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A Plenitude of Prefixes: Delineating the Boundaries of Neo-, Retro-, Faux- and Post-Victorian Literature

Abstract

The category of contemporary fiction looking back to nineteenth-century British history is adorned with various prefixes, among them neo-Victorian, retro-Victorian, faux-Victorian and post-Victorian. The problem of naming is a common one when attempts are made to describe and define a new phenomenon. After about a decade of debate, the prefix 'neo' is the one chosen most often. Nevertheless, it is quite often used interchangeably with the others. Evidently then the boundaries between these terms are at best blurry. In fact they are often treated as synonyms, even though the scope of the concepts to which they are applied often differs. It seems, however, that all these terms could be put to good use if their individual definitions were specified and agreed upon. I would therefore like to postulate a disambiguation of the four terms mentioned above.

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Fiction consisting of virtual ventures into the reign of Queen Victoria bears many prefixes, among them *neo*-Victorian (currently the most common), *retro*-Victorian (Shuttleworth 1998; also Gutleben 2001; Golda-Derejczyk 2009), *faux*-Victorian (Mitchell 2010) and *post*-Victorian¹ (Kirchknopf 2008). Which one is the most suitable and what exactly it denotes is disputable. The problem of naming is a common one when attempts are made to describe and define a new phenomenon. After about a decade of debate, the prefix 'neo' is the one chosen most often, though it is sometimes used interchangeably with the others (cf. Gutleben 2001; Kirchknopf 2011; Golda-Derejczyk 2009). Evidently then the boundaries between these terms are at best blurry. In fact they are often treated as synonyms, even though the scope of the concepts to which they are applied often differs. It seems, however, that all these terms could be put to good use if their individual definitions were specified and agreed upon. I would therefore like to postulate a disambiguation of the four terms.

Who, what, where and when?

The starting point in defining modern fiction rediscovering 'the Victorian' is a definition of just that — 'the Victorian'. The task is surprisingly problematic, as can be seen in the discrepancies in various neo-Victorian studies. I would argue that in order to qualify for the adjective 'Victorian' (following any of the three main suffixes: neo-, retro- or faux-), that a significant part of the text needs to be set in Victorian times, understood as a three-dimensional area defined by chronological, spatial and cultural axes.

In terms of time, it seems quite logical to assume the boundaries of the times in question as the enthronement of Queen Victoria in 1837 and her death in 1901, even if the Victorian age is subdivided (into early, high and late Victorian periods) and the 'Victorian' nature of the beginning and ending of Queen Victoria's reign are sometimes challenged (cf. Houghton 1976: xv; Briggs 1972). Despite these seemingly self-evident chronological boundaries, texts qualified as neo-Victorian in scholarly papers include those in which Victorian times are the scene for only a minor part of the narrative (e.g. *Waterland*) as well as those in which the Victorian period serves only as a background for the time of the actual action. This is

¹ Understandably the least popular term, taking into account, that the prefix suggests direct temporal succession rather than the intended association with postmodern writing.

the case with *Arthur & George*, rightly described in Frederick M. Holmes' overview of Julian Barnes' work as "recreat[ing]... the *Edwardian* period, which Bradbury refers to as 'that wonderland before the twentieth century went so wrong'" (Holmes 2009: 22–23; my emphasis). A curious case is that of Wesley Stace's *Misfortune* which seems largely to be playing with the concept of neo-Victorian literature (cf. Heilmann, Llewellyn 2009: 41). One of the elements of such an approach consists of setting more than half of the text in the 1820s and 1830s: in the 19th century but before Victoria's ascent to the throne, while at the end of the novel the reader learns that the frame narrative (from which the story is being told and in which it's being recorded) is in fact set nearly two decades after the queen's death, in 1918.

An even better example of exploring the liminal space at the boundaries of Victoria's reign is Sonia Overall's *The Realm of Shells*. The narrative, presented by Fanny, a child, begins in 1835 and reaches the summer of 1837 after nearly three fourths of the book. The change of monarch takes place wholly in the background, somewhat like the Napoleonic wars in Jane Austen's novels. The author thus shows that Victoria's ascension to the throne was in no way a revolutionary change and the initial and terminal dates of her reign are largely arbitrary points of division². Overall herself acknowledges that she was interested in exploring the in-between time. In the interview included in the novel, she states that she "began by reading about the murky 1830s, before Victoria but after George. It's an interesting embryonic period" (Overall 2007a: 4). The readers are therefore witness to Victorian attitudes being born.

Overall's text is closed off by a letter written by the same narrator in 1897 when Frances (Fanny) is an elderly woman. Addressing a man who seems to be a historian, she points out how much time has passed since the events of her childhood and that most of her siblings are already dead which changes her own approach to talking of the past ("I swore once I'd never say, but that was all a long time ago"; Overall 2007b: 326). This being the second to last sentence of the novel, it underlines how lengthy the Victorian period was. The fact that events from its beginning are the interest of researchers even before the death of Victoria (the letter is written in 1897 and mentions Frances having been looked up 'some years' earlier) serves to demonstrate that the 1830s and 1840s were already history to those living in the 1890s; even more so than in the case of the 1940s and 1990s due to the shorter life spans in the nineteenth-century. Hence, characters living throughout the entire age — Fanny in *The Realm of Shells*, Rose in *Misfortune* — rather than suggest a unified character to the period, demonstrate that it was a time of significant change, characterized by internal heterogeneity, especially when its early and late fragments are taken into consideration. Nevertheless, 1837–1901 is commonly regarded as a whole, synonymous with the Victorian period in reference to which neo-Victorian fiction was named, even if some authors are already playing with the concept as has been shown above. In other words, the reign of Queen Victoria, even if not mentioned directly, is a necessary element of the setting a neo-Victorian text.

