Andrea Kirchknopf: Recent (Re)workings of (Post-)Victorian Fiction

PhD Dissertation

Theses

Topic and Corpus

My dissertation focuses on an increasingly popular segment of contemporary fiction in English, namely novelistic refashionings of the nineteenth century as a significant trend in postmodern literature from the 1960s to the present day. Out of the ever-growing body of such novels about thirty pieces are referred to in this work ranging from the first two classics, Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) and John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969), through Booker Prize winners of the eighties and the nineties, such as Peter Carey's *Oscar and Lucinda* (1988) and A. S. Byatt's *Possession* (1990), to most recent rewritings, like Lloyd Jones's *Mister Pip* (2006) and Gaynor Arnold's *Girl in a Blue Dress* (2008). These texts exhibit diverse appropriations of Victorian authors, fictional characters, novels, conventions and motifs, all assisting in establishing correspondences between the past and the present in various ways.

Goals and Structure

Since the research interest in post-Victorian fiction is relatively new, the dimensions of current responses to Victorian narratives and the critical apparatus for reviewing them still lack comprehensive reflection. My dissertation aims to fill these gaps by systematising the existing knowledge about the subject and by situating the corpus in contemporary literary and cultural criticism surveying the theoretical and ideological debates they incite or join. My work is structured into four chapters. In Chapter 1, "From *Victorian* to *Post-Victorian*: Definitions, Terminology, Context," I juxtapose competing theoretical perspectives that are available for the contextualisation of postmodern fictional responses to Victorian texts. In Chapter 2, "Post-Victorian Fiction in its Social and Political Context," I discuss the major ideological frameworks according to which these novels are produced and received. In Chapter 3, since post-Victorian fiction is inspired by historical correspondences, I examine how fictional texts and their criticism have evolved, through a diachronic case study of a novelistic chain of three closely linked texts which also feature in the title of the chapter:

"*Jane Eyre* Tailor-Made: A Case Study of the *Jane Eyre, Wide Sargasso Sea, Charlotte* – Adaptive Chain of Novels and Other Adaptations." In Chapter 4, "The Future of the Post-Victorian Novel: Indications of Topic and Genre," I indicate trends in current post-Victorian fiction pinpointing the prevalent subgenres into which novelistic production, reproduction, reception and historical legacies are translated, such as biofiction, island fiction and the novel sequel, speculating on possible future developments as well.

Sources and Methods

The main critical collections I use for my work include *Victorian Afterlife: Postmodern Culture Rewrites the Nineteenth Century* (2000) edited by John Kucich and Dianne F. Sadoff, Christian Gutleben's *Nostalgic Postmodernism: The Victorian Tradition and the Contemporary British Novel* (2001), *Functions of Victorian Culture at the Present Time* (2002) edited by Christine L. Krueger, *Refracting the Canon in Contemporary British Literature and Film* (2004) edited by Susana Onega and Christian Gutleben, Cora Kaplan's *Victoriana: Histories, Fictions, Criticism* (2007), *Victorian Turns, NeoVictorian Returns: Essays on Fiction and Culture* (2008) edited by Penny Gay, Judith Johnston and Catherine Waters and issues of the *Journal of Neo-Victorian Studies* launched by general editor Marie-Luise Kohlke in 2008. These critical anthologies discuss fictional texts from a Victorian or a postmodernist perspective as well as contextualising rewritings within a wider spectrum of cultural production and reproduction embracing film, theatre, painting, photography, architecture, teaching, science, technology and different forms of living. The variety of discourses applied to the phenomenon of readdressing nineteenth-century texts indicates its present-day theoretical relevance and implies an interdisciplinary approach that I also adopt in my dissertation. My methods mostly derive from literary and cultural studies, briefly touching upon the research in history, political science, media studies, trauma studies and cultural memory. I utilise these field-specific studies along with other critical material as well as works of narrative fiction as tools of scholarly interpretation.

Major claims

Scrutinising the competing terms and definitions of postmodern rewritings of Victorian texts in Chapter 1, I argue that it is the term *post-Victorian fiction* that most accurately depicts the body of novels in question. For grouping novels that address history in a traditional or a paradoxical way terms like *historical novel* or *historiographic metafiction* (Onega and Gutleben 2004) prove necessary in a generic sense, but they do not specify the age that is

