

## Posudek na diplomovou práci Ester Szilágyiové „The Neo-Victorian Novel: Contemporary Trends in British Fiction“

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Historical reconstruction has become a regular feature of late twentieth-century British fiction. Written at a time of national crisis, it is most frequently concerned with class conflict, with the world of upper- or middle-class manners and regimented mass institutions. Much of the most celebrated current British fiction has indeed become in many ways “inward-looking”. It is concerned with revisiting the earlier tradition of the novel (especially its most forms of the Victorian era) as well as the national past (again the peak era of British success, and also in many ways, national shame and embarrassment, the Victorian era). What came to be known in Linda Hutcheon’s term as ‘historiographic metafiction’ surrounded historical romance with reflexive commentaries on the nature of fiction and history. Postmodernism is an international style that affected all the arts and came to dominate cultural theory and critique from about 1970 onwards. But, although Postmodernism builds on the self-referentiality which is a perennial aspect of artistic forms, the British novel has been affected by specific local circumstances as national politics and national economy have undergone profound and continuing changes. Fiction often seemed to reinforce an essentially backward-looking national image. The popular concept (dating from the 1980s onwards especially) of “National Heritage” can be described as the “extraction of history – of the idea of historical significance and potential – from a denigrated everyday life and its restaging or display in certain sanctioned sites, events, images and conceptions” (Patrick Wright, *On Living in an Old Country: The National Past in Contemporary Britain*, p. 69).

1. Therefore, one of the first questions that may require clarification, is the relationship of the Neo-Victorian novel and the flourishing of the National Heritage. Critics do indeed talk of the so-called heritage TV and film industry (especially, e.g. in relation to the costume drama of the Merchant and Ivory tandem, and also to the adaptation for the screen of novels of the Victorian and Edwardian Era). Mention is made of its essentially conservative approach to the past, of fossilizing an image of traditional England. Where and how would Ester Szilágyiová place the Neo-Victorian novel in relation to this image? Although some mention is made of the popular trends in contemporary culture (i.e. the china dogs on the mantelpiece, the Victoriana vogue etc.) but does she see these as conservative while the novel is critical, or ambivalent? Where and how, if indeed, can we draw the distinguishing line?

Further issues that may need pointing out and clarification:

2. Wrong name of department on the cover of the thesis.

3. The explanation of the structure of the thesis on p. 96 is rather problematic and actually testifies to the very loosely adopted concept of the Neo-Victorian novel: first outline the features, then exemplify them on several texts which have actually been selected because they fulfill the criteria for Neo-Victorian novels which have been outlined at the beginning. This is a highly problematic circular definition. This is even more emphasized by the awkward list of novels in the Appendix. What were the criteria for inclusion and exclusion? Why not include Angela Carter’s *Nights at the Circus* and why include David Lodge’s *Nice Work*? (Why is this novel attributed to Graham Swift on page 19?) Isn’t *Nice Work*, more concerned with the contemporary state of British industry and feminism, rather a very loose formal inspiration by the Condition of England novel? Is the Neo-Victorian novel a “Historical novel” or not? Is it to be set in the past? And what does Linda Hutcheon have to say on this issue?

4. Introduction: the features outlined are rather problematic, especially in relation to the narrator. There may be more experimentation than may seem from the thesis’s definition. (And is actually shown by the individual chapters of analysis) The introductory definition is unfortunate in its certainties and simplifications of presentation, which obviously need to be checked by contemporary subversions of both form and theme. Indeed the Neo-Victorian novel may be considered to be more “conservative” in form than the most experimental

examples of postmodernist fiction, but even there are experiments in narration than exceed the suggested 3<sup>rd</sup> person omniscient and first person autobiographical form.

5. The structure of the thesis has its problems. Numbering of chapters, at least, would have been useful.

6. Are Bradbury and Gutleben necessarily in “contradiction” (p.19)? Bradbury (p.21) is implying “affinity” and nostalgic echoes in his “link” while Gutleben in your account definitely stresses ambivalence of motivation (p.19).

7. Page 23 - Suspense and revelation of a mystery (including some historical evidence and/or even archeology) is a contemporary established practice in popular culture and (Holywood etc.) film, see the series of Indian Jones, Flynn Carson, National Treasure films etc. Re-writing traditional history, welding it on popular fiction forms and techniques is not just a result of Victorian scandal narrative (Gutleben) but can be influenced by other contemporary practices. And what is more postmodern than inspiration by other artistic forms...

8. Page 26: the comparison of Dickens and Kneale is insufficient. Not only is it about poverty experienced through the senses, but there are differences in vision, too – the moral, the foreboding, the mass - while Kneale has the peculiar allusion to the Pharaohs, a vision from down below etc. In general, and this can be said about the whole thesis, analogies are slippery, for every similarity given, many differences can be found in approach. This richness and diversity is simply elided in the thesis.

9. If Fowles’s novel forces the reader to “come to terms with the referential and non-referential nature of literature at the same time”, and therefore presents a hybrid “postmodern” fiction (see Gutleben , note 71), then how come it can be said to rely on Victorian practices and the Victorian aesthetic programme? (Which, it is made clear later in the thesis, does not mean simply “echoes”, or quotations, of past voices (these are dealt with in a separate chapter) but an essentially mimetic programme?)

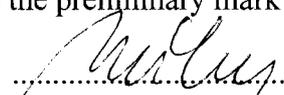
10. Page 36: the quotations of Sarah Woodruff - no voice like that appears in mainstream Victorian texts of the period that the novel is set in. This brings up the issue of the protagonists’ voicing contemporary, modern, 20/21<sup>st</sup> century views that would not be imaginable and even thinkable in 19<sup>th</sup> century literature. See also page 77 (Bella). Is this ahistorical? Accusations of ahistorical types of current sensibility appearing in historical novels (and even more often, film) set in the past frequently arise. What is the view of the author of this thesis on this accusation?

11. If *Affinity* is designed as illustration (“vykazuje všechny znaky”, str.96) then why is it dealt with mainly in the context of the spectral derealization of lesbian desire and the manipulations of the gaze. This is an interesting study but how is it actually related to the aspects of Neo-Victorianism? From this perspective, it is only the second of the selected book that proves indeed relevant to the topic of the thesis.

12. Where is the bibliographic information on the novels by Waters and Gray? Just as proofreading, the referencing of primary and secondary literature should have been done with more careful attention.

My critical comments above are related to some conceptual and formal aspects of the thesis, but overall I found the study of great relevance. It deals with an immensely important feature of contemporary British literature. Its underlying thesis is sound and substantiated. Despite frequent errors resulting from inattentive proofreading, I find the MA thesis well formulated and readable. It definitely fulfills all requirements for academic work on this level. Therefore, I recommend it for defence with the preliminary mark of **VERY GOOD (VELMI DOBRĚ)**.

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Vedoucí práce