Variants of *Victoriana* in the Postmodern English Novel

Tatjana Jukić
Faculty of Philosophy, Zagreb

John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is the first English postmodernist novel to address the issue of its own Victorian heritage. It offers a new perspective of the issues commonly associated with the postmodernist concept of historicism. My aim is to analyse the interaction between Fowles's portrayal of the Victorian era and the Victorians as seen by other contemporary novelists. Thus the "second wave" of the postmodern English novel (Barnes, Ackroyd) casts aside the documentary and ontological quality of Fowles's historiographic archaeology, stressing metatext and metafiction. The "neo-Victorian" fiction of the Nineties (women novelists: Byatt, Tennant, Colegate) refrains both from Fowles's restoration and Ackroyd's deconstruction of the Victorians. Here, history functions as the delightful source for a possible world, recognized as fiction/romance and enjoyed as such.

Quite apart from some theoretical issues involving the difference between modernism and postmodernism, there is no doubt that, most often, a skilful reader will not find it too difficult to differentiate between a modernist and a postmodernist novel.

One clue in this sense is the modernist obsession with novelty, aesthetic uniqueness and innovation, and a strong tendency towards disregarding the past, as opposed to the postmodernist inclination towards neohistoricism, towards conservation and a careful revision of tradition and historical inheritance. Recent positive reevaluation of the historicist styles of the 19th century is a distinct symptom of such an inclination.

As far as literature is concerned, it seems that this aspect of postmodernism has been most thoroughly exploited by the British novel. The Victorian Age – its internal growth and transformations – has proved a valuable source for a neohistoricist game with issues of principal importance for a postmodern mind. It would seem that the end of the last century might serve as a magic mirror to help us define our own *fin de siècle*.

The magic mirror, however, has significantly changed since its first Victorian reflection almost thirty years ago. As postmodern times were changing, undergoing their own transformation, witnessing their own growth, the picture of the Victorians in the neohistoricist mirror was transmuted too, so as to match the eyes that beheld it. Although it never lost its two principal focuses – a steadfast focus on the second half

of the 19th century, and an equally steadfast concentration on the probing of the nature of story-telling – the reflection of the times past has been twisted so as to fit the current angle of postmodernist poetics, thus reflecting not only the Victorians, but also the internal growth of postmodernism itself.

My aim here is to analyse the shifts in the portrayal of the Victorian era and its legacy, as they are reflected in the shifts in postmodernist poetics. Step one of my analysis will focus on the first comprehensive postmodernist model reviving the Victorian era – that of John Fowles and *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. Step two will concentrate on a more elaborate postmodernist viewpoint, adding a new angle to the Fowlesian perspective on the Victorians. The principal title here is Peter Ackroyd's *Chatterton*. Step three will address the third, up-to-date, postmodernist mirroring of the Victorians, as seen and imagined by A. S. Byatt, in *Possession*.

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It is a little surprising that the first great intertextual dialogue with the Victorians was conducted by a modernist – Jean Rhys, who in 1966 published her last novel, *Wide Sargasso Sea,* the work structured as a revision of Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*. However, despite its obvious contribution to, as it were, the rewriting of the Victorian canon, and despite overt intertextuality, this text is still a modernist one: the author's aim was a solipsistic and highly aestheticized portrayal of a woman's consciousness and subconsciousness, rather than a wide cultural interplay of various historical discourses, so typical of postmodernism. Or, to quote Brian McHale on differences between modernism and postmodernism (McHale 1987), Rhys's paradigm is still dominantly epistemological.

Accordingly, the Victorians, as she sees them, are not a formative attribute of a new possible world. Rhys only borrows a particular literary text, one isolated artefact, in order to undermine its ideology and translate it into modernism. Her novel is in fact an intertextual play of several points of view, not a dialogue of two different historical entities. Moreover, even if one should disregard the differentiation between the ontological and the epistemological, there remains the difference between Rhys's and the postmodern treatment of the Victorian legacy. Instead of using irony, *pastiche* and parody – typical postmodernist devices for a neohistoricist dialogue with the past – Rhys simply avoids them. Concern with the past, with history, is but a small point, barely noticeable even in Rhys's rendering of the suitable scenery.