being refashioned. The term *Victoriography* (Wolfreys 2001) confirms that reworkings of Victorian texts belong to the already established postmodern discourse of historiographical metafiction, yet, just like *Victoriana* (Kaplan 2007), a word originally denoting objects from the Victorian era, it conjures a broader frame of reference than just the fictional, since it relates to various representations, not only novels. *Neo-* and *retro-Victorian fiction* are the most widely and even interchangeably used terms by scholars (Shiller 1997, Shuttleworth 1998, Gutleben 2001, Bormann 2002, Kohlke 2008), which seems a consensual but largely unreflected critical practice. The flexibility of their definition does not assist in trying to delimit the area of research. They both foreground the notion *Victorian*, so much so that some scholars view this field of study as one that mainly provides new insights about the Victorian era (Llewellyn 2008). Hence in the prefixes *neo-* and *retro-* the relationship of the signified texts to the postmodern context appears only implicitly and requires more elaboration. In contrast to these, the term *post-Victorian fiction* (Kucich and Sadoff 2001, Letissier 2004) encompasses a more explicit reference to the postmodern context. I claim that this term seems the most suitable to date for the following reasons. Firstly, just like *Victorian*, it displays nuances in both the historical and the aesthetic realms. Secondly, *post-Victorian* comprises both the Victorian and the current historical settings without immediately taking a stance on the hierarchy of the eras. Thirdly, similarly to the terms postcolonial or postimperial, it expresses an intention of revision rather than that of a repetition of earlier narratives. Fourthly, the fact that *post-Victorian* may embrace the Victorian, the modernist and the postmodernist eras, points towards the integrative nature of this term which blends in with the interdisciplinarity of research in the subject.

Delineating contexts and discourses of post-Victorian fiction, I show how various research areas, such as literary-, film- and adaptation studies or cultural memory, trauma- and cultural studies, intersect. I underline the research benefit of these overlaps, as it may not only yield new models of interpreting post-Victorian novels, but also incite some theoretical and practical adjustments in various fields. My analysis of *Oscar and Lucinda* in Chapter 2 reveals how the postcolonial reading of the novel, the cultural criticism and cultural memory accounts of the Crystal Palace amend one another. Hence the juxtaposition of various cultural objects with narratives of individual and collective cultural memory emerges as a new interpretive tool in understanding narratives of identity in post-Victorian texts, which I exemplify on two additional novels, Gail Jones's *Sixty Lights* (2004) and Lloyd Jones's *Mister Pip*. I also maintain that, just like many of its Victorian source texts did, post-Victorian

fiction assists in bridging the gap between the so-called high and low culture as well as academic and popular criticism. The reading of such novels enhances a productive dialogue between high and mass culture, which I demonstrate by a brief survey of book cover designs. I attribute the popularity of post-Victorian fiction and its criticism to their capacity of providing fruitful discursive sites for diverse ideological schools on a wide spectrum of disciplines and audiences. I argue that post-Victorian fiction also marks some current changes in postmodernism through its synthesising tendencies. It fosters a compromise or a juxtaposition of the paradoxes of postmodernism as the co-existence of traditional and experimental uses of Victorian fiction in such rewritings and in their criticism proves. In addition, post-Victorian fiction and the critical paradigms utilised for their analysis, show how these texts and applied contexts modify the exclusively text-centred postmodernist approaches to reading by refocusing empirical realities and historical referentiality.

This concurrence of postmodern paradoxes causes duplicity in responding to questions of originality, authenticity and plagiarism in and about post-Victorian fiction. The general perception of postmodern novels as rewritings of earlier texts implies that these questions should not apply any longer, especially in the case of adaptations which often refashion more than one original, purposely copy-pasting extracts from various source texts. Yet, both in post-Victorian novels and in their criticism these issues re-emerge as debatable. Jean Rhys voices authorial anxieties of capitalising on Charlotte Brontë's nineteenth-century cult text, which turn into public accusations of plagiarism and exploitation of the literary market in receptions of D. M. Thomas's *Charlotte* (2000). I analyse how the novel *Charlotte* fictionalises such literary scandal of ventriloquising, by focusing on originality, copyright and forgery in a playful manner. Similarly, I sustain that Jasper Fforde's *The Eyre Affair* (2001), which provides us with an original ending of *Jane Eyre* (1847) that is different from Charlotte Brontë's, making readers believe that Brontë's original ending is already an alternative one, reads as a satirical comment on the whole enterprise of rewriting that would fan the adoration of characters, readers and critics on Brontë's version but also emphasise that in the metafictional game of rewriting the "revision" to get the "original" these concepts lose their points of reference. This duplicity also affects the classification of post-Victorian responses to Victorian texts, especially in terms of establishing their relationship to their sources. As I state in Chapter 1, *fluidity* (Bryant 2002) and *literary continuum* (Knight and Stoneman 2004) allow for a non-judgemental characterisation of these connections, whereas terms like *aftering* (Humpherys 2005) indicate the secondary nature of adaptations and other generally used ones,

