



# Neo-Victorianism and the Victorian Heritage: Authenticity, Post-Authenticity and Presentism

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## Neo-Victorianism and the Victorian Heritage: Authenticity, Post-Authenticity and Presentism

→‘The real stuff is running out [...] You gotta have *substitoots*.’  
Graham Swift (1992: 8)

Bill Unwin, the narrator quotes one of his stepfather’s catchphrase, or mantra. His stepfather is an American, plastic tycoon. The real stuff here could be taken as a synonym for authentic, ‘substitoots’ uttered with the American accent epitomises the inauthentic, the fake, the bogus, the phoney. Graham Swift’s *Ever After* counts amongst the first generation of neo-Victorian novels. In it, Bill Unwin strives to revive an ancestor from a relic that has been passed down to him, a genuine manuscript. From the grain and texture of the paper, from the ink and spots on the sheets, he fancies he can relate sensorially to the old dead man ‘when I open their pages, I open, I open the pages that he once touches. I occupy, as it were, his phantom skin’. (46)

Plastic, the artificial, an alien a substance >< consubstantiality, forming one and the same body, yet phantom → spectrality.

Neo-Victorian literature (or culture, but the scope would have been too wide for this talk) is particularly well-adapted for an investigation of Authenticity and Heritage. I will begin by crossing some of the analyses propounded by the sociologist Gilles Lipovetsky *Le sacre de l’authenticité* (not yet translated into English) with some defining features of neo Victorianism.

According to Lipovetsky, in his ‘Patrimonial Fever’ section (‘La vague patrimoniale’) the authentic is what is old and carries cultural landmarks and a collective identity. In this acceptance, the authentic is ‘of undisputed origin or authorship’ (Varga & Grignon, 2014). This is obviously the case with the Victorian past which is still celebrated in popular culture, think for example of Christmas Carol pantomimes, TV series such as *Dickensian*, *Penny Dreadful*. Victorian architecture is still very much present today, and Victorian is a hackneyed adjective used for almost everything, from fashion, to escape games, from economics (political economy) to moral values. Margaret Thatcher not that long revived a nostalgia for the Victorian work ethos (John Ruskin’s Gospel of work) and John Major’s 1993 ‘Back to Basics campaign’ returned to traditional Victorian family values flagging principles such as ‘neighbourliness, decency, courtesy’, before the campaign collapsed in the wake of a series of scandals.

Moreover, Lipovetsky insists on a continuum between past and present, what is authentic is what allows the past to persist in the present. As will be shown, this is the stance claimed by many neo-Victorian writers. As early as 1969, John Fowles who was speaking of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* wrote: 'I am trying to show an existentialist awareness before it was chronologically possible [...] it has always seemed to me that the Victorian Age, especially from 1850 on, was highly existentialist in many of its personal dilemmas.' ('Notes on an Unfinished Novel'). A line of continuity between past and present is clearly established, even if Fowles reversed the temporal axis by projecting the present onto the past (See Simon Joyce's *The Victorians in the Rear View Mirror*, 2007). Precisely this time inversion is paradigmatic of neo-Victorianism, but what qualifies as authenticity here is the fact of recreating a memory by embracing a tradition.

However, what resonates most with neo-Victorianism is when Lipovetsky speaks of 'Third Type Authenticity' (*Une authenticité du troisième type*). This is very close to the post authenticity in my title. Basically, this means that there has been a shift in the use of the concept of authenticity. Indeed authenticity is no longer so much attached to a fetishism of the original, the primary, the primal or, if we extrapolate a metaphor from the world of printing, the princeps, as it is continuously being (re)negotiated, updated, recycled, and as a result hybridised. Said differently, a stabilised authenticity, frozen at a given moment in the past, has been progressively superseded by an authenticity in process, which is performed. Lipovetsky gives a whole range of examples, which do not come from literature, but could nevertheless easily fit into neo-Victorian poetics. There is in particular the idea that authenticity can now be combined with spectacle by staging the past to give it visibility, to make it sexy even. Thus a certain degree of showmanship is indispensable to patrimonial authenticity. Edutainment, i.e. to instruct and to entertain at the same time, are complementary approaches to serve authenticity. And the thrill of 'exo-nostalgia', the exciting immersion in what is too remote in time to have been experienced first hand, is assimilated to an appropriation of the authentic. To cite Lipovetsky the irony pervading the present moment lies in the fact that the more preoccupied we are with authenticity, the more willing we are to theatricalise, and perhaps artificialise our heritage, the legacy of the past. To propose a transition with neo-Victorianism, one could say that at first neo-Victorianism was closely bound up with postmodernism. In other words, there was a self-conscious, self reflexive take on the Victorian culture and literature, in which the past was not just showcased and spectacularised. The methodology and processes whereby aspects of the past could be uncovered were appraised from the vantage point of the present. This hybridisation was not construed as an adulteration of the past, it was on the opposite vindicated as a new

