Contemporary Victorian-centered novels: a comparative study of Fowles's
French Lieutenant's Woman* and Byatt's *Possession

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1. Introduction

In the introduction to *Rereading Victorian Fiction*, Jenkins and John (2000:1) comment that 'Appetites for Victorian fiction seem to be increasing […] as the centenary of Victoria's death approaches'. This appetite has caused not only a revived interest in the re-reading of Victorian fiction, but also the re-writing of it. As Gutleben (2001:5-6) points out in *Nostalgic Postmodernism: the Victorian Tradition and the Contemporary British Novel*:

> [1] John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, published in 1969, brought to the public attention the parody of Victorian social, sexual and literary conventions, but it is really in the 1980s and 1990s that many British novelists […] have unearthed and resuscitated the great Victorian tradition.

The interesting thing about this trend of fiction is that many of the novels have not simply been interested in resurrecting or retreating into the Victorian past, but have instead 'display[ed] an informed postmodern self-consciousness in their interrogation of the relationship between fiction and history' (Shuttleworth, 1998:253). These novels belong to the category which Linda Hutcheon (1988:5) calls the 'historiographic metafiction', by which she means 'those well-known and popular novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages'. However, in the effort to problematise the boundary between history and fiction, these writers have been forced to rely on the techniques of Victorian realism. What this paper is interested in discussing is how writers of historiographic metafiction have used and adapted aspects of the Victorian novel to recreate a believable aura of the past to suit their critique. I have selected John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) and A.S. Byatt's *Possession* (1990) for the discussion. In his '*The French Lieutenant's Woman*: Postmodern Victorian', Foster (1994:67) lists A. S. Byatt as one of the writers who 'follow [Fowles's] lead'. The connection between the two books is further exemplified by Malcolm Bradbury:

> [2] The extraordinary skill with which John [Fowles] reconstructed the Victorian novel [in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*] and then set it up in dialogue with the 20th century has had a very powerful influence. I don't think

A.S. Byatt's *Possession*, for instance, would have been possible without it. (quoted in Denes, 1998:223)

In the above comment, Bradbury not only firmly establishes the relation between Fowles's and Byatt's novels, he also points out two vital characteristics shared by the books. First, both are known to have reconstructed the impression of the Victorian novel. Second, they both establish a dialogic relationship between the nineteenth and the twentieth century. Bradbury's observation is sufficient to begin an analysis of the relationship between the two books. Yet it is incomplete. He fails to mention the different stylistic approaches employed by the two writers to recreate the Victorian novel. Also, he neglects the different ways the two novels create a dialogic relation between the two centuries. In this paper, I will focus more on these differences than the similarities suggested by Bradbury.

Bradbury's comment captures my attention also because it seems to imply the superiority of Fowles's craftsmanship in reconstructing the Victorian novel over Byatt's. According to Bradbury, Byatt's *Possession* would have been impossible without Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. There may be some truth in Bradbury's observation since Fowles's novel is commonly considered to be a pioneering work in the field. However, his quote also seems to reduce Byatt's novel to an inferior imitation of Fowles's work. In this paper, I would like to bring the concept of 'authenticity' into the discussion of the two novels and re-evaluate the attitudes and skills of the two writers in composing their work.

2. Temporal perspectives

According to Gutleban (2001:8), it is possible to divide contemporary novels set in the nineteenth century into two categories based on the temporal perspective they adopt:

> [3] [I]f the perspective is contemporary, that is if the narrative situation and voice are situated in the twentieth century, the Victorian allusions, references and echoes will necessarily be parodic since there cannot be an illusion of faithful imitation. If the perspective is Victorian, that is if the characters and the textual productions are clearly set in the Victorian epoch, the difference between the two modes calls for a second distinction to be made between a ludic and a serious reworking of the nineteenth-century material, corresponding respectively to parody and pastiche.

Here Gutleban attempts to differentiate between parody and pastiche; but I find his distinction between a contemporary temporal perspective and a Victorian one more useful for the analysis of Fowles's and Byatt's novels. In a way, all historical novels are written from a modern perspective since the writers are inevitably conditioned by a contemporary awareness. Many writers, however, would prefer that the reader be kept unaware of contemporary involvement and instead accept the fiction as a straightforward narrative. Fowles and Byatt, much bolder, confront the relationship between the historical and the contemporary directly. Both Fowles's and Byatt's novels provide two complementary historical perspectives: one contemporary and one Victorian.

In Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, the author-narrator is the agent of the convergence of the modern and the Victorian modalities who tells the story of a respectable Victorian Charles Smithson and his involvement with the 'fallen woman' Sarah Woodruff. He is 'contemporary in his perspective on the earlier period and in the chronological scope of his reference' (Olshen, 1978:65). Indeed, in Chapter 13 of the novel, the omniscient narrator explicitly informs the readers that he 'live[s] in the age of […] Roland Barthes' (97). Fowles's novel can be regarded as an example of a pseudo-Victorian novel adopting a contemporary perspective.