The ontological dominant, recognized by McHale as typical of postmodernism, becomes clear and visible in the novel published only three years after the appearance of *Wide Sargasso Sea* – in John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. The Victorian era in this text is no longer reduced to a suitable background in a story that deals with essentially ahistoric human passions and desires. The Victorian past becomes a full-fledged world, delved out in its stunning entirety, corresponding to the present world of Fowles's postmodern narrator, watching it from 1967. Its ontological status

is unquestionable. Or rather, it is questionable to the same degree as is the world that we, the readers of the novel, live in.

Fowles's initial ambition is, beyond doubt, the literary restoration of the Victorian world in all its complexity, which in itself is primarily an ontological, rather than an epistemological task. The year 1967, as his narrator sees it, although still marked by a predominance of modern critics and writers, is the year witnessing the first cracks in the modern paradigm set by the thinkers and artists of the first half of the 20th century, just as 1867, the year he is telling us about, witnesses the first cracks in the perfect and undamaged mirror of the Victorian world. Religious doubt and the rising social problems are paralleled by a revolution in almost all areas of civilizational activity: science is revolutionized by Darwin, social theory by Marx (who in 1867 lives in London writing *Das Kapital*), psychology by Freud, art by the Pre-Raphaelites. At both times a perplexing *fin-de-siècle* is on the rise. The two worlds, their ideological balance showing the first signs of decline and confusion, could, if compared, bring about a fuller understanding of both history and the present, possibly even save them.

The actual beginning of the novel validates such a world-restoring ambition: the novel opens with an accurate description of the Lyme-Regis landscape in a manner very similar to the same kind of depersonalized openings of many Victorian novels. This description, then, has two functions: the first is the textual creation of a possible world, and the second is a link with the same kind of world-making in Victorian literature. Even the main characters respond to this ambition. Charles Smithson is a pastime geologist and a firm believer in natural history. Sarah Woodruff is, as a character, tied to primeval woods unblemished by civilization, history or any ideology. Even her last name suggests an ostensive nature-world, rather than any text-world, tinted by linguistic and ideological doubts of a given historical moment.

In the course of the novel, however, the narrator realizes that his celestial ambition is false, because he can no longer pretend to hold the reins of his creation firmly in his hands. The world he has created is a world apart, with its own laws, its own uncertainties, echoing Victorian quotations before each of the chapters rather than any actuality, Victorian or contemporary. In Chapter 13, the chapter of revelation, Fowles's narrator is forced to admit that the 1867 world he is making is still but a text, a fiction, quite free from its creator, based on the texts and fictions inherited from the past, in the same way that the contemporary world, which both the narrator and the reader live in, is but a gilded or blackened autobiography, again a text, again a fiction. Once more, the Victorian characters respond to the narrator's disillusionment: Charles loses his inheritance and status in the aristocracy, so that his faith in natural and social laws is fatally shattered. Sarah is no longer a Woodruff, but a Roughwood. Now a Londoner, she no longer hides in woods, but – by painting them in Rossetti's home – fakes them. The Victorian mirror, just like the modern one, has by now irrevocably "cracked from side to side".[1]

As a result, the ending of the novel, split in two, responds to the acknowledgment of such an ontological apprehension: the world recognized as fiction, as a text, as a

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[1] The reference here, of course, is to a line from Tennyson's "The Lady of Shalott". It is interesting to note that the image of mirror plays one of the central roles in the structuring of this poem: again, works

necessary conglomerate of words, patterns, quotations, and vacillating ideologies, is eventually given the final and desperate freedom – that of choice. If nothing holds, if everything is gilded or blackened, possible and optional, then all of us (readers, narrators and characters alike) should be at least allowed to decide which fiction and which ending to choose. The **world** of the beginning of the novel is at the end seen as two heaps of **words**, a two-faced textual stone that a Sisyphus-like reader is condemned to anyhow.