way of uncovering authentic aspects of the Victorian past which had been so far occluded and obfuscated.

In a 2009 article on the neo-Victorian novel, Sarah Gamble rightfully observed that “the nineteenth century lives on in the twentieth century only as an artefact or relic, which can be viewed curiously, critically or nostalgically, but never ‘known’ in any authentic sense.” (Gamble 2009: 126) The ambivalence of the neo-Victorian is inscribed within its appellation: ‘Victorian’, understood as “a homogenized identity – even a signifier – in contemporary culture” (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 2) *and* ‘neo’, which presupposes some interpretive and heuristic leeway. On one hand, there is a tangible past period, firmly staked out by well identified historical data and characterised by memorable landmarks, on the other, with the prefix ‘neo’, a secondary, derivative restoration or revision, at one remove from the authentic Victorian original. The latter is bound to always persist as a tantalising absence, craving to be brought back into a constantly shifting present. The semantic oscillations between ‘neo’, ‘retro’, ‘faux’ or ‘post’ (Kirchnopf 2008: 59-66) in repeated efforts to circumscribe what is not the authentic, in the sense of originary and essential bedrock, is proof of the indecisive range of possible relationships existing between the genuine, historical source (whose age, content, provenance, authorship are duly established by scholars), and its imitation, copy, adaptation or appropriation.

In the Western philosophical tradition, authenticity is tightly bound up with the origin and synonymous with both truth and voice which, as Jacques Derrida argued, warrants pure self-presence. From his sociological standpoint, Lipovetsky speaks of ‘faithfulness to one’s self’, ‘to be oneself’, or to lead a life in keeping with one’s own truth: *‘La fidélité à soi “être soi-même”, mener une existence conforme à sa propre vérité’*. We could joke by recalling Oscar Wilde’s famous aphorism in ‘The Portrait of Mr H.’: ‘Be yourself. Everyone else is already taken.’ This posits the primacy of an embodied presence, of an ontological plenitude. Conversely, writing was viewed in Derridean philosophy, as a threat because of its endless displacement of meaning, “plac[ing] it **for ever beyond the reach of a stable, self-authenticating knowledge.**” (Norris 1996: 29)

Precisely, Neo-Victorianism plays up the tension between voice and writing which is at the root of “logocentric metaphysics” (Derrida 1977: 43), by putting forward concepts such as truth and reality, that are premised on presence, essence, identity, origin and *authenticity*. On the opposite, the post-authentic (which has much to do with Lipovetsky’s *authenticité du troisième type*, asserts the crucial role of absence, difference and spectrality (Remember the ‘phantom’ in the ‘phantom skin’ above). Unlike structuralism and poststructuralism, neo-Victorianism never quite gives up on voice as a token of presence. Yet instead of

the phonocentric fallacy of the voice sealing a single originary presence, neo-Victorianism proposes polyphonic ventriloquism, that is “speaking through and speaking for” (Davies 2012: 4), but never from a *single* origin. Writing, on the other hand, gives itself as trace or supplement, signifying both the lack of a ‘presence’ and the possibility of compensating for that lack through a whole range of (re-)creative practices. So, right from the beginning, the tension between authenticity and post-authenticity is at the core of neo-Victorianism and raises aesthetic, historical and philosophical questions which are seminal to encompass this movement.

