

**Neo-Victorianism and Empathy:
Time, Affect, and the Ethics of Reading**

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Abstract

This thesis argues that recent cultural-theoretical research on narrative temporality, empathy and affect can be usefully brought to bear upon one other in order to interrogate the ethics of reading neo-Victorian literature. I present neo-Victorian literature as a genre defined by its contemporary exploitation of, and experimentation with, ‘empathetic narrative’ (Sylvia Adamson, 2001) and, in contrast with the historical preoccupation of much neo-Victorian criticism, focus instead on what is distinctive about the ways in which readers of these texts are positioned. In so doing, I open the texts up to the work of a wide range of literary, cultural, philosophical and psychoanalytic theorists including Lauren Berlant, Amy Coplan, Mark Currie, Marshall W. Gregory, Suzanne Keen, Melanie Klein, Jean-Paul Sartre, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Silvan Tomkins. In contrast to the popular understanding of neo-Victorianism as a genre that seeks to explore the afterlife of the Victorians, my focus is on the wide-ranging ethical and political implications of its ‘empathetic narrative’, both with respect to the representation of intra-diegetic characters and the text-reader relationship. The authors I use to explore these ideas include Margaret Atwood, Julian Barnes, Graeme Macrae Burnet, Michael Cox, Jane Harris and Sarah Waters whose texts complicate and unsettle reader-pleasure by making empathy into an uncomfortable and ethically challenging experience. Despite these discomforts, the thesis combines empathy studies, ethical criticism, affect studies and the philosophical interrogation of temporality in order to provide a future-orientated, reparative and politically meaningful way of reading neo-Victorian literature. Each chapter brings in an approach to empathy from disciplines as various as psychology (Heinz Kohut), phenomenology (Edmund Husserl, Edith Stein and Dan Zahavi) and aesthetics (Robert Vischer, Harry Francis Mallgrave and Eleftherios Ikononou) in recognition

of its contested meaning and significance. By considering the concept of empathy in relation to the affective landscape of neo-Victorian texts, this thesis thus shifts the study of neo-Victorianism from a postmodern critique of historiographic metafiction to an ethical interrogation of the reader-text relationship. This is with the aim of breathing new life into the debates associated with the genre and demonstrating new ways of reading and valuing the texts.

Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own work, and has not been submitted in substantially the same form for the award of a higher degree elsewhere.

A shorter version of Chapter Two has been accepted for publication in the collection of essays *Consuming the Body in the 19th Century* (edited by Katherine Mansfield and Michael Goodman) under the title “Queer and Inconvenient Lusts”: Shame, Consumption and Reading in Sarah Waters’s *Tipping the Velvet*.

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Introduction

Neo-Victorianism and Empathy: Time, Affect, and the Ethics of Reading

A double temporality

In his 2007 book *The Victorians in the Rearview Mirror*, Simon Joyce uses the metaphor of the rearview mirror to illustrate the complicated temporality inherent in the twentieth century's – and in particular, the modernists' – engagement with the Victorian legacy in literature, politics, film, and visual culture.¹ Joyce takes his cue from Raymond Williams's discussion of how the genre of the literary pastoral constantly locates idealised pastoral perfection in the past.² Unlike the sense of backward referencing Williams identifies in *The Country and the City* (1973), Joyce suggests that, for modernists, the 'escalator' moves forward.³ Given the privileging of 'the here and now' in modernist representations of the Victorians, Joyce revises Williams's model and argues that the twentieth century's engagement with the Victorians pushes 'the decisive point of transformation forward instead of back in time'.⁴ As he elaborates:

The starting point for this study, then, is the observation that we never really encounter 'the Victorians' themselves but instead a mediated image like the one we get when we glance into our rearview mirrors while driving. The image usefully condenses the paradoxical sense of *looking forward to see what is behind us*, which is the opposite of what we do when we read history in order to figure out the future. It also suggests something of the inevitable distortion that accompanies any mirror image, whether we see it as resulting from the effects

¹ Simon Joyce, *The Victorians in the Rearview Mirror* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2007).

² Joyce, p. 4.

³ Joyce, p. 4.

⁴ Joyce, p. 4.

of political ideology, deliberate misreading, exaggeration, or the understandable simplification of a complex past.⁵

The image of the rearview mirror brings out some key concerns in Joyce's examination of the relationship between the Victorian period and the twentieth century, including the role of temporality in the representation of the Victorians, and the ethics and politics, as well as aesthetics, of this kind of adaptation and appropriation. For Joyce, the modernists' approach to the Victorians is governed by a double temporality, referring to the juxtaposition of anticipation and retrospection. As his metaphorical use of the rearview mirror illustrates, 'the here and now' we experience during the process of driving is characterised by activities of moving forward and looking backward, which arguably posits the past and the present as the objects of future recollection.⁶ By highlighting the role of anticipation in engaging the past, Joyce's model suggests that the way we approach the past is informed by the present we may find ourselves in and the future we expect to arrive at. In this regard, we are not passive readers of – or witnesses to – the past. Rather, we are active participants in the (re)construction of the past. To a certain extent, this model reverses the cause-and-effect sequence of an event, and this is an idea I take up from Mark Currie's discussion of Jacques Derrida's theorisation of 'archive fever'.⁷ As Currie argues in his engagement of Derrida, in a highly developed media capitalist society, 'an event is recorded not because it happens, but it happens because it is recorded'.⁸ This argument challenges the notion of 'the archive' (as in Derrida's context) as being 'a passive record' of the present.⁹ By

⁵ Joyce, p. 4. My emphasis.