² An evident analogy is the reign of Elizabeth II, the second longest reigning monarch of the United Kingdom. Since the beginning of her reign in 1952, Great Britain first refused to join the European Communities, then formed part of the European Union; the Cold War escalated, lasted for around four decades, and ended, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics was dissolved; the British fought over the Suez Canal in 1956 and peacefully returned Hong Kong to China in 1997, etc. To paraphrase Bob Dylan, the times, they were a-changin', despite the monarch remaining the same. Victoria's reign may be seen as a somewhat stronger uniting element due to the wider array of ruling instruments and influence available to the monarch at the time, but even then the subsequent Reform Acts continued to limit her prerogatives and in the latter half of her reign it was the Parliament which decided who was to be appointed as head of government.

The second dimension, space, is even more difficult to define. An intuitive approach would be to duplicate the method used in identifying the temporal boundaries and state that a Victorian setting would be one in which the action takes place in lands or territories subject to the rule of Queen Victoria. Such a definition seems logical and fairly effective, with the majority of neo-Victorian texts being set in Great Britain, and others in Victorian colonies (*Wide Sargasso Sea*, for example, is set in Jamaica) or dominions (Peter Carey's *Oscar and Lucinda*, 1986, takes place largely in Australia). Even Matthew Pearl's *The Last Dickens*, an example of American retro-Victorian popular fiction, although it is set largely in the United States during one of Dickens' transatlantic tournées, the main character (an American publisher, not the titular Dickens) retraces the Victorian author's steps across the ocean and continents are switched before half of the narrative is through. At the same time, another plot evolves in "the brightest jewel in Victoria's crown", India. The setting is therefore predominantly Victorian: English and Indian. But what if the narrative was limited to the first part and the novel consisted of a retelling of Charles Dickens' readings in America which supposedly contributed to the worsening of his health and eventually to his death? What if the author of *Bleak House* and his assistant were the only Victorian elements in a 'neo-Gran-tian' novel? I would argue that both place and character can fulfill the criterion of Victorian in terms of setting. If the hypothetical novel was therefore centered on Dickens and his (Victorian) thoughts, actions and reflections in response to non-Victorian surroundings, the setting would still classify as Victorian. The smallest unit of Victorian space would therefore be a Victorian character (who can be present also through documents, such as diary entries or letters). In this aspect, space is in certain cases interchangeable with culture. Loosely understood Victorian culture without embodiment from the time of Queen Victoria, however, would not qualify as a Victorian setting.

If only one of these aspects — time *or* space/character — is met, the novel should not be classified as neo-Victorian. Therefore, David Lodge's *Nice Work* is not a neo-Victorian novel. Even if we assume that the main character, Vic, is so named because he is to represent the Victorian character, the story is set fully in the modern world. This is not changed by epigraphs from Victorian texts or similarities of plot structure. It is a novel to some extent inspired by nineteenth century writing, but not one exploring Victorian times from within.

The case of an implicitly Victorian setting is a similar one to the question of overtly self-conscious and self-questioning texts set against those which may inspire the reader to similar reflections on the nature of history and storytelling, but refrain from doing so overtly. Kate Mitchell describes as a flaw in Linda Hutcheon's concept of historiographic metafiction "elid[ing] the role of the reader in producing historical meaning" (Mitchell 2010: 33). Alexia Bowler and Jessica Cox support this claim, stating that "the reader's participation in producing the work cannot be underestimated" (Bowler, Cox 2010: 4). Such a phenomenological approach to defining various types of fiction would certainly more fully take into account the function of the novel (to be read, rather than to exist on its own) through including the interaction between reader and text and the input of the former. Unfortunately, such definitions possess one inherent flaw — the highly variable nature of readerly input, dependent on person, time, space, age and other circumstances³. I would therefore not include in

³ One may of course, try to speculate as to the 'proper' readerly responses on the basis of constructing a 'model reader' defined by Umberto Eco (2007: 14) as the recipient for whom the author imagined s/he wrote the text. The model reader should not be inconsistent with the 'model author' represented by style and narrative strategy

the category of 'neo-Victorian' texts which require of the recipient to construct their own Victorian storyline based on scattered clues, but only those which consist at least partly of a nineteenth-century tale.

Another example of only one of the criteria of time and space being met is mentioned in Agnieszka Golda-Derejczyk's "*Through the Looking Glass*": *the Postmodern Revision of Nineteenth-century British Culture*. One of the novels discussed as an example of the neo-Victorian is Julian Barnes' *Flaubert's Parrot*. Golda-Derejczyk admits in a footnote that the novel "may not be seen as exactly in neo-Victorian" but decides that since "in its postmodern approach to history and the fact it resuscitates the figure of the nineteenth century novelist Gustave Flaubert it comes close to be classified as such" (Golda-Derejczyk 2009: 72, footnote 63). Neo-Victorian fiction seems in this case to have become a synonym for historiographic metafiction. Even if Barnes' novel comes close to the neo-Victorian in evoking the nineteenth century, it is the cultural and physical space of the Second French Empire, not the United Kingdom, that is invoked. The example also shows why a fairly precise definition of the various terms used when discussing neo-Victorian texts should be adopted. Otherwise, the scope of the key concepts risks becoming more and more inclusive, simultaneously becoming less and less useful. If we treat the neo-Victorian as synonymous with historiographic metafiction, there is no need for introducing a new term, much like there is little cause for using both 'retro-Victorian' and 'neo-Victorian' if no distinction is made between them. I would therefore like to discuss each of the prefixes mentioned at the beginning in order to attempt to delineate their boundaries.