<p align="center">* * *</p>

Peter Ackroyd, the writer whose postmodernist attitude towards history in general and the Victorians in particular is shaped in the course of the Eighties, represents the second mode of the English neohistoricist novel. Just like Julian Barnes with his *Flaubert's Parrot*, Ackroyd starts at the point where Fowles ends.

If Fowles's double ending suggests primarily the dispersion of a full-fledged and full-blooded possible world into a mixture of possible texts and multifarious representations, with no consistent ideology or ontology, Ackroyd undertakes the task of scrutinizing all the facets of such a linguistic and representational possibility. By now postmodernism itself is so exhausted that even playing with a number of possible worlds and possible histories carries little or no meaning. The only thing left, thus, is a game with historical left-overs – with texts and artistic representations devoid of a valid historical context and message. Instead of a textual duel with possible representations of worlds and histories, quite in the manner of Fowles, Ackroyd can afford only a game with possible histories of representation itself. Or, if Fowles's initial idea seemed to be the naturalization of representation, Ackroyd's initial ambition is its de-naturalization (Hutcheon 1989: 95).

His novel *Chatterton* (1987) is the best illustration of such a literary practice. It consists of three stories, set in three different centuries, each depicting a practice of representation and a practice of faking. The thread that connects the three is the figure of the most famous plagiarist(!) in the history of British literature – the 18th century poet Thomas Chatterton. The first story is an account of the last days of Chatterton himself, his own last forgeries of the medieval past. The second story speaks about a Victorian forgery of the past: in 1856 Henry Wallis is trying to recreate, to mirror, to forge, the scene of Chatterton's death – the scene later included in many Pre-Raphaelite monographs. The model posing for the painting is the famous Victorian poet, George Meredith. The third plot-line focuses on the literary and historical ambitions of a

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of art represent the mirrored image of outside reality. Even more interesting is the fact that the mirror image represents the basis for an intermedial dialogue between Tennyson's poem and its Pre-Raphaelite illustration as conceived by William Holman Hunt. (Also intriguing in this sense is the fact that this particular drawing adorns the cover-page of *Victorian Poetry*, edited by Malcolm Bradbury and David Palmer in 1972.) Needless to say, it was the Pre-Raphaelite poetics, with its specific attitude towards past and towards representation, that seems to have attracted most attention on the part of postmodernist neohistoricism, witnessing many reincarnations.

postmodernist poet, Charles Wychwood, obsessed with the vision of Wallis's painting and late-20th-century views on fake, forgery, representation.

It is interesting, however, that the main body of purely metatextual remarks concerning fake, forgery, the nature of art as representation... - that is, all the ideas and concerns closely related to postmodernism - will be found in the story-line that Peter Ackroyd has devoted to Wallis and Meredith. Consequently it is Meredith who counters Wallis's realist beliefs by saying that all that remains from the past and from history are not people or their deeds, but representations of these people and their acts. Thus Chatterton's forgery of the Middle Ages is more lively and more factual than the actual medieval monk whose works he plagiarized. In the same way Wallis's nineteenth-century painting of Chatterton seems more manifest and more factual than the actual death of the poet. No wonder then that Ackroyd's Meredith readily concludes: "I can endure death. It is the representation of death I cannot endure" (Ackroyd 1987: 3). Accordingly, the Victorian story about the relation between Wallis the painter and Meredith the poet is crucial for our understanding of both Chatterton and Charles - of both the 18th and the 20th centuries. Once more splinters of the Victorian mirror are used as a metaphor for our own century.