Byatt's *Possession*, on the other hand, portrays the Victorian and contemporary temporal strands separately and thus 'foreground[s] a disjunction between past and present' (Wallace, 2005:212). The narrative of the novel is primarily located in the twentieth century and moves backward to reveal the love story between two Victorian poets. The forbidden love affair is told almost entirely through a myriad of texts written in a style that is reminiscently Victorian and devoid of anachronism. Featured in the Victorian section of the novel are also three passages written by a nineteenth century omniscient narrator. Together, the Victorian texts and the three passages represent a kind of 'stability and wholeness' (ibid, 216) of the past. Therefore, *Possession* can be viewed as an example of the type of a pseudo-Victorian novel which adopts a Victorian perspective.

There exists a need for both contemporary Victorian-centred novels to exploit some mimetic techniques to evoke a distinct and coherent sense of a nineteenth-century environment, bringing the bygone age to the imagination of the contemporary reader. However, the different temporal perspectives employed by Fowles and Byatt reveal their respective approaches to the representation of the past. These different approaches are illustrated in Fowles's use of Victorian dialogue, Byatt's use of

Victorian documents, and both writers' use of the Victorian omniscient narrator and Victorian vocabulary.

3. Fowles's treatment of Victorian dialogue

A twentieth-century novelist rewriting a nineteenth century novel is likely to encounter the need to reproduce Victorian dialogue. This is true for Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. Representing characters' dialogue poses certain problems. Fowles has said in an interview that 'On the whole, dialogue is the most difficult thing, without any doubt' (Tarbox, 1988:172). He succinctly summarises one of the problems related to dialogue writing: 'in modern-novel dialogue the most real is not the most comfortable to actual current speech' (Fowles, 1977:139). Despite Fowles's comment, those writing in a contemporary setting may still have an advantage in reproducing current speech; for they at least know intimately through daily experience how people talk in his or her own time. But the writers of historical fiction such as Fowles face much more difficult challenges. How can they convincingly make characters sound as if they are from a past epoch for modern readers?

In 'Notes on an Unfinished Novel', Fowles (1977[1969]:140) discusses the writing of dialogue in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, 'Very early on I tried, in a test chapter, to put modern dialogue into Victorian mouths. But the effect was absurd, since the real historical nature of the characters is hopelessly distorted'. This remark reveals Fowles's early belief that it may be plausible to use modern dialogue in a pseudo-Victorian novel. Naturally, the experiment with modern dialogue was unsuccessful; and Fowles understood that dialogue in historical fiction ought to have a flavour of the past. Indeed, characters in historical fiction speaking in a modern tongue not only sound 'absurd', but may even 'throw [some readers] out of the period completely', according to Johnson (2005:8) in *Historical Fiction: a Guide to the Genre*.

Believable Victorian characters should sound Victorian. However, it is impossible for writers to know exactly how people spoke in the historical past. Of course, one may consult and acquaint himself or herself with books of a particular period before attempting to imitate the styles of characters' speech found therein. Fowles, for example, relied heavily on the Victorian magazine *Punch* for details about food, clothes and dialogue (Campbell, 1976:464). However, there is an obvious problem associated with this method of recreating past speech: the dialogue in older books does not necessarily reflect accurately how people conversed in real life, just as modern-novel dialogue does not resemble actual speech in an entirely faithful manner.

The dialogue found in books is almost always a compromised representation of authors' interpretation of speech. In fact, while doing research for *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, Fowles (1969:139) had the following realisation:

> [4] [T]he genuine dialogue of 1867 (in so far as it can be heard in books of the time) is far too close to our own to sound convincingly old. It very often fails to agree with our psychological picture of the Victorians – it is not stiff enough, not euphemistic enough, and so on [.]

What Fowles did, then, was to 'archaize [the dialogue] [and] to stretch the more formal elements to get it to sound right' (Campbell, 1976:464). This seems to partially concur with Johnson's (2005:8) observation that 'authors frequently use slightly more formal dialogue than one would speak in casual conversation today' in historical novels. Fowles (1969:139) described his attempt to archaise the dialogue and further exaggerate the identifiable formal elements in spoken speech as 'cheating'. I argue that this kind of 'cheating' suggests that Fowles has consciously forsaken authenticity or correspondence to historical fact to meet contemporary perceptions and expectations of speech of the historical period. This is false semblance of mimesis, as Fowles deliberately misrepresents the past to create what did not really exist.