Post-Victorian: innovativeness or succession?

Starting from the end of the list of prefixes, 'post-Victorian' has been postulated as an apt term for late-twentieth/early-twenty-first century literature revisiting Victorian times. Post-victorian is meant to combine the words 'postmodern' and 'Victorian'. The prefix "post", however, also functions independently of 'postmodernism'. Its meaning is in such cases restricted to "after, later" (WordWeb 2006: n.pag.). Therefore the term 'post-Victorian', apart from its suggested connotations with postmodernism, also means simply "[written] after Victorian times". The expression was already in use in this sense in the 1920s and the 1930s. Likewise, postmodernism, of which post-Victorian fiction is postulated to be a branch, was so named to indicate its (temporal and ideological) relationship to modernism. If the traits associated with these attitudes are to be included in a new name for contemporary art dealing with Victorian times in a postmodern fashion, the proper term would be a rather redundant "postmodern post-Victorian". Conflating these words by removing the root of the first and the prefix of the second, though at first glance an obvious improvement, unfortunately results in ambiguity; its effects are indistinguishable from rejecting the first word altogether. It seems therefore best to retain the original meaning of 'post-Victorian' as "having come into being after the end of Queen Victoria's reign", especially taking into consideration the particular characteristics of neo-Victorian fiction which will be outlined below.

(2007: 18, 23). Even in this model, however, Eco identifies as a special case texts in which the model author speaks directly to the model reader (2007: 32–33). He classifies them as an epiphany of the art of storytelling.

Retro-Victorian: reaching back to the past

The second term, 'retro-Victorian', underlines the elements linking contemporary creations with works of art created during the nineteenth century. The dictionary definition of the prefix is "behind, back, backward" while that of the noun describes it as "a fashion reminiscent of the past" (WordWeb 2006: n.pag.). The stress is evidently on replication and re-creation rather than revision. There is a large corpus of works which can be classified as retro-Victorian mainly due to their attempts at recreating (more or less faithfully) the characteristics of Victorian models. Christian Gutleben rightly pointed out that the majority of contemporary novels set in Victorian times do not attempt to problematize the relationship between the present and the past, but rather focus on recreating the attributes and alleged atmosphere of past times, much like television costume productions (Gutleben 2001: 60; cf. Heilmann, Lewellyn 2010: 217). Such texts can aptly be named "retro-Victorian" as they tend towards nostalgia rather than postmodernism, to apply the criteria embedded in the title of Christian Gutleben's seminal 2001 book about neo-Victorian literature, *Nostalgic Postmodernism*.

Gutleben rightly points out that the Victorian archetype against which most contemporary texts are set is in fact a construct. The same is of course the case of the concept of neo-Victorian fiction. Doubly so, taking into consideration that also its 19th-century theoretical prototype (the concept of Victorian fiction) is quite often based on stereotypes (Gutleben 2001: 167). The characteristics considered to be typical of Victorian prose may include objective, realistic and omniscient narration, excessive propriety, including avoidance of descriptions of physical intimacy, and focus on WASP upper and middle classes ensuing in marginalization of other social groups. As the examples of *Middlemarch* and *Tom Jones*⁴ show, however, the supposedly postmodern self-conscious and questioning stance is not something revolutionary (cf. de Groot 2010: 120–121). Similarly, Dickens' protagonists sometimes (seemingly) come from the lower classes and much attention is concentrated on the plights of the poor⁵. Finally, Victorian novels were often considered improper in their own times (Gutleben 2001: 167; West 1996: 493–494)⁶. Many of the supposedly new elements (foregrounding the marginalized, reflecting on the subjective nature of memory, etc.) can therefore be treated as reproduction rather than innovation.

The problem in deciding whether something is modern (in terms of newness of approach) or traditional is therefore largely a question of intentions and interpretations, both on the side of the writer and the reader. As readers' expectations have changed, retro-Victorian novels which may have seemed improper to a 19th-century audience will be far from breaching the expectations and comfort zone of a 21st-century recipient. Therefore, if a contem-

⁴ The definitely pre-Victorian example is used in order to show the long history of self-reflective British fiction.

⁵ In the case of retro-Victorian novels which limit their social engagement largely to replicating Dickensian descriptions of the hovels of the poor in nineteenth-century cities, one might argue that they are in fact an example of what Fredric Jameson argued to be the plight of postmodern fiction: using tropes and motives from the past simply as decoration. A contemporary reader may be moved by the squalid livid conditions of the Victorian lower classes, but bereft of any impulse in the text to reflect on possible parallels to today's times (in Asia or Africa, for example) may dismiss the problem as one that has largely been solved and does not require additional attention.

⁶ This is not to say that Victorian literature was in general innovative, raucous and lewd. To a large extent, the opposite is the case (cf. Evans 1973: 237). However, there was a number of novels, including many of those which survived the test of history as the epitomes of Victorian writing, which stand apart from such a standardized description (cf. Sulmicki 2010).

porary novel differs from a Victorian one primarily through choice of characters and scenes depicted, or choice of words and language, it is likely to be a retro- rather than a neo-Victorian work: a text applying approaches analogical (if not identical) to its Victorian forebears.