Bearing this in mind it is particularly interesting to see the developments in the Victorian line of the plot, compared to the one dealing with the 18th century and the one anchored in the 20th. The novel opens with three short passages coming one from each of these centuries: the first one opens with the poetic ardour and a joyous - but quotative - medieval recital of young Tom Chatterton. The second portrays George Meredith posing for Chatterton, uttering the sentence about enduring death but not its representation. The third passage introduces 20th century characters, haunted by paintings and literary quotations. While the 18th-century opening conveys a poetic thought very different from Ackroyd's postmodernist gloom and deconstruction, the Victorian and the 20th-century ones establish a postmodern relationship.

Compared to such an openly deconstructionist and metatextual/meta-representational beginning, the ending is structured in a different fashion.

The whole last part of the novel speaks only of Chatterton's actual death (yet another Chatterton's-death representation?) and of the accelerating madness of Chatterton's postmodernist and fake-obsessed counterparts. The falsifying and representation-happy worldview from the beginning of the text has at the end merely reached its maddening *crescendo*. No fundamental change of events did take place in the course of the action. The ending only mirrors the uncertainties of the beginning. And *vice versa*.

The Victorian plot-line, however, is played out as early as Part Two. Unlike the relation between the beginning and the ending in the other lines of the plot, the Victorian ending marks a significant difference with regard to the opening. The Victorian beginning introduces the painter-model relationship between Wallis, a convinced realist, and Meredith, sceptical about the predominance of life over art, actuality over representation. The ending of the Victorian story, however, shows the defeat of Meredith's artistic attitude and private-life ironies, in contrast to the victory of both the artistic and the private philosophy of Henry Wallis: Meredith's wife Mary deserts her husband, unable to endure his cynical behaviour and his inability to adhere to any firm

belief and any firm emotion. Instead, she turns to the young painter, who still believes in the mimetic power of art and the actuality of emotions. The last Victorian scene of the novel is very telling: Mary Meredith touches Wallis's trembling face, leaning over the forgotten painting of Chatterton.

Accordingly, if the bulk of Ackroyd's novel relies heavily on the poetics of mature postmodernism, sentenced to ponder representational doubts about possible worlds, turning each world into a mass of words[2], the ending of the Victorian plot-line leaves a lacuna for another poetic thought, for a possible way out. The victory of Mary Meredith's and Henry Wallis's love-story over the metatextual futility and cynical emptiness of George Meredith's art and (modern) love makes an aperture through which we, the readers, might glimpse at a possible victory of world over word.

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It is precisely the possible victory of world over word that seems to be the option elected by the writers of the English Nineties – and clearly exemplified by the recent novels by A. S. Byatt.

A.S.Byatt represents the third stage in the postmodernist treatment of the Victorian legacy. By the beginning of the Nineties, not only has Fowles's metahistorical mode been exhausted, but Ackroyd's and Barnes's have turned into clichés too. The appearance of *Possession* in 1990, however, showed that the small lacuna in the metahistorical dead alley could be successfully widened and developed into a fresh and new way of shaping a text, a world, a history... The secret of Byatt's Victorian formula was very simple: it literally reversed the process of Fowles's creation of the Victorian Age, arching over the history-fashioning in the manner of Ackroyd or of Barnes. A heap of words, patterns, sterile quotations that by the Nineties came to represent the world of *Victoriana* were in *Possession* converted back to (however textual) worlds, flesh, reality.

Byatt transcends metatext and metahistory by borrowing from the Victorian genre system – *Possession*, as its subtitle indicates, is a romance. The mode of romance is thus superimposed over the metatextual and metahistorical substance of the novel, functioning as its conclusive structural umbrella. The Victorian intertext in *Possession* is therefore much more complex than in the case of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* or *Chatterton*. While *The French Lieutenant's Woman*'s intertext from the Victorian era touches mainly on the legacy of typically Victorian motifs and representational practices (especially in the visual arts), and while *Chatterton*'s intertextual loans concern primarily the Victorian Gothic – its tone and atmosphere, A. S. Byatt borrows not only motifs, representational practices or atmosphere, but an entire world-making