## 1 ‘Post-Authentic Victorian Fiction’

Post-Authentic Victorian fiction dismisses the binary opposition between the ‘authentic’, as what is historically established and verifiable, existing beyond the confines of the book, and the ‘inauthentic’, standing for fake, counterfeit, spurious. In both *The Meaning of Night* (2006) and its sequel *The Glass of Time* (2009), Michael Cox introduces epigraphs authored by one J.J. Antrobus, professor of ‘Post-Authentic Victorian fiction’. More than a spoof (a hoax/a practical joke), this paratext underscores the novel’s autotelic dimension. Different interpretations have been adduced for the invented professor’s name (Banerjee n. p., Heilmann and Lewellyn 2010: 23) showing that it is both metafictional and referential. A compound of the Latin *anterus* for ‘other’ and the Italian *buso* for ‘hollow’ (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 23), the name is used as a *trompe-l’œil* display of fake erudition, but also turns out to be a passing nod at real people: a Canadian hillbilly rock group to recall Cox’s past as a musician (Banerjee 2013: n.p.) and also a reference to Wilkie Collins’s unhappy youth when he worked for Antrobus & Co tea markets (Pykett 2005: 6-7). Thus the forged moniker underscores the hybridity of the authentic/post-authentic, erasing any boundary line between the factual and the counterfactual. It also establishes a filiation between Wilkie Collins, whose novels evince a “surprisingly modern view of fiction as artifice or construct” (Lonoff 1982: 108) and Cox, whose ‘faux Victorian novels’, showcasing imitation as “authenticating strategy” (Mitchell 2010: 118) may also convey authentic heart-felt distress.

Indeed, *The Glass of Time*’s plot morphs mourning on two levels that coalesce. There is on the first level the ramifying multiplot with, at one point, the autodiegetic maidservant Alice Gorst who shadows her mistress to the mausoleum where her lover Phoebus Daunt reposes in a sarcophagus (Cox 2009: 177-183). The passage takes up the cemetery as palimpsestic “Victorian heterotopia” (Braid 2022:1), i.e. the other space or “counter-site” (Foucault 1986: 24), that is omnipresent in the Victorian novel, from Charles Dickens’s iconic opening scene

in *Great Expectations* to Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. The extract, which amplifies the melodramatic conventions of sensational fiction, proves heterochronic when the maidservant finds herself accidentally locked in the burial chamber. She "contemplates mortality" (Cox 2009: 180) and wonders "what it will be like to die – as it seems I must – minute by minute, hour by hour, day by day." (Cox 2009: 180) On another level, the maidservant's inner reflections, which are commonplace in a gothic tale, take on an eerie dimension, when read alongside the author's 'Acknowledgements', where he thanks "all the consultants, doctors, and medical staff who have kept [him] going over the past two years" (Cox 2009: 532). Cox was actually to die of cancer in 2009, a few months after completing his second and ultimate novel. Therefore the highly contrived and somewhat meretricious, or inauthentic scene of the cemetery, trotting out all the clichés of a canonised subgenre, surreptitiously inscribes a confessional moment of rare sincerity and authenticity – understood as "the truth of the human heart", which is Nathaniel Hawthorne's definition of romance (Hawthorne 2001: 5) – in a theatralised episode of dramatic intensity.

### **The Lures and Deception of Authenticity**

Neo-Victorianism is known for its use of montage, collage, embedding, mash-ups. A novel like Alasdair Gray's *Poor Things* (1992) by Alasdair Gray – both a writer and a painter – can be described as artifactual, and this is revelatory of a tendency to turn history and the past into art (artialised past). For those who have seen Yorgos Lanthimos's recent baroque adaptation with Emma Stone, the Victorian era is lavishly depicted through a contrasting mix of overornamented, stifling domestic interiors and glaringly artificial decor, a blend of steampunk retrofuturism and of realistic Victorian paraphernalia. The question could be to what extent does this over-the-top display of artificially contrived decor somehow restore an authentic flavour of the past?