Faux-Victorian: dressing up in costumes

The third prefix used in discussions of modern novels set in the nineteenth century is “faux”. Kate Mitchell defined ‘faux-Victorian’ fiction as:

novels written in the Victorian tradition that refuse to self-reflexively mark their difference from it in the characteristically parodic mode of historiographic metafiction. These novels revive Victorian novelistic traditions, offering themselves as stylistic imitations of Victorian fiction. Yet what they imitate they also re-imagine and extend: What would the Victorian novel have looked like had it represented other voices? (Mitchell 2010: 117)

The term ‘faux-Victorian’ is used by Mitchell to describe Sarah Waters’ novels wherein the “other voices” are those of sexual minorities. The texts therefore fit into what Gutleben described as “the tyranny of the politically correct” (Gutleben 2001: 155, cf. 167–172) through striving to make visible and audible those who were earlier marginalized. In this they do not stand apart from either retro- or neo-Victorian fiction⁷. In fact, the whole description quoted above could be applied to the category of retro-Victorian texts. Not all members of this category would qualify, however, as there are retro-Victorian novels which imitate the style of Victorian fiction to a limited extent as well as ones which do little to represent voices which were muted in the nineteenth century⁸. Faux-Victorian fiction should therefore be seen as a subset of retro-Victorian art. Due to its narrative conservatism, it would not qualify to the category of the neo-Victorian.

Neo-Victorian: conflating the new and the old

Finally, the fourth term, the one which has come out as the most popular in academic debate, is ‘neo-Victorian’. In terms of morphology, it aptly describes the phenomenon in question, conjoining ‘Victorian’ with the prefix signaling its “new, revised new version” (WordWeb 2006: n.pag.). As the most often used term, ‘neo-Victorian’ is also the most encompassing. In the broadest sense, it serves to describe all modern art dealing with the nineteenth century. ‘Modern’ times are usually understood as beginning in the 1960s (cf. Gutleben 2001: 5) although sometimes the chronological scope of neo-Victorian art is equated with post-Victorian times (cf. Heilmann, Llewellyn 2010: 6). Delimiting the temporal scope of the phenomenon is only one of several problematic issues related to defining the ‘neo-Victorian’, however. Louisa Yates rightly described it as “to paraphrase Henry James, a loose, baggy genre” (Yates 2010: 186).

⁷ Hayden White in fact describes a moral attachment to a certain type of truth (in modern historical discourse) as Victorian (2009: 70–71).

⁸ At least strictly speaking, as the intent of representing the poor and the servants is most likely usually intended to give voice to those who were not able to speak of themselves. This is done regardless of the fact they already appeared in Victorian texts.

Various, more or less precise attempts have been made to describe and/or define the phenomenon of neo-Victorian fiction. Sally Shuttleworth described the “deluge of Victorian-centred novels currently being published in the British Isles” as “display[ing] an informed post-modern self-consciousness in their interrogation of the relationship between fiction and history. They reveal, nonetheless, an absolute non-ironic, fascination with the details of the period, and with our relations to it” (Shuttleworth 1998: 253). Christian Gutleben in *Nostalgic Postmodernism* referred to the definition [of “retro-Victorian”] provided by Sally Shuttleworth in her 1998 article when he described the neo/retro-Victorian novel⁹ as “consist[ing] in re-thinking and rewriting Victorian myths and stories” (Gutleben 2001: 5), at the same time echoing Linda Hutcheon’s description of self-aware historical fiction as “rethinking and reworking the forms and contents of the past” (Hutcheon 1988: 5). Gutleben’s definition has been repeated in other papers, for example in Louisa Yates’ article in the Winter 2009/2010 issue of *Neo-Victorian Studies*. The definition is a very broad one, encompassing both novels which problematize our relationship with the 19th century and those simply set in Victorian times. Dana Shiller’s description narrowed the scope down somewhat when she defined the neo-Victorian as “characteristic of postmodernism and imbued with a historicity characteristic of the nineteenth-century novel” (Shiller 1997: 538)¹⁰, thereby engaging in a dialogue with the Victorian past. Taking into account the multiple identities of postmodernism, this is still not an exact definition, but it can be assumed to narrow the temporal time frame of the phenomenon to the period from the 1960s onwards, when postmodernism is commonly assumed to have become a widespread cultural trend (cf. Bertens 1995). The definition of neo-Victorianism has been further particularized in Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn’s book on its manifestations in the first decade of the 21st century. The authors stress that they understand the phenomenon as requiring “not only that the text be set in the 19th century,” but also be “self-consciously engaged with [...] (re)interpretation, (re)discovery, and (re)vision concerning the Victorians” (Heilmann, Llewellyn 2010: 4). It is this self-analytic and self-conscious nature that is to set neo-Victorian texts apart from ones making use of Victorian elements simply as decorations in the Jamesonian sense of nostalgically reconstructing the surface without paying attention to what originally lay beneath.

Neo-Victorian fiction is therefore defined in a way similar to the concept of historiographic metafiction, described by Linda Hutcheon in *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988) as “novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages” (Hutcheon 1988: 5). According to Hayden White, such overt self-consciousness results in a more truthful approach than that of traditional historiography through avoiding the “ideology of objectivism” (presenting a narrative as facts free of interpretation) (White 2009: 77). Neo-Victorian fiction defined according to Hutcheon’s terms could therefore be dubbed, tongue-in-cheek, “Victoriographic metafiction”, being a subset of historiographic metafiction dealing with Victorian times. In many cases such a description seems apt, especially when analyzing novels written before the turn of the millennium.