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[2] Julian Barnes in his *Flaubert's Parrot* uses a very similar textual strategy, but without the redeeming ontological lacuna which a 19th century plot-line would allow. One could argue, of course, that *Flaubert's Parrot* cannot be really compared to *The French Lieutenant's Woman* or *Chatterton*, because it focuses on Flaubert and not on the Victorians (although some chapters do deal with Victorian England).

strategy, that of the romance (as against the novel). So, if in 1969 Fowles's metatextual and metahistorical commentaries use certain elements of the Victorian romance in order to reevaluate the romance and the era that produced it, A. S. Byatt subsumes the postmodernist metatextual and metahistorical fad of the Eighties to the structure of a Victorian romance. Once again, thus, the story is superior to metafiction, and the (Victorian) possible world is superior to postmodern words and analyses.

How does this mode function in the text itself? The correlation between the beginning and the end provides once more a very useful contextual comparison.

Possession opens with Roland Michell digging through a Victorian copy of Vico's historical texts[3], taking notes, surrounded by the stacks of the London Library. His main aim is a deconstructionist reading of a Victorian poet, Randolph Henry Ash. Both the locus and the state of mind of the main characters exude the metatextual and metahistorical air of postmodernism. In the course of the novel, however, both Roland and Maud, another critic and teacher of literature, come to realize that romance and history are much better when implemented than when analysed. The ending illustrates the change in their priorities: contrasted with the images of the library, books and the current theoretical jargon, stands the image of Roland and Maud making love, in terms of metaphors taken straight from the world of nature. The epilogue is a brief lapse into the Victorian past, portraying Maud's grand-grand-father and his illegitimate daughter in an extremely Arcadian setting.

The characters and their attributes only reinforce such a reading of *Possession*. Initially, both Roland and Maud are characterized only in terms of their belonging to the academic intelligentsia, possessed by quotations, papers, metahistory and metatextuality. Maud Bailey is first characterized by internymic[4] borrowings from Tennyson and Yeats, representing the frigid postmodern academia. Eventually she learns that her preoccupation with Randolph Ash and Christabel LaMotte, two Victorian poets, cannot be reduced to a purely academic interest, because she is virtually, literally, vitally related to them – she is their grand-grand-daughter. What began as a textual quest for ever more textual proofs of the times past, ends as a flesh-and-blood discovery: (Victorian) words are in the moment of Maud's discovery literally made flesh[5]. The Victorian world literally lives in the world of today. What the postmodern world lacks is not the ability to trace the Victorian past in its textual entirety or its representational otherness, but the ability to rekindle the Victorian potential for

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[3] The fact that Roland peruses a copy of Vico only underlines Byatt's neohistoricist and postmodernist inclinations – Vico's theory of circular history was warmly accepted by the postmodern academia, opposing the concept of progress and linear history.

[4] 'Names belong to the most obvious devices of relating figures of different literary texts. Interfigural relations are to a large extent internymic relations. The shift of the name of a fictional character, whether in its identical or in a changed form, to a figure in another text is, as far as the linguistic aspect is concerned, comparable to a quotation' (Mueller, 1991: 102–3).

[5] It must be said that A. S. Byatt is not the only contemporary British (woman) writer who employs the "lineage" motive in order to create a firm and valid ontological link with the Victorian era. The same technique is very skilfully employed in Emma Tennant's *Tess* and Isabel Colegate's *The Summer of the Royal Visit*. In both cases the contemporary narrators, in their accounts of Victorian circumstances, affirm their credibility by the fact that they are the authentic descendants of the Victorians that they are telling us about.

passion, for *physis* – its worldliness. Maud and Roland's love-making at the end of the novel represents therefore the most thorough imaginable grasp of the Victorian legacy[6].

In this sense one might say that A. S. Byatt has come closest to the world she wanted to correspond with. Instead of efforts aiming at unearthing those segments of *Victoriana* that seem to parallel our time, our doubts, current complexities, in the manner of Fowles and, later, Ackroyd, A. S. Byatt has attempted to create a Victorian world the fiction of which will tell us more about its ontological essence and our ontological problems than any excavated and allegedly factual documents: in *Possession*, she created both her worlds, the Victorian and the contemporary, as if they were created by a Victorian writer, which is the highest possible form of intertextuality.