Indeed overall, neo-Victorianism is driven by the need to get at a more comprehensive and genuine representation of the Victorian era. Said differently, it aims both at widening the scope of what is eligible for representation, on the assumption that whole dimensions of the past have been occluded as "unprettified truth" (Faber 2003: 229), and also at questioning the tenets of what has come to be known as Victorian Realism (Thorndike-Breeze 2015: 209-216). These two complementary approaches testify to an engagement with authenticity, through their desire to apprehend the totality of a fantasised pristine, unadulterated past, whilst remaining conscious that the mediation between the 'now' and 'then' necessarily entails some measure of distortion. This commitment to authenticity is also ethical and resonates with some of today's current debates: "however we explain it, it is clear that a rhetoric of 'difference,' of 'diversity' (even

‘multiculturalism’), is central to the contemporary culture of authenticity.” (Taylor 1992: 37) We may think of colour blind casting, with the African American Jerrod Carmichael as Harry Astley, the cynical, ‘Malthusian’ (132) Caucasian in Gray’s *Poor Things*, or the British Indian Dev Patel as David Copperfield in Armando Iannucci’s 2019 film, to say nothing of India Amarteifo, whose father was Ghanaian, in the role of Queen Charlotte in the *Bridgerton* netflix series. Here authenticity does not lie so much in fidelity to accurate data as in the acknowledgement of a historical plurality which has long been deliberately disregarded.

Therefore neo-Victorianism addresses diverse, singular aspects of the Victorian era, an epoch which Marie-Luise Kohlke describes as “Western culture’s mysterious, eroticised, and exotic other” (Kohlke 2008: 68). It also collapses the homogeneous ‘Victorian’ signifier by opening it to an array of “multivalent Victorianisms” (Bernstein 1999: 111).

Authenticity remains a riveting issue amongst neo-Victorian writers, perhaps because realism was in many respects the aesthetic mainstay of the dominant literary genre of the Victorian age: the novel. By devoting a mirror section to George Eliot’s paradigmatic chapter 17 of *Adam Bede*, Patricia Duncker in *Sophie and the Sibyl* scuppers Victorian/Eliotian realism by substituting her own definition of authenticity for her forebear’s. As is well known, Eliot intertwined the aesthetic and the moral in her plea for realism which, she alleged, could only be achieved by dint of a painstaking, humble endeavour to link up with the others, through sympathy, a concept she took up from the German philosophy of David F(riedrich) Strauss and Ludwig Feuerbach. Artistic authenticity was therefore for George Eliot the rejection of “vague forms, bred by imagination on the mists of feeling, in place of definite, substantial reality.” (Eliot 1856: 626) Duncker, for her part, in her near oedipal rebellion against a writer she both loves and hates, blames Eliot for what amounts to Sartrean *mauvaise foi*. The so-called ‘Sibyl’ is indeed a “master of pretence” (Duncker 2016: 30) who availed herself in her life of the very liberties she deprived her heroines of. If the “high moral purpose championed by the Sibyl in 1859, doesn’t cut much ice now” (Duncker 2016: 30), the contemporary novelist’s authentic attachment to her Victorian mentor can only be restored by reading against the grain, for example by revelling in the “jolly taste for melodrama” (Duncker 2016: 30) which Eliot constantly, albeit fortunately, too often vainly, attempted to discard from her writings.

The definitional limits, as well as the ethos of Victorian realism, are displaced by the fictional inscription of what defies language’s mimetic function, yet affords a sensorial and phenomenological take on the past: i.e. smells. Novels like Matthew Kneale’s *Sweet Thames* (1992), Clare Clark’s *The Great Stink* (2005) and Michel Faber’s *The Crimson Petal and The White* (2009) extend the

range of the representable, by flaunting “an active engagement with the least intellectualized and most stubbornly material of our senses” (Colella 2010: 87), to wit the olfactory. It would of course be naive to think that smells are absent in Victorian novels. Janice Carlisle’s *Common Scents: Comparative Encounters in High Victorian Fiction* (2004) is proof of the contrary. But Victorian realism tends to sublimate or classify odours as social markers and is naturally inclined to put harmless smells to the fore (Carlisle 2004: 14), hence perhaps the collocation “common *scents*”. Circumlocutions and the softening effect of gentle humour euphemistically desensitise the reader to the noisome stench of stables in this passage from Charles Dickens’s *Little Dorrit*: “To the sense of smell the house was like a sort of bottle filled with a strong distillation of mews; and when the footman opened the door, he seemed to take the stopper out” (Dickens 1985: 151). In *The Crimson Petal and the White*, authenticity is what stretches credibility as a result of efforts to render, through the abstract medium of language, the evanescent tangibility of the chaos of extreme odours. To a contemporary reader, used to our “muted olfactory environment” (Corbin 1986: 5) the Victorian “cacophony of bad odours” (Colella 2010: 91) is hardly palpable through sensory imagination, hence the need for jarring and elaborate synesthesia. Whereas the Victorians euphemise smells, to the neo-Victorians odours complexify the connection to the real, by short-circuiting cognition:

1. ‘the house smells of cancelled *soirées*, dismal garden parties.’ (155) Here there is no attempt to introduce the lexis of odours, scents. The olfactory/osmotic experience is immediately linked to the mental experience of remembering, maybe Proustian involuntary memory. This juxtaposition of two separate highly subjectivised responses – one sensorial, the other mnemonic – points to the failure of rendering something that is unique to one individual.
2. ‘Come with me now, away from the filthy city streets, away from rooms that stink of fear and deceit’ (177), there is here an abrupt departure from the metonymic association of contiguous elements (partakes of the realist aesthetic). What we get is an abrupt condensation, in which elements have been truncated, i.e. maybe streets in which the fear of being assaulted causes badly washed bodies to sweat, wafting nasty smells. So nothing is said to come to a definition of the specificity of the odour, what is underscored is the capacity of lingering smells to mentally trigger a whole range of situations.
3. About the perfumer’s effort to praise his perfumes: ‘Scent, like sounds, (he explains) stroke out olfactory nerve in exquisite and exact degrees. There’s an octave of odours like an octave in music’ (189) Arthur Rackham resorts



to the standard device of synesthesia, i.e. accounting for one sense perception by tentatively referring to the effects produced by another.

These quotations bear witness to the will to authenticate the subjective experience of smells, by acknowledging that language does not provide the lexical range that would render the whole gamut of subtle olfactory stimuli. So authenticity does not reside in the exactness of the terms to convey a unique experience but in the sincere, honest effort to account for a phenomenological situation, which can at best be suggested through a method of trial and error, a series of more or less proximate connotations (as denotations are excluded). This complexification of the notion of authenticity may have something to do with the distinction made by Denis Dutton, an art historian, between nominal authenticity and expressive authenticity: “‘Authentic’, like its near-relations, ‘real, genuine,’ and ‘true,’ is what the philosopher J. L. Austin called a ‘dimension word,’ a term whose meaning remains uncertain until we know what dimension of its referent is being talked about (Austin 1962:68-76)”. (Denis Dutton, ‘Authenticity in the Art of Traditional Societies’, *Pacific Arts*, July 1994, No. 9/10 (July 1994), pp. 1-9). So nominal authenticity, could be defined as the correct identification of an object; while expressive authenticity would consist in rendering the experience of the object, the object as apprehended relationally, as it were. In the case of smell, nominal authenticity is confronted to a linguistic void, the deficiency of language to translate fitfully the olfactory. But this linguistic deficiency can be perhaps compensated for by expressive authenticity, a phenomenological engagement with the subject assailed by odours. The latter is probably steeped in the present in her/his attempt to recreate the past.

Lastly, olfaction invites a parallel with spectrality because its evanescent, discarnate existence conjures up a lingering past, beyond recovery—an absent present.

### **The Historiographic Stakes of the Authenticity/Post Authenticity Debate**

The “will to authenticity”, which Jennifer Green-Lewis describes as “a desire for that which we have first altered and then fetishized, a desire, perhaps for a past in which we will find ourselves” (Green Lewis 2000: 43) is enacted, via youtube channels or instagram, where advice or instructions are delivered to popular audiences on how to make genuine Victorian garments (Bernadette Banner or Cheyney McKnight – the latter for Black Victorian clothing) or how to cook the true Victorian recipes (Aimee Twigger) etc.<sup>1</sup> The “material turn” (Freedgood 2006), so fruitful for Victorian studies, also contributes to anchoring the