Graham Swift’s *Ever After* (1993) or A.S. Byatt’s *Possession* (1990), to take two of the more prominent examples, both recreate the past on the basis of documents and underline the un-

⁹ As has been mentioned, Gutleben uses the two prefixes interchangeably.

¹⁰ Kirchknopf postulated a similar semantic scope when proposing to read “post-Victorian” as an abbreviation of “postmodern Victorian”.

certain nature of such reconstructions. Victoriography takes place and a valid historical plot and storyline are presented, but the modern metafictional plot and comments engage the reader in reflecting on the significance of the process of linking the artifacts and information which has survived into a (hi)story. Byatt's novel directly shows that sometimes the conclusions of those engaged in reconstruction must be false due to some events not having left any traces for posterity. However, many of the novels commonly classified as neo-Victorian do not qualify to be described as historiographic metafiction. Christian Gutleben evoked the image of an iceberg of which only the tip rose above the water and a much more massive corpus was hidden from view; the tip was meant to represent the novels most often evoked in critical texts while the remainder under the water the less ambitious contemporary recreations of Victorian times which I suggest should be classified as *retro*-Victorian.

Unfortunately, the distinction between the categories of 'neo' and 'retro' is rarely respected. Even in studies which seem to support a more restrictive understanding of neo-Victorian fiction (as is the case with Heilmann and Llewellyn's 2010 book), the texts analyzed include not only self-reflective ones problematizing the relationship of past and present, but also those which may inspire the reader to such reflections, but do not take them up directly¹¹. This is the case with the movie version of Christopher Priest's *The Prestige* (1995, adapted to screen in 2006). Even if the parallels between magician's tricks and fictional recreating of past times are an interesting illustration, the fact that the movie is about tricks (including magic/science-fiction) and illusions does not automatically imply that it is metafictional. It can, however, be interpreted as such¹². The boundary between retro- and neo-Victorian works in such a case becomes therefore once again problematic, as it becomes dependent not only on the inherent qualities of a text but also author-text-recipient interaction.

Delineating the boundaries between the terms

Evidently then, 'post-Victorian', 'retro-Victorian', 'faux-Victorian' and 'neo-Victorian' are not mutually exclusive concepts. I would argue, however, that they also not be treated as synonymous. To sum up the above deliberations concerning *neo*-Victorianism, I believe that Llewellyn and Heilmann's criteria (requiring not only that the text be set in the 19th century, but also "be self-consciously engaged with the act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery, and (re)vision concerning the Victorians") provide a good starting point and an apt working definition.

Returning for a moment to the question of setting in terms of time and space, I would argue that the setting of a significant part of the narrative of a text needs to be Victorian for it to qualify as retro/neo/faux-Victorian. 'Significant' meaning not only taking up a substantial part of the text but also providing a crucial element of the whole work's structure and

¹¹ Mark Llewellyn during the 2012 neo-Victorian conference in Amsterdam, when presenting the closing plenary lecture, referred to his and Ann Llewellyn's definition being repeatedly cited by various speakers and stated that he is no longer quite pleased with the definition presented in the 2010 book. He did not, however, present any superior description to take its place.

¹² The fact that the director favors such an interpretation and states this fact in the commentary to the movie could be used as an argument for classifying *The Prestige* as a neo-Victorian text. However, the commentary would need to be considered to be an integral part of the movie, i.e. the DVD version would have to be assumed to be the default form rather than the cinematic projection. I would argue for classifying the director's comments as a separate text as a more rational option.

meaning. It should be stressed, however, that both the qualitative and quantitative criteria need to be met. Ian McEwan's *Saturday* (2005), for example, would not qualify. Despite incorporating a poem of Matthew Arnold's as a pivotal element of the plot, the novel is set fully in the twenty-first century (with some flashbacks to the second half of the twentieth) and contains very few references to the nineteenth (cf. Llewellyn 2008). The problem of quality and quantity can be further illustrated by two novels of Graham Swift's included in studies of neo-Victorian literature.

One, *Ever After*, revolves around a twentieth-century protagonist analyzing the notebooks of his Victorian predecessor. Modern narrative alternates with entries from mid-nineteenth-century notebooks and reconstructions of events based thereon. The focus is on what we have in common with the Victorians and what has changed, primarily in terms of moral and intellectual dilemmas. With its highly self-conscious narrator, the novel can serve as a model example of 1990s neo-Victorian fiction.

The other novel by Graham Swift, *Waterland* (1983), is similar in that it also consists of a self-reflective narrative by a contemporary character (this time a history teacher rather than academic dealing with literature) musing over past events. The difference, however, is that the focus is much more spatial and hereditary than temporal. The history of various aspects of the Fens (the titular Waterland) and the Crick and Atkinson families is told. What happened in Victorian times is an element of a larger construct in which almost equal attention is given to pre-Victorian (18th and early 19th century) and post-Victorian (with particular focus on the two World Wars) times. The Victorian episodes are just that — individual episodes among a multitude of others. Kate Mitchell's claim that "it is the Victorian era that looms large over the twentieth century of the novel's making" (Mitchell 2010: 64) is based largely on identifying the Atkinsons with Victorian times. However, their story stretches beyond that period in both directions. It is a history of history rather than Victorian times. In the typology delineated above, *Waterland* would therefore classify only to the genus of (chronologically) post-Victorian fiction, being neither retro- nor neo-Victorian.