If one should recall her essays about selected Victorian writers, entitled "Incarnation and Art", one might presume that her narrative strategy and her Victorian poetics parallel primarily her conclusions about the poetic method of Robert Browning and George Eliot. According to these essays, one of the basic Victorian assumptions (often found in Browning's and Tennyson's works, for instance) is the belief that artistic representation concerns always a translation of the infinite into the finite, the abstract into the concrete, the Word (in its biblical sense) into the world. In Byatt's own words about Browning, "fiction, mere imagery, are deeds and things, not testimony, are apprehended by 'the eye' as pictures might be, sensuously, without the mediation of the partial and lying word. Fiction that makes fact alive is a kind of truth, to set beside human untruth, and the undifferentiated Divine Word-Truth(...) His beliefs might be compared to those of George Eliot, who wished to make her ideas 'thoroughly incarnate' in particular individuals, and feared to lapse from the picture to the diagram" (Byatt 1993: 51). Roland Michell and Maud Bailey, Byatt's characters, are perfect examples of such an incarnation, who not only embody the word-world progress in the story as such, but also – quite physically – their Victorian predecessors, the times past[7]. The mirrors incarnated.

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Of course, it is very difficult to reach any final conclusions. That recent "neo-Victorian" works by A. S. Byatt seem to have added the final touch to the neohistoricist experiment initiated by *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is but a provisional estimate. It still remains to be seen how the overall neohistoricist practice in literature, as well as postmodernist poetics in its entirety, will develop. The progression from worlds to words, and then the other way around, might prove to be

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[6] Such a love-making stratagem is then diametrically opposed to the description of love-making in Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* (Calvino 1979), one of the milestones in the development of postmodernist poetics. In this novel the characters making love are identified simply as two readers. Their sexuality is translated into a typically postmodernist metatext, into jargon appropriate to deconstruction.

[7] Victorian views on incarnation and problems of physicality in general are further explored in A. S. Byatt's *Angels & Insects*. Byatt's essays on Victorian literature in *Passions of the Mind* prove again to be a valuable source of metafictional comments, illustrating the author's attitude towards the Victorians.

only a stage in an even more complex future scheme. Nevertheless, the contextual reading of the three "neo-Victorian" novels conveys an insight which cannot be ignored: it witnesses both the growth of postmodernism and the process of its internal exhaustion. The end of history, whether literary or otherwise, will have to wait.

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VIKTORIJANSKO NASLIJEĐE U ENGLESKOM POSTMODERNISTIČKOM ROMANU

Središnja tema ovoga članka jest analiza slike viktorijanske epohe u post-moder- nističkoj poetici.
Ženska francuskog poručnika Johna Fowlesa otvara postmodernističku debatu o povijesnom naslijeđu britanske književnosti, te nudi vlastiti pogled na problematiku koja se obično veže uz postmodernističko shvaćanje historicizma. Cilj mi je bio raščlaniti međuodnos Fowlesova prikaza viktorijanske ere i viktorijanaca na način na koji ih prikazuju još neki posmodernistički romanopisci. Tako »drugi val« engleskog postmodernističkog romana (Julian Barnes, Peter Ackroyd) odbacuje dokumentarističku i ontološku poziciju Fowlesove historiografije, te u prvi plan stavlja metatekst i metafikciju. »Neo-viktorijanska« proza devedesetih (A. S. Byatt, Emma Tennant, Isabel Colegate), međutim, izbjegava kako Fowlesovu restauraciju Viktorijanaca, tako i njihovu dekonstrukciju, kakvu im nudi Ackroyd. Nasuprot tome, ove spisateljice povijest vide prije svega kao poticajnu građu za tvorbu mogućih svjetova, za punokrvnu romanesknu fikciju.