

Ester Szilágyiová, *The Neo-Victorian Novel: Contemporary Trends in British Fiction*

MA thesis

Opponent's review

Ester Szilágyiová made a full use of her stay at the Scottish Universities International Summer School 2010 to get inspired by the lecturing professors and more easily accessible critical sources, and to complete her MA thesis on the Neo-Victorian Novel. Her endeavour resulted in an extended discussion of the phenomenon, together with broader concepts such as historicity or metafiction, in the earlier part of her work, and an analysis of two 1990s Neo-Victorian texts, Sarah Waters' *Affinity* and Alasdair Gray's *Poor Things*. The decision to work more or less independently, without the aid of regular consultations and critical comments on the finalized versions of individual chapters, reflects, unfortunately, in a rather unbalanced character of the thesis and many inconsistencies and obvious errors. Ambitious as the topic is, the thesis managed to meet it only partially.

In my assessment, I would like to focus on particular issues that either seem to be not fully developed or explained, or those which seem confusing. One of the first not adequately elucidated problems is the relationship between the postmodernist aesthetic and contemporary historical fiction; what the respective chapter implies is that each recent neo-Victorian novel is a postmodern text. Is this mechanical subsumption justifiable? And if so, wouldn't it be useful to distinguish between different types of neo-Victorian writings? (What I mean here is e.g. the fact that there is no distinction stated between the novels set in the Victorian times and those set in the present referring to the Victorian era in some way, such as *Nice Work* or *Possession*.)

Presenting the theoretical context, E. Szilágyiová seems to depend on the critical sources perhaps too unreservedly. Yet a more "critical" approach to this kind of information would be appreciated. Thus the role of Strachey's *Eminent Victorians* as a turning point in viewing historical past should not be overestimated and generalized. Strachey indeed does not take the Victorian era as a "golden age," but it is basically because he deals with a recent historical phase; his book was part of the tendency with which the Modernists disparaged the values of the preceding period, a rebellion of children against the generation of fathers. In the same fashion the early 19th century rejected the values of the previous age, in art and literature, in moral outlooks, etc., and yet was able to inaugurate the historical novel about the "golden age" past.

Victorian times. Yet the explanation of shifts between the original Romantic and Victorian focus should be presented, as well as a more theoretical debate of some key issues (Foucault on control, Sartre on gaze, etc.).

Similarly, the criteria for the list of neo-Victorian novels in the Appendix are not clear. Not only is Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* missing, curiously, but so are some other well known books, e.g. B. Bainbridge's *Watson's Apology*, Mervyn Jones's *Holding On*, or Michel Faber's *The Crimson Petal and the White*.

Last but not least, the thesis abounds in typos and occasional language errors, which sometimes results in confusion, especially when words are missing.

Conclusion: The thesis attempted to present a very important aspect of the recent development of the English novel. There are some valuable, revealing passages but, unfortunately, there are other parts which seem rather problematic, as has been suggested above. I recommend the thesis for the defence with a preliminary mark “velmi dobře” to “dobře”. The final result will depend on the character of the student's performance.

12 September 2010



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