The next step in delimiting the boundaries of 'neo-Victorian' should be delineating the "new and revised" aspects signaled in the prefix "neo-". Such innovative (in relation to Victorian tradition) elements may be visible on several levels: narrative techniques, choice of temporal and spatial plane(s), and attitude towards cognoscibility of the past. When analyzing these aspects, it is worthwhile to keep in mind the fact that contemporary fiction addresses the needs of the present. This fact, underlined by Kate Mitchell in *History and Cultural Memory*, does not require additional explanation (modern novels are by default addressed to modern readers), but may sometimes be forgotten when looking too closely at texts which look back to other times.

In terms of narration, fragmentation has been described as the common element in all contemporary texts revisiting the Victorian period (Gutleben 2001: 142, 162). However, in some cases, this division into differing parts is no more (and sometimes less) radical than in nineteenth-century novels. Accordingly, it can serve different purposes — from undermining the belief in the possibility of reconstructing past events on the basis of fragmentary evidence, through manifesting a plurality of viewpoints, to simply introducing variety into the novel to make it more entertaining. None of these techniques are used to present the past as completely alien to us. Among the various types of narration are usually documents from the epoch which usually have the effect of confirming that at least parts of history survive

to future times. Even if the events presented as remaining unrecorded and not surviving the passage of time partially contradict what can be deduced from these artifacts, there are many facts which remained unquestioned. It is rather individual, albeit usually significant, details that are suggested to lead future generations to the wrong conclusions and interpretations. The persons and events on which these interpretations are based, however, do not remain a total mystery. Even if the reconstruction of history, like a net, remains a series of holes linked together by our fragmentary knowledge, to use Julian Barnes' metaphor, the net is present and we can catch something in it. Modern narratives revisiting Victorian times tend to acknowledge this fact. Gutleben is therefore right in suggesting that neo-Victorian fiction may be a sophisticated way of returning to narrative simplicities (Gutleben 2001: 200, quoting Hutcheon 1988: 201). Victorian narrative devices can also serve an inverse purpose and provide a simple method of sophisticating the relationship between narration and the objects it depicts. John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* consists largely of just that: presenting narration modeled on the Victorian and problematizing its mechanisms, assumptions and effects. Similar stances of narratological (auto-)analysis are present in novels with contemporary literary scholar protagonists (*Ever After*, *Possession*) or, in a less overt manner, in collage-novels consisting of amalgams of pastiches and imitations of various Victorian sources (e.g. D. J. Taylor's *Kept*) whose inspirations are more or less directly signaled to the reader. Finally, the nineteenth-century elements can be commented on by an anachronistic third-person heterodiegetic narrator (as in Michel Faber's *The Crimson Petal and the White*) or by an anachronistic homodiegetic one (as in *Misfortune* — cf. Greenland 2005: 26, Heilmann, Llewellyn 2010: 40).

Another element of a novel which determines its distance from its Victorian forebears is the setting (strongly linked to narration, though neither automatically determines the other). If the novel is at least partly set in contemporary times, it can no longer qualify to the label of faux-Victorian. This does not imply, however, that a contemporary setting disqualifies a text from being retro-Victorian. Both *Ever After* and A. S. Byatt's *Possession* are examples of novels set in contemporary times but with parallel Victorian plots present through documents read by twentieth-century characters.

Another approach may consist of adorning a traditional plot with elements of self-conscious narration and literary theory — a good example of what David Lodge described through a metaphor of the writer composing a text from what s/he has chosen in the literary supermarket. David Lodge's *Author, Author* (2004) may serve as an example of a text wherein the "purchase" of elements associated with the postmodern, that is ones which draw attention to the artificial and constructed nature of the novel itself, would suggest to qualify the text as neo-Victorian. The fact that these components are used in a decorative rather than structural manner, however, would suggest the retro-Victorian label.

The main narrative of Lodge's bio-fictional depiction of Henry James' life consists of third-person omniscient, largely non-intrusive narration. Metatextual comments from the author-narrator appear only at the beginning and end of the narrative. Towards the end of the novel, four pages of italicized comments on the influence of Henry James after his death are inserted into the narration. The closing scene, also presented in italics, is a vision of "the spirit of Henry James existing out there somewhere [...] watching the [adaptations of his texts] on some celestial video player". The presence of contemporary self-conscious narration disqualifies the novel from the group of fully-fledged retro-Victorian works. However, the definite majority of the text fulfills the criteria of a classic realist novel. Despite

the claim of beginning “at the end of the story, or near the end, and then go[ing] back to the beginning”, the narrative is in fact chronological from which the initial narrative of the final months of James’ life (interspersed with some flashbacks) is the only exception. The third person omniscient narrator is for the most part unintrusive, nor does s/he stand apart from the presented world through language or anachronistic references. The frequent focalizations showing the world through the eyes of nineteenth-century characters do not cause discord between form and content (although the novel beginning with a scene during World War I shows that the perspective cannot be earlier than that of the early 20th century). Finally, the narrator’s omniscience is hardly discredited in the narrative at all. The 21st century comments at the close of the novel are in italics and thus visibly separated and distanced from the main body of narration. The illusion of the story being an exact retelling of real life events is partly broken in the acknowledgments and in the first author-narrator interjection. In both cases, however, references to the fictional elements of the story are set against similar events in the life of the original Henry James and are therefore shown to have a basis in reality¹³. The novel is therefore also not a model example of the neo-Victorian, but rather the intermediate “neo/retro” approach.