⁶ Joyce, p. 4.

⁷ Mark Currie, *About Time: Narrative, Fiction and the Philosophy of Time* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007; repr. 2010), pp. 11-12.

⁸ *About Time*, p. 11.

⁹ *About Time*, p. 12.

positioning the archive as ‘an active producer of the present’, Currie demonstrates how the present is structured ‘in anticipation of its recollection’ in the process of archiving or narration.¹⁰ Currie’s identification of an envisaged or projected future in the archiving or narration of the present clearly resembles the forward impulse Joyce identifies in his work on the twentieth century’s engagement with their Victorian precursors.

Joyce’s focus on the writings of the twentieth-century adaptations and appropriations of the Victorians – ranging from the work of the Bloomsbury Group to recent films (e.g., a number of heritage films produced by Merchant Ivory in the 1980s and 1990s) – may be seen as contributing to the study of the ‘neo-Victorian’: a term originally coined by Dana Shiller to describe the burgeoning of ‘a subset of the historical novel’ in contemporary literature, one that is ‘characteristic of postmodernism and imbued with a historicity reminiscent of the nineteenth-century novel’.¹¹ However, unlike Joyce’s preoccupation with the writings of the modernists, Shiller’s conceptualisation of the neo-Victorian highlights certain postmodern traits such as the idea of history and fiction as ‘human constructs’ and the notion of history as something that is ‘predicated on interpretation’.¹² The marked difference between Joyce and Shiller brings out a key question about exactly when neo-Victorianism as a cultural phenomenon and/or literary genre came into existence (and it should be noted that Joyce did not use the term ‘neo-Victorianism’ itself in his work). As Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben note, critics try to situate the origins of neo-Victorianism in different historical periods.¹³ It could be ‘after the death of Queen

¹⁰ *About Time*, p. 12.

¹¹ Dana Shiller, ‘The Redemptive Past in the Neo-Victorian Novel’, *Studies in the Novel*, 29.4 (1997), 538-60 (p. 538).

¹² Shiller, pp. 540, 552.

¹³ Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben, ‘The (Mis)Shapes of Neo-Victorian Gothic: Continuities, Adaptations, Transformations’, in *Neo-Victorian Gothic: Horror, Violence and*

Victoria’, or ‘after the Second World War and the end of high Modernism’, or ‘in the 1960s’ when Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) and John Fowles’s *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* (1969) – two texts that are largely considered by critics as the defining texts of the neo-Victorian genre – are published.¹⁴ This introduction does not intend to pin down the origins of neo-Victorianism as either a literary genre or a cultural phenomenon. It is more interested in examining how the study of neo-Victorianism develops, evolves and shapes itself as a burgeoning field in literary criticism in the past decade.

Notably Joyce’s work helps to map out one of the key issues my research on neo-Victorianism explores; that is, the role of temporality – or more precisely, a *double temporality* – in the engagement with the Victorians, which, as I will be arguing, extends the discussion in the field of neo-Victorian studies from the dynamic between the past and the present to that between the past, the present and the future. As Joyce’s illustration of the role the rearview mirror plays in the act of driving suggests, this model of a double temporality is associated with the ‘driver’s’ – or in this case, the reader’s – (active) involvement in the construction of the (fictional) world. Taking my cue from Joyce, this project focuses on the text-reader relationship in neo-Victorian literature – and in particular, the role of empathy as part of that engagement – in examining the ways in which neo-Victorian narratives may be construed as both retrospective and future-orientated. This project thus presents neo-Victorian literature as a genre defined by its contemporary exploitation of, and experimentation with, ‘empathetic narrative’, a concept I have drawn from Suzanne Keen’s work on the relationship between novel reading and empathy and will return to in detail in the next

Degeneration in the Re-Imagined Nineteenth Century, ed. by Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2012), pp. 1-50 (p. 3).