4. Byatt's treatment of Victorian texts

Apart from dialogue, another type of mimesis in contemporary fiction set in the past is the inclusion of apparently historical documents to give an illusion of fidelity to the historical epoch. Perhaps it is easier to recreate written documents of a past world than dialogue, which is often mediated in written form and does not bear total resemblances to live speech. The Victorian story in Byatt's *Possession*, a novel described by its writer as 'the forged manuscript novel' (Byatt, 2000:48), is to a large extent told through texts that Byatt had fabricated herself. The heavy reliance on the long-lost letters of two Victorian poets combined with their meaning-loaded poetry to tell a hitherto unknown love affair suggests that the past may be retrieved through documents, given that the documents are accessible and someone is reading them carefully.

However, my concern here is not the ontological question of whether the past can be accurately reconstructed or known through the polyphonic and pluralistic texts it has left behind. Instead, in line with the discussion of this paper, which is the stylistic means contemporary writers have employed to make their pseudo-Victorian novels believable, I am interested in looking at how authentic Byatt's collage of Victorian

documents appears to be. According to Hulbert (1993:59), Byatt 'had set herself the challenge of imitating and interweaving as many Victorian genres as possible; short poems, long poems, personal letters, public letters, stories, journal entries […], and more'.

But how closely do Byatt's pseudo-Victorian texts resemble real ones? Before answering this question, perhaps it is relevant to first consider the general readers' reaction to some of the texts in the novel. Discussing the poetry in *Possession*, Mullan (2002) comments, 'Most readers will surely not be able to recognise the genres [Byatt] imitates, the verse forms she mimics, the habits of diction and imagery that she follows.' Mullan's comment focuses on Byatt's use of verse but can be extended to the Victorian documents such as letters and journal entries in the novel. If Mullan is right that the average reader cannot appreciate Byatt's labourious effort in recreating the 'mock-Victorian poetry' and many people admit not reading it (ibid), one wonders why Byatt has included the poetry and other nineteenth-century texts in the novel. Did she overestimate her readers' ability? Or did she simply fail to foresee this kind of reaction from her readers? No matter what the answer is, it shows that readers' recognition of the texts is not Byatt's major concern. Mullan offers some explanations to the inclusion of the Victorian poems in the novel and one of the explanations is that the poems 'serve as a kind of authentication device [and] [hint] at a larger imagined world' (Mullan, ibid). Indeed, Byatt seems to value authenticity highly. She once commented,

> [5] I do believe that if I read *enough*, and carefully enough, I shall have some sense of what words meant in the past, and how they related to other words in the past, and be able to use them in a modern text so that they do not lose their relations to other words in the interconnected web of their own vocabulary. […], it seems somehow important to be able to make coherent texts using words as they were used, together. (Byatt, 2000:94 emphasis original)

Here, Byatt seems to suggest that if one reads texts from the past carefully enough, one can understand meanings of words in them better, and in turn use these words 'as they were used' to 'make coherent texts' in 'a modern text'. If we interpret *Possession*, which is in effect 'a modern text', in light of Byatt's comment, then it is possible to see that Byatt might be using 'words as they were used' in Victorian times to fabricate 'coherent texts' such as poems, letters and diaries in the novel.

It is clear that there are two contrasting attitudes towards the representation of the past by Fowles and Byatt. Fowles's treatment of Victorian dialogue, as discussed in the previous section, shows that authenticity is not necessarily of primary importance to him. Byatt's meticulous treatment of Victorian documents, on the other hand, shows that it is authenticity which she strives for.

5. Fowles's and Byatt's treatment of the Victorian omniscient narrator

While dialogues and documents written in a style that is typical of the Victorian period help evoke the feeling, atmosphere and realism of the age, a narrative voice that purports to be Victorian also strengthens mimesis. The conventional narrator in Victorian fiction is the omniscient, godlike narrator who 'sometimes comment[s] on [his or her] storytelling, but at the same time believ[es] in it' (Neuhaus, 1990: 275). In both *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and *Possession*, the authors adopt an omniscient voice to narrate the pseudo-Victorian narrative; but their treatment of the third-person narrator is drastically different.