The next aspect to be analyzed is the question of the text’s stance towards cognizability of the past, one of the most widely discussed aspects of neo-Victorian fiction and a quality through which the subgenre is sometimes suggested to distinguish itself (cf. Golda-Derejczyk 2009: 9). The problem has already been signaled in relation to the whole category of contemporary texts revisiting Victorian times. The majority of such works have little to do with foregrounding the processes of re-constructing the past. I would argue that such highlighting is a quality of the *neo*-Victorian novel. While retro-Victorian texts may inspire one to think of the same problematic aspects of narrative, memory and history, it is a matter of initiative on the part of the reader rather than the text itself containing such reflections. What distinguishes the neo-Victorian is the direct nature of commentary upon these problems.

Such ruminations may be provided either by the characters, sometimes serving as homodiegetic narrators (this is the case for example in Wesley Stace’s *Misfortune*), or by extraneous narrators (e.g. *The Crimson Petal and the White*). In both cases, the narrator’s point of view is most often modern (even in Wesley Stace’s novel, where the narrator is supposedly speaking as an nonagenarian at the beginning of the twentieth century) and critically inclined towards reading documents and monuments as objective transcriptions of the past. Such a stance, as well as knowledge of Victorian literary history and aptitude in analysis of texts, is in several cases justified by the character being a literary scholar (*Possession, Ever After*) or the narrator demonstrating knowledge in this field along with a proclivity for digressions (*The French Lieutenant’s Woman*, the few italicized fragments of *Author, author*).

Not every metatextual comment automatically makes a text neo-Victorian, however. I would like to sketch an outline of the types of narrative intrusions or interpolations which qualify a text to the category of Victoriographic metafiction. This element is visible in several definitions of neo-Victorian fiction. Not only in the one adopted by Llewellyn and Heilmann, but also Dana Shiller’s pointing to the neo-Victorian “adopt[ing] a postmodern approach to history” (Shiller 1997: footnote 1), or Sally Shuttleworth’s description of the subgenre as “display[ing] an informed postmodern self-consciousness in their interrogation

¹³ Cf. Kaplan 2007: 65 for a more in-depth discussion on bio-fiction as exemplified in the novelistic depictions of Henry James’ life.

of the relationship between fiction and history" (1998: 253). All these descriptions underline the foregrounding of reconstructing the past as a conscious, creative process rather than a matter of unearthing the facts and presenting them as an objective story to the reader. That these elements serve to identify *neo*-Victorian fiction is visible in the difference between the above definitions and the one adopted by Gutleben to describe both neo- and retro-Victorian (he uses the two terms interchangeably) works as "re-thinking and re-writing Victorian myths and stories" (2001: 5). In a study aimed at proving that the pastiche of retro-Victorian fiction is more common than the parody of the neo-Victorian a more precise definition would undermine the main argument. If the definition were divided into "overtly re-thinking" and "covertly re-writing", the neo- and retro- elements respectively would be more clearly signaled.

Among the tell-tale elements of overt re-thinking (manifested through retelling) are comments on the process of (re)construction included in the text. The most direct examples are provided by literary scholar characters. "I invent all this," reminds the reader Bill Unwin in Graham Swift's *Ever After* in an interjection to a story of his Victorian ancestor's life (1992: 109). (Unwin exaggerates somewhat, as — much like historians — he bases his stories on the documents he found.) Less radical examples are present in novels with plots bereft of contemporary characters. Hence the Victorian narrator of *Misfortune* after switching from third-person to first-person narration explains that the former mode was necessary so that the reader would "trust what [s/he] was reading" (Stace 2005: 78). The arbitrary nature of narrative structure is thus put forward to be inspected, much like an actor showing his wig. A similar approach is manifested by the anachronistic narrator of *The Crimson Petal and the White* who repeatedly addresses the reader to remind him/her of the limited knowledge which can be acquired from reading the narrative. Hence the narrative starts with underlining the distance which divides the reader from the times depicted ("you are an alien from another time and place altogether"; Faber 2003: 3), and goes on to poke fun not only at the narrative techniques ("let me rescue you from drowning in William's stream of consciousness"; Faber 2003: 63), but also the limited and/or erroneous nature of information to be acquired from a text. At one point the reader is politely told by the narrator: "Forgive me if I misjudge you, but I get the impression, from the way you're looking at the Rackhams' house — [...] — that you think it's very old. On the contrary, it's quite new" (Faber 2003: 164). The artificiality of the story is foregrounded by references to images unavailable to the reader as the recipient of a message transferred by words, and probable erroneous assumptions on the reader's part.

There is, however, a significant difference between the approaches used in Faber's and Stace's novels. Only the first one forces the reader to acknowledge that they are reading a modern text and need to come to terms with how their world relates to the Victorian one. Stace's metanarrative tropes are used in a way which does not disrupt the illusion of the reader dealing with a nineteenth-century artifact. Bożena Kucala rightly reasserts Sudha Shastri's postulate that neo-Victorian texts need to ensure that the reader be conscious of the simultaneous presence of the presented historical world and the present. I, too, would like to stress the importance of the "reliance on duality" of the neo-Victorian dependent on "a double perspective: the Victorian world [being] juxtaposed with the contemporary one" (Kucala 2012: 43). Reflections on the Victorians or on Victorian texts made by the Victorians would not be a sufficient qualification for a text to be classified as neo-Victorian. This

is a result of the various possible interpretations. Patricia Waugh rightly noticed in her study of metafiction that a lack of explicit metacommentary significantly reduces the chances of the process of recontextualization being fully understood. The planes and orders of reality may in effect be confused resulting in an illusionist rather than metafictional effect (Waugh 1984: 36–7).

