

## **NOSTALGIC POSTMODERNISM: THE VICTORIAN TRADITION AND THE CONTEMPORARY BRITISH NOVEL**

Christian Gutleben

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Christian Gutleben's study delves into a more than noticeable phenomenon in the context of postmodernist fiction: the recasting of Victorian conventions in a wide range of postmodernist novels. These he calls "retro-Victorian", taking the term from Sally Shuttleworth (1998), or, alternatively, "neo-Victorian", thus emphasising the retrieval of past traditions and of the historical past, which, as the book's title announces, links postmodernist practices with nostalgia.

Illuminating as Linda Hutcheon's works on postmodernism and postmodernist literature seemed to me when I first read them, I must confess that I was not utterly convinced by her view that the postmodern has little to do with nostalgia and much to do with irony (see Hutcheon 1987, 1988, and 1998a). The double-voiced, playful and often critical nature of many postmodernist novels becomes one with their recourse to irony, which can thus be said to play a relevant role in the way they deal with the traditions of the past. Yet it is precisely this recurrent inclination to express the new through the old that inevitably puts nostalgia on the agenda. Therefore, how should one cope with the assertion that these ironic works have little to do with nostalgia? I opened Gutleben's *Nostalgic Postmodernism* expecting to find there something that could throw light upon the problematic relationship between nostalgia and irony. The book says much on the subject, though I would have welcomed a lengthier introduction in which the author paved the way for the practical cases (specific novels) analysed in the following pages. Nostalgia is an

interesting phenomenon and, as such, I think it deserved some “isolated attention”, a more suggestive reflection on nostalgia in the age of postmodernity, prior to the illustration of the way in which it works in those late twentieth-century novels that recast the conventions of Victorian fiction.

Before going on, though, in all fairness to Linda Hutcheon, I should say that, precisely because she had not explored the ironic *and* nostalgic forces at work in postmodernist fiction, there came a point at which she had a “welcome (or unwelcome) sense of unfinished business for having simply believed that irony was more complicated and ‘edgy’ than nostalgia”, when in fact what is most complicated of all is the tension between the two (1998b). As Gutleben explains, there is irony in postmodernist fiction and there is nostalgia as well. Both forces co-exist, then, but can we give the screw a further turn and argue, in the light of Hutcheon’s “make-amends essay”, that, among other things, it is nostalgia itself that is being ironised? I think Gutleben’s study would have profited from a reflection on this and other questions in the same line, even if the author himself can be said to be somewhat ironic about nostalgia, arguing that this relish for the past in general, and for the Victorian past in particular, is not ingenuous, and that it should rather be approached as part and parcel of a profitable business.

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The book is divided into three parts. Part One focuses on the relationship between the imitative activity at work in a wide range of novels and the fascination exerted by the Victorian model on late twentieth-century writers. Imitation is here approached as pastiche and several novels are discussed, which, to the author, duplicate the Victorian prototype without the challenge that is inherent in a parodic rewriting. The (Victorian) voices of authority are variously revived in ways that lend distinction to the words (in epigraphs, quotations, etc.) and style of famous Victorian writers. If pastiche requires a model to be imitated, the relationship between the imitation and the imitated work/tradition is one of dependence and derivation. What one finds here is the narcissistic pleasure of the postmodernist writer who is able to reproduce the voices of the past, as A. S. Byatt does in *Possession*, but also the view that these voices which are being imitated remain unsurpassed. In addition, the pastiche at work foregrounds (and privileges) a creativity and originality that is linked with the Victorian mode, while postmodernist practices seem to be much closer to repetition and recycling. Thus, what many retro-Victorian novels imitate is not only the style of certain Victorian writers, but also the global organisation of the typically Victorian narrative: plots culminate in the resolution of a mystery, events follow a chronological order, and, in a word, narratives are teleologically oriented. This is the case with John Fowles’ *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*, A. S. Byatt’s *Possession*, Emma Tennant’s *Tess*, Matthew Kneale’s *Sweet Thames*, Patricia Duncker’s *James Miranda Barry*, and

Sarah Waters' *Affinity*, to name a few of the works considered by the author. If the (conventional) structural organisation of these retro-Victorian novels is governed by the (equally conventional) purpose of surprising and seducing the reader, the Victorian art of description (of characters and worlds) also prevails in its contemporary counterparts. From the ideological point of view, then, such conservative aesthetic choices inevitably appear to be a mark of regression, given the fact that these choices have been made at a historical period characterised by the collapse of metanarratives.

