combines the Victorian (e.g. transgressive and "low brow culture" genres and styles; celebration of narrative and immersive experience) with postmodern metafiction (e.g. exuberant intertextuality and metafictional techniques with or without the disturbance of ontological levels). The description of this new double coding adds subtlety and complexity to a category of novels that have otherwise been described as novels that are simultaneously characteristic of postmodernism and imbued with a historicity reminiscent of the nineteenth-century novel or that represent the revival of the Victorian novel in a postmodern format. This new double coding could signal an intense search for a new narrative paradigm. If we consider that this dialectic has a certain degree of applicability to the phenomenon studied, then we can infer that the Neo-Victorian novel does not rise with radical negativity against its predecessor, because, as I have shown, there are still various metafictional strategies that postmodernism has carried out insistently and exuberantly. Nor does it embark

on a total neo-morphism, but plunges into the coffers of the past and, without falling into cheap traditions or lazy conformism, seeks to save resources that allow, from the heterosis thus generated, to point out directions to overcome the grimace of historical fatigue.

Our times seem to have surprised the neo-Victorian novel in full gesture of return and on the way back to an order that does not yet manifest itself in a palpable way, although some principles are clear. It does not give up on the temptation of obedient docility, and its commitment to expressing anxiety and discomfort toward existing paradigms is still valid for the most recent neo-Victorian novels. It remains as a future endeavour, undertaken when the work on the expansion and restoration of the neo-Victorian novel is completed, to confirm that the abilities of its heterosis have been fully exploited.

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