Another method of exposing history as a construct consists of juxtaposing conflicting accounts of the same events. If these accounts (and in particular their incompatibility) are in no way commented upon, however, the text cannot be classified as neo-Victorian, but rather to the intermediate neo/retro category, or even as retro-Victorian. This is the case with Matthew Kneale's *English Passengers* which is told by twenty-two narrators whose points of view vary greatly. All of them, however, fit into the Victorian narrative and the reader need not engage in much more metatextual reflection than in the case of reading a detective story consisting of conflicting accounts. Such a form does, of course, encourage the reader to think of how we piece together information on the past from what has survived to our times and what we tend to see as more objective, but it does not automatically entail such thoughts¹⁴.

Finally, it should not be forgotten, that an integral element of the neo-Victorian is the... Victorian¹⁵. The reflections and queries in neo-Victorian texts concerning cognizability of the past and what links us to our forebears do not invalidate all our knowledge of the previous centuries. Even if some (or even a large part) of the retrospective narrative is presented as a construct, at the same time the reader is provided with the foundations on which this construct is built. The bases on which stories are woven are usually artifacts such as diaries, letters or other documents. Sometimes non-textual evidence is also presented as a text read and interpreted in our times, although the contemporary reading is usually misleading. Examples of nonverbal texts include houses (*Misfortune*, *The Crimson Petal and the White*), paintings (*Misfortune*), clocks (*Ever After*) or skeletons (*English Passengers*). There is no doubt as to the past having existed and quite a lot being known about it. Numerous links, both material and spiritual, are shown to still exist between our times and those of Queen Victoria. The problem is rather, to paraphrase Lytton Strachey, that the history of the period will never be written because we know too little about it. Nevertheless, we know enough to give firm grounds to speculation and re-construction.

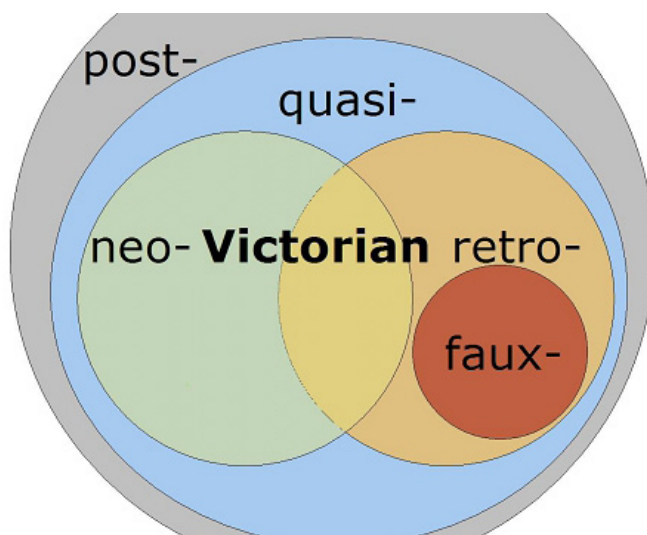
The boundaries of the concepts which are the subject of this article should by now be sketched out although some aspects still require more precise definitions. There appears, however, a problem resulting from the division of the semantic referents of each of the prefixes used to describe contemporary fiction referring back to Victorian times. Namely, a term is lacking to describe the aggregate of neo/retro/faux-Victorian works. One option would be to use the most common term, neo-Victorian, interchangeably as referring to all three types of texts. This would cause some confusion, however, and undermine the effects

¹⁴ Another element which needs to be taken into consideration is the definition of the text of a novel. The comments from the author preceding and following the narrative (in the case of *English Passengers* they include an epilogue on the subjective nature of writing and a document referring to the real-life person on whom one of the characters was based) usually include information requiring the reader to see the narrative in a new light. Their clear separation from the narrative, however, makes their influence on the reading experience one of a different caliber, similar to reading an academic paper on the novel.

¹⁵ A brief discussion of why novelistic variations on the Victorian continue to be popular can be found in my 2011 article on the functions of British novels looking back to the 19th century (see bibliography for details).

of attempting to define the limits of each prefix. I would therefore suggest a new term: “quasi-Victorian”. The prefix denotes an element “partly, to some degree, partly similar” (WordWeb: n.pag.) which is a definition loose enough to incorporate the meanings of the remaining prefixes. The prefixes’ semantic scopes could then be presented as in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1. Illustration of the scope of the prefixes discussed



‘Post-Victorian’ is the broadest term, as its boundaries are temporal in nature and encompass all kinds of fiction written after 1901, not only those referring in one way or another to Victorian times. The quasi-Victorian consists of those post-Victorian texts which refer back to the reign of Queen Victoria. This category can in turn be divided into the neo-Victorian, i.e. historiographic metafiction dealing with Victorian times, and the retro-Victorian — historical fiction, often focused on aspects of Victorian life and society considered to be underrepresented in 19th-century texts. The boundaries between these two subcategories can overlap depending on the extent to which a given text is considered to breach the boundaries of the model Victorian novel. If a retro-Victorian text, however, strives to reproduce the style of the original while at the same time foregrounding groups considered to have been excluded from Victorian literature, it can be classified as faux-Victorian.

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