Yet the fascination exerted by Victorian fiction, which accounts for the relish for pastiche, discussed in Part One, does not prevent contemporary writers from challenging and subverting the tradition. Here is where parody enters the scene, in Part Two of Gutleben's study. The author insists on the fact that parody and pastiche are not always easily distinguishable phenomena, which makes the division between Parts One and Two of the book somewhat problematic. Thus, some of the novels approached in Part One from the point of view of pastiche reappear in Part Two, where what is at stake is the parodic rewriting of Victorian conventions. What one should bear in mind, even if Gutleben does not state it explicitly, is that if parody is imitation with critical distance, pastiche (understood as sheer imitation) forms part of parody. A novel may be parodic when considered as a whole, and yet, because a parody should set up its target before subverting it, certain aspects of it may well be approached by regarding it as pastiche. This is a pastiche that ultimately proclaims its own artificiality, that is to say, its contribution to a broader project in which parody expands imitation beyond its limits till it ends up questioning whatever is being imitated. In fact, the co-presence of pastiche and parody seems to me less problematic than the practice of pastiche alone. One may wonder what the point is in writing a whole novel at the end of the twentieth century whose only aim is to imitate a model that, because it is a model, cannot be surpassed. Thus, Gutleben analyses Charles Palliser's *The Quincunx* (1989) as an illustration of retro-Victorian pastiche, which some have read as a parody of Victorian fiction in general and of Dickens' novels in particular, but which, to him, is utterly devoid of parodic intention. I agree that *The Quincunx* is more conservative than innovative, and that it powerfully recalls Victorian fiction in terms of both content and style. However, even though Palliser resorts to pastiche, there are enough destabilising elements (formal and thematic alike) in the text to justify its being interpreted, when the novel is considered as a whole, as a parody, and not as a pastiche. In short, if one wishes to argue that pastiche alone sustains a whole novel and not merely certain aspects of it, something more is needed than what Gutleben offers with regard to *The Quincunx*.

Part Two begins by preparing the reader to find ambiguity all everywhere. Parodic works are playful, ironic, critical, but they cannot be said to be so at the expense of leaving out respect and admiration. Rather, those retro-Victorian novels that resort to parody adopt an ambiguous stance towards the past that is both salutary and derisive at the same time. What is subverted may have to do with characterisation (the main character as social model and moral guide), with the notion of progress (be it historical, social or human), or with the functioning of narrative voice (the stable and univocal instance best represented by the Victorian omniscient narrator). All these possibilities are illustrated through the analysis of particular retro-Victorian novels, whose dynamics also serve to show how the new can be re-invigorated with the old. The reconsideration of gender issues, the importance paid to unheard narrative voices, the role played by the ugly/the unsavoury in fiction, the preference for openness, and other such features which perfectly fit postmodernist tenets, form part of the aesthetic and ideological rewritings of the tradition in works like Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Peter Ackroyd's *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem*, James Buxton's *Pity*, Alasdair Gray's *Poor Things*, Beryl Bainbridge's *Master Georgie*, etc.

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As the author explains, if the first part of his study seems to disagree with the second part, this is only because there are contradictory forces and drives within the practices of retro-Victorian fiction. It is these tensions that Part Three of the book explores. Thus, Gutleben puts the subversive character of certain retro-Victorian narratives into perspective by commenting on the precedents of modernist and early postmodernist literature. As he concludes, "yesterday's scandals are today's conventions" (158), and so, these novels are closer to the more conservative, rather than the more experimental pole of postmodernism. Moreover, taking into account the fact that the main flowering of the retro-Victorian novel took place in the 1980s and 1990s—a period which corresponds to the advent of the politically correct—the author raises a series of questions intended to make the reader reflect on whether or not it is reasonable to harbour the suspicion of an opportunistic drive inherent in this kind of fiction. Favouring certain narrative choices and certain perspectives which were discarded in nineteenth-century literature amounts to giving the reading public what they expect: political correctness has become widespread and, far from being subversive or innovative, it has become "predictable, not to say redundant" (169). Thus, Gutleben concludes, political correctness in the novels he analyses is more a fashionable attitude than an ideological battle.

It is to his credit that the author of *Nostalgic Postmodernism* tends to shun clear-cut distinctions, and hence it is that, despite comments like those mentioned in the paragraph above, he manages to present a retro-Victorian novel as both

subversive and seductive (the work chosen is D. M. Thomas' *Charlotte: The Final Journey of Jane Eyre*). Subversion is possible, even if, as he insists, it must be qualified. And whatever the implications of these novels are, their aesthetic ambiguity and palimpsestuous nature ultimately enrich the narrative. This fact explains why so many of them have been written and also enjoyed by a wide spectrum of readers, invariably driven, despite their different backgrounds and the layers of meaning they may be able to find in the text in question, by the promised pleasures that a good yarn still affords.

*Nostalgic Postmodernism* is a rewarding read for anyone interested in postmodernist literature in general and, more specifically, in those novels that rewrite the Victorian tradition, which are considered here from several, and often complementary, points of view. A wide range of works are commented on, many of them published shortly before the book itself, and provoking questions are raised for the reader to ponder on. The work improves as it advances and, all in all, it is unlikely to disappoint the reader, being, as it is, a good point of departure for delving into the literature and the critical production connected with the subject it explores.

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