such as *prequel*, *sequel*, *midquel* or *parallelquel*, presuppose the existence of an original that enjoys a temporal priority. The same applies to the category *adaptive series* which contains items refashioning the same source text in a chronological order. I utilise a slightly modified version of this term, namely *adaptive chain* for the texts I analyse in Chapter 3, since in the consecutive list of novels *Jane Eyre–Wide Sargasso Sea–Charlotte* the later items contain all the previous ones. Peter Carey's *Jack Maggs* (1997) and Lloyd Jones's *Mister Pip*, novels I scrutinise in Chapter 4, both rewrite the same original, Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations* (1861) in ways that can be related to each other, so they may be read as part of an adaptive series or mapped as independent refashionings of one source text. The term *adaptive map* serves to collect this multiplicity of contested interferences of novels, which I illustrate by a description of various refashionings of Dickens's life and work commonly called Dickensiana. Some works acquire a double function in the world of sequels: *The Eyre Affair*, for example, constitutes both an item on the adaptive map of *Jane Eyre* and a first instance of the series of the adventures of the literary detective Thursday Next.

In line with the less experimental and more referential, less text- and more author-based phase of postmodernism post-Victorian fiction also marks, refashionings of historical writers have acquired a great degree of popularity. As I maintain in Chapter 2, the lack of political and social models in the present age explains the renewed emphasis on the author fuelling the production and reception of novels centralising such a figure. This reinstatement of authorship together with its ensuing discourses of authority, authenticity, mystification and cult takes place in similar ways as was customary in the nineteenth century. Examining the *Jane Eyre–Wide Sargasso Sea–Charlotte* adaptive chain of novels in Chapter 3, I explain how the author function intertwined with that of the character-narrator becomes crucial in recent readings of the three novels. Literary biographies also flourish as a result of recentring the writer. Surveying five Henry James adaptations published around the same time in Chapter 4, I argue that the venture of rewriting Victorian authors could itself be read as a symbolic move of restoring authorship into the central position it assumed in the nineteenth century. The novels, Emma Tennant's *Felony* (2002), Colm Tóbín's *The Master* (2004), David Lodge's *Author Author* (2004), Alan Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty* (2004) and Michiel Heyns's *The Typewriter's Tale* (2005) as well as the ensuing authorial and critical reactions show the interaction of literary biographies and criticism concerning the writing process, the limits of artistic compromise, the consequences of intellectual theft and ghostwriting historical authors, literary reception and reactions to literary reception. This intersection, called biofiction, offers

a joint interpretive site for fiction, theory and criticism. From my analysis of *The Eyre Affair* it also emerges how much the author, the reader and the literary market interact in today's production and reception of post-Victorian rewritings. Through utilising the tools of comedy, utopia, dystopia and science fiction, the most popular generic directions post-Victorian fiction seems to take, Fforde's novel at the same time reinforces and shifts the romance–realism debate about the ending of *Jane Eyre* towards the economic realm of commodity culture.

The emphasis on history in post-Victorian novels foregrounds the issue of how contemporary Britain faces its colonial and imperial legacies, which constitutes the topic of Chapter 2. I read the last thirty years of post-Victorian output together with instances of cultural criticism to see how various narratives of identity were forged in a climate of changing political rhetoric. Examining how discourses of internal and external colonisation are activated in Graham Swift's *Waterland* (1983) and Carey's *Oscar and Lucinda* and fears of reverse colonisation get voiced in Lodge's *Nice Work* (1988), Byatt's *Possession*, Alasdair Gray's *Poor Things* (1992) and Swift's *Ever After* (1992), I conclude that the articulation of facing colonial follies in the post-Victorian fiction of the 1980s and 1990s partially reinforced the imperial discourse it opposed. I establish that the question of self and home are closely related in the texts of the novelistic chain I analyse in Chapter 3 and I pursue how characters' dislocation determines shifts in their self-, national and cultural identifications. In Chapter 4 I identify island fiction as a specific subgenre within post-Victorian fiction that offers dislocation and travel, also characteristic of the adaptation process itself, as constructive tools assisting in the reconceptualisation of current postimperial and postcolonial identities. I study Caryl Phillips's *Cambridge* (1991) and Matthew Kneale's *English Passengers* (2000) by juxtaposing concepts of eighteenth-century discovery narratives, nineteenth-century travelogues and Simon Gikandi's trope of travel (1996). I argue that the crisis within Britain that Gikandi regards a crucial motivating factor for travel in the nineteenth century resurfaces as the main reason for travelling into the "history of" the empire in post-Victorian fiction. These novels reveal contemporary existential anxieties of loss of home and identity resulting from Britain's insularity and isolation through exposing inter-island journeys of ownership within the empire as failures.

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