Even though in an interview Fowles admits that he 'never feel[s] quite at home as the omniscient narrator' (Campbell, 1976:463), *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is a third-person novel. The narrator is described by Onega (1996:43) as 'intrusive and parodically omniscient' and other critics suggest that the narrator 'echoes some of the most popular Victorian writers' (Salami, 1992:108). However, Fowles oftentimes undermines the expected convention of the narrator in the novel to 'show the real limitations of his avowedly omniscient narrator' (Onega, 1989:77). Cooper (1991:107) even goes as far as suggesting that the omniscient narrator in the novel is 'rejected' so as to revise 'Victorian novelistic conventions in the light of twentieth-century experience' (ibid.). When asked by an interviewer why he disowns authorial omniscience and intrudes in his own voice in novels such as *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, *Daniel Martin* and *A Maggot*, Fowles responds 'I would say on moral grounds: if you're writing in 1985, omniscience is just a pretense.' (Baker, 1986:668)

Byatt, on the other hand, seems to be more at ease with the third person narrator. In an essay, Byatt (2000:55-56) evaluates the use of the nineteenth-century narrator:

> [6] Fowles has said that the nineteenth-century narrator was assuming the omniscience of a god. I think rather the opposite is the case – this kind of fictive narrator can creep closer to the feelings and the inner life of characters —as well as providing a Greek chorus—than any first-person mimicry. In *Possession* I used this kind of narrator deliberately three times in the historical

narrative—always to tell what the historians and biographers of my fiction never discovered, always to heighten the reader's imagination entry into the world of the text'.

Here Byatt directly criticises Fowles's opinion of the nineteenth-century narrator while applauding the narrator's versatility and superiority over the first-person narrator. In Byatt's view, the nineteenth-century narrator is capable of 'creeping' close to the characters' inner life as well as performing the role of a commentator like a Greek chorus. In *Possession*, for example, the nineteenth-century narrator reveals unknown events which other characters are oblivious to and at the same time involves readers' participation in the Victorian world Byatt has constructed.

Comparing Fowles's and Byatt's treatment of the Victorian omniscient narrator—a prominent feature of the Victorian novel—it is evident that Fowles is not keen on presenting the impression of an authentic Victorian narrator; instead, he is not squeamish of breaking this illusion. Byatt's positive appraisal of the nineteenth-century narrator, on the other hand, shows her concrete belief in the accomplishment of the nineteenth-century narrator and the ability of this kind of narrator to evoke a sense of the historical past.

6. Fowles's and Byatt's treatment of Victorian language

The combination of Victorian dialogue, documents and a nineteenth-century narrator appearing in contemporary fiction helps create a credible impression of the historical period. Byatt (2000:46) believes that 'a text is all the words that are in it'. What words should be used in the dialogue, documents and narrative in a pseudo-Victorian text? Sir Walter Scott, when discussing the use of language in historical fiction, says that the writer should 'exclude all that can awaken modern associations' (quoted in Lascelles, 1980:136).

A close scrutiny of Scott's quote reveals that his suggestion is actually rather simple, that is, avoid using words that arouse a modern feeling. Both Fowles and Byatt take heed to this advice in their Victorian-centered novels. Fowles's concern, again, first and foremost lies on the reaction and response of his modern readers rather than achieving linguistic authenticity. He comments,

> [7] It's a great problem, when you are writing in the past, to get the language more or less right for modern readers. I deliberately cheated in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, for instance, by cutting out many of the syntactic

abbreviations, "n't" and so on, and using full negatives, longer sentences. What evidence we have of how Victorians spoke denies all this. (Baker, 1986:663-664 emphasis original)

This is not the first time Fowles labels the compostion of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* as a cheat. He admits that the language he puts in the novel is not real Victorian language: 'What evidence we have of how Victorians spoke denies all this'. The point to note here is that Fowles is aware of the existence of discrepancy between his writing and the genuine Victorian language. And he has intentionally represented the nineteenth-century language in a way that would meet the modern readers' expectations. His method is mechanical; generally he uses archaic and more formal words to construct longer sentences to create the effect.

Byatt's representation of Victorian words is more serious. She comments,

[8] [W]riting Victorian words in Victorian contexts, in a Victorian order, and in Victorian relations of one word to the next was the only way I could think of to show one could hear the Victorian dead' (Byatt, 2000:46-47)

It seems that Byatt believes in the possibility of using Victorian words just as they were used in the nineteenth-century, if one gets the correct combination.

7. Conclusion

In this brief paper, I have compared the different methods Fowles and Byatt use to reconstruct the impression and aura of the nineteenth-century in their novels, namely, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and *Possession*. I have looked at how these two writers approach the problem of setting their novels partially within the Victorian era by examining their interviews and their own nonfiction writing, as well as considering the opinions of well-regarded scholars. Even though we can compare the different methods adopted by Fowles and Byatt, we cannot judge which method is superior, since both novels are widely recognised as late twentieth-century *tour-de-forces*. The next step, of course, is to follow this somewhat 'outside' treatment of the two books with a more 'inside' look, by bringing the insights of careful linguistic investigation and textual analysis to further illustrate the skill and style of each writer in re-presenting the Victorian novel to modern readers. Finally, we must consider the reader-response theory to explain how readers perceive the authenticity of the books and whether authenticity is an issue that the general reader considers when reading the novels. Only then can we compl

ete our exploration of how these twentieth-century books represent the nineteenth century.

[END]

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