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://www.messynessychic.com/2022/01/06/and-now-a-brief-compendium-of-neo-victorians/> (Consulted 27.06.2022)

tangibility, and genuineness of Victorian artefacts in contemporary commodity culture. A.S. Byatt's *Possession*, through its evocation of mourning lockets, and rings, encircled by jet, or studded with pearls, and brooches with hair cut off at the death-bed inside (Byatt 1991: 258) substantiates the idea of a tangible past, through the transmission into the present of jet—a palpable organic mineral emblematic of a vanished death culture. In fact, authenticity is relative, context-based, and mediated through the prism of subjectivity: “‘authenticity’ may not always be relevant to memorial dynamics, and certain things may be recalled because they are meaningful to those doing the recalling rather than because, from the historian’s perspective, they are actually true.” (Rigney 2004: 381) Jerome de Groot, for his part, speaks of “authentic fallacy” (De Groot 2010: 97) to account for the desire of the readers of historical novels to believe in the realness and authenticity of what they are reading. In the neo-Victorian novel, there has been a shift from the constructedness of “historiographic metafiction” (Hutcheon 1988: 105-123), where authenticity may be seen to reside in the critical attitude toward the past (Mitchell 2010: 27) to “metahistorical romance” (Elias 2005), where authenticity lies in the invention of plausible narratives to make up for the absence of actual, authentic historical archives. John Fowles’s *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* is illustrative of this first form of authenticity which postulates the need for multiple perspectives and the transfer from cognition to fiction. Sarah Waters’s neo-Victorian trio exemplifies the quest for a semblance of authenticity that would do justice to the memory of the silenced or invisible lesbian and queer minorities.

The fabrication of a ‘plausible’ version of the Victorian past and the stratagems that this illusionism implies call for yet another take on the issue of authenticity. Indeed, the staging of this alternative historical version, however grounded in factual research it may be, cannot fail to bring to mind Jean Baudrillard’s postmodernist concepts of simulation and hyperreality. To Baudrillard, inauthenticity means the loss of a direct relationship with the real and the illusion that simulacra stand in for the real, when in actual fact: “the simulacrum is never what hides the truth – it is truth that hides the fact that there is none. The simulacrum is true.” (Baudrillard 2001: 169. Qtd. from *Ecclesiastes*) So, in a hyperreal world, is the neo-Victorian yet another simulacrum, like the ever more popular historical theme parks? Slavoj Žižek contends that in the desert of the real, which is the correlate of hyperreality, “authenticity resides in the act of violent transgression [...] the Batailleian excess” (Žižek 2002: 6), in order to tear the veil of history. In the neo-Victorian novel this can take the form of the *kairos*, when the sudden intrusion of the “Here and Now” (Swift 1984: 44) defeats all previous forms of intelligibility: “sometimes the happening won’t stop and let itself be turned into memory.” (Swift, 1984: 284)

## Presentism in the Debate on Heritage and Authenticity

According to the French historian François Hartog, who introduced the notion of ‘regimes of historicity’, the period we are living in is characterised by presentism. This entails that the tyranny of the instant abolishes any sense of temporal perspective. Presentism perversely extends the present both forward into the future and backward into the past. It extends the present into the future, through, among other things, the notions of precaution and responsibility, the fear of catastrophism, technology risk or nuclear disaster, and extends the present into the past through the duty to remember, the culture of commemoration, and the multiplication of heritage sites. Neo-Victorianism is probably not above reproach where the encroachment of the present on the past is concerned. The question then would be whether it impairs the authenticity of its relationship with history and the past. As history-driven fiction-writing, the neo-Victorian novel has always shown a real engagement with the epistemological issues resulting from its creative approach. Thus authenticity stems from the awareness of its deliberate interference with more standardised representations of the past. If anything, neo-Victorianism overtly claims that the past is never apprehended from a vacuum, and that it operates along a large spectrum between at one end ‘an inadvertent error or analytical blind spot’ and at the other ‘a purposeful, consciously pursued, critical and creative practice’ (Kohlke 2018: 5).

Neo-Victorianism proposes to re-read the past through the prism of contemporary issues, which could be seen as a breach of authenticity. Yet, in doing so, it shines a light on aspects of the past which have sometimes not been delved into, or hardly, and does not close definitively these questions. On top of that, it shows up the complexities of issues which have long gone unrecorded. Amongst the contemporary domains which are currently being investigated by neo-Victorianism, we could list disability studies, animal studies, Black Victoriana, and perhaps though it is still nascent, ecology. As for queer and transgender it was there from day one. Concerning the latter on which this presentation will close, it could be said that there is an obvious epistemological connection between neo-Victorianism and queer theory in so far as both favour difference, be it through a decentred outlook on the past or through “resistance to regimes of the normal” (Warner 1993: xxvi). Self-reflexivity and critical self-interrogation are for these reasons common to both.

Since the publication of Sarah Waters’s queer lesbian novel trio (*Tipping the Velvet*, *Affinity*, *Fingersmith*) back in the late nineties and early aughts, the neo-Victorian treatment of LGBTQIA+ topics has branched out to cover a whole range

of texts, films and series, from emancipatory, progressive works, like Barbara Ewing's *The Petticoat Men* (2014) and Sally Wainwright's *Gentleman Jack* (2019- ), to examples of "reactionary exoticisations of sexual 'deviance'" (Koegler and Tronicke 2020: 11), such as K.J. Charles's *Sins of the Cities Series: An Unseen Attraction, An Unnatural Vice and An Unsuitable Heir* (All three in 2017) and Cat Sebastian's *It Takes Two to Tumble* (2017). The emphasis on Butlerian gender performativity and Foucauldian analysis of disciplinary power and biopower has progressively given way to more nuanced explorations of the experience of leading gay, lesbian, or queer lives in the Victorian era. Aging as a gay man, for example, is tackled in Rupert Everett's Oscar Wilde biopic, *The Happy Prince* (2018); achieving a life of subtle negotiations between heteronormativity and non-normalcy is the topic of Sally Wainwright's series *Gentleman Jack* and, in the novel *The Petticoat Men* (2014), Barbara Ewing exposes the capacity of personal ties to triumph over repressive historical norms so as to make life livable and viable for queer Victorians.

These humane, and humanist approaches tend to rest on barely contestable, universal values, which would pave the way for a consensual perspective of presentism at the tail end of a history of transgenerational stigmatisation and persecution of non-normativity. All these examples are probably more pertinent to illustrate what Charles Taylor in his 1991 monograph defined as 'the ethics of authenticity', than in propounding a historical method to adequately strive towards the elusive past of the silenced minorities. (something which probably comes close to being realised in Tom Crew's recent *The New Life*, 2023). Indeed Taylor emphasises the intersubjective dimension necessary for authenticity. He downplays the emphasis on individuality and the 'natural state' that has to be found within oneself which have often come into the definition of authenticity. This tradition going back to Jean Jacques Rousseau views society as detrimental to authenticity, understood as integrity (what is complete in and of itself). For Taylor, the Canadian philosopher, not only is authenticity not antagonistic with demands emanating from beyond the self, but it presupposes them. It is through social bonds and communities that a successful authentic life can be realised. So what these neo-Victorian works committed to the queer and transgender question endeavour to achieve is an authentic life, reaching beyond historical limitations/confines. In other words contemporary existential reflections on minorities can prove illuminating to deal with the past, and conversely archives when they exist enrich the present by contributing to a commonality of experience.

In summary, Neo-Victorianism is torn between the hankering for the genuine past and the awareness of the hyperreal present in which authenticity has become

somehow unattainable, or at least may no longer be taken for granted as a given. On the one hand, the neo-Victorian culture keeps a passion for the authentic, not only through the mania for genuine objects and the revival of customs and practices, but also by enlarging the spectrum of approaches to return to the nineteenth century, equipped with the teachings of contemporary human sciences. On the other hand, this is the age of post-authenticity, the era of suspicion, in which authenticity is not longer posited as an absolute but depends on subjectivity, ethical choices or artistic projects. Finally, the question of authenticity *versus*, or in tandem with, post-authenticity would probably call for an examination of the role played by religion and faith, omnipresent in Victorian culture but blatantly absent from secular Neo-Victorianism.

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