¹⁴ Kohlke and Gutleben, ‘Neo-Victorian Gothic’, p. 3.

section.¹⁵ It also takes up J. Brooks Bouson's lead and presents the act of reading as 'an empathic event'.¹⁶ By comparing the role of the critic/reader to that of the psychoanalyst, Bouson suggests that 'the empathic reader' is 'a participant-observer', who, in the acts of reading and interpreting, is both subject to 'the disruptive and disturbing responses' the characters and texts engender and 'aware of the negotiated roles he or she is invited to play when responding to fictional texts'.¹⁷ With a focus on the affective engagement between the text and the reader, Bouson's 'psycho-critical' model of reading serves as a useful 'corrective' to the development of reader-response theory in the twentieth century, which, as Lynne Pearce points out in *Feminism and the Politics of Reading* (1997), is marked by a 'lack of interest in the affective aspects of the reading process'.¹⁸ As Pearce further explains, although theorists such as Wolfgang Iser, Stanley Fish, Jonathan Culler and Roland Barthes have shown 'considerably more interest in the role and significance of the reader', their discussions of the reader tend to privilege the cognitive aspects of reading and are largely conducted 'in the context of interpretation and meaning-production'.¹⁹

Whilst Bouson's formulation of an empathetic model of reading takes its cue from the American psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut's conceptualisation of empathy, this project's focus extends to a wide range of literary and cultural theorists, psychoanalytic critics and philosophers, such as Lauren Berlant, Amy Coplan, Mark Currie, Marshall W. Gregory, Edmund Husserl, Eleftherios Ikonomou, Suzanne Keen, Melanie Klein, Heinz Kohut, Harry Francis Mallgrave, Jean-Paul Sartre, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick,

¹⁵ Suzanne Keen, *Empathy and the Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

¹⁶ Both 'empathetic' and 'empathic' are used as the adjective form of 'empathy'. In this thesis, I use 'empathetic' since it is derived from the more familiar pairing of 'sympathy' and 'sympathetic'. J. Brooks Bouson, *The Empathic Reader: A Study of the Narcissistic Character and the Drama of the Self* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1989).

¹⁷ Bouson, p. 27.

¹⁸ Bouson, p. 27. Lynne Pearce, *Feminism and the Politics of Reading* (London and New York: Arnold, 1997), p. 4.

¹⁹ *Feminism and the Politics of Reading*, p. 5.

Edith Stein, Silvan Tomkins, Robert Vischer and Dan Zahavi. By bringing the recent cultural-theoretical research on empathy and affect together, this project examines the ways in which the act of reading involves a dynamic interplay between the affective and the cognitive in neo-Victorian literature. In so doing, it attempts both to complicate the discussion of reader pleasure in the field of neo-Victorian studies and contribute to the study of empathy. The overarching focus concerns how the exploration and representation of the complexity of fictional characters and landscapes featured in a selection of neo-Victorian texts relate to, and often reproduce, the *unsettling* empathetic engagement between the text and the reader.

This introduction, meanwhile, serves as a theoretical foundation for the whole project. It takes three approaches to the concept of temporality from Currie, Sedgwick and Gregory from the perspective of narrative consciousness, literary and ethical criticism respectively, all of which have some relevance for a future-orientated theory of narrative. In doing so, it challenges the predominant understanding of neo-Victorian fiction as a retrospective or nostalgic genre. In what follows, I begin with a review of the development of neo-Victorian studies in recent decades with a particular focus on the issue of temporality. Then I move to a discussion of the work of Currie, Sedgwick and Gregory in demonstrating the sense of anticipation at the core of narrative consciousness in neo-Victorian fiction and its role in ethical criticism. Through a review of the study of empathy in the fields of philosophy, psychology and literary criticism, I link the issue of temporality with the idea of ethics in neo-Victorian literature. I conclude the introduction with a detailed chapter overview.

A dialogic genre

In general, neo-Victorian fiction can be construed as a kind of ‘dialogic’ genre.²⁰ The idea of ‘dialogicality’ in this context manifests itself in the interactive and responsive relationship between the Victorian past and the contemporary period in neo-Victorian fiction. To be specific, it is about how the contemporary speaks back to – and for – the Victorian in neo-Victorian literature, and also how the Victorian ‘speaks for’ itself through the neo-Victorian. As the following review of a number of recent studies suggests, the exploration of the dialogic nature of the neo-Victorian genre demonstrates how our understanding of the past is shaped by the contemporary perspective, and how the contemporary is projected and negotiated in the re-imagined past. Tatiana Kontou’s *Spiritualism and Women’s Writing: From the Fin de Siècle to the Neo-Victorian* (2009), for example, presents the authors of neo-Victorian fictions as ‘spiritualist mediums’ who ‘ventriloquize the dead’.²¹ Through an interrogation of the gendered history of spiritualism, Kontou examines the gendered subjectivity of history and the political and ethical issues involved in our access to the past. Helen Davies’s *Gender and Ventriloquism in Victorian and Neo-Victorian Fiction* (2012) also adopts the metaphor of ventriloquism in her discussion of the engagement between the Victorian and the contemporary periods.²² By examining the power dynamic between the ‘dummy’ and the ‘ventriloquist’, Davies raises some ethical concerns about the contemporary authors’ appropriation of the past, and in particular, the ways in which they position the Victorian precursors as ‘dummies’ that are ‘manipulated and voiced

²⁰ I take up this idea from Lynne Pearce’s *Reading Dialogics*, in which Pearce examines Bakhtin’s concept of dialogism and links it to her exploration of new models of female subjectivity. Although my research does not engage with the concept of dialogism directly, the term ‘dialogic’ is useful for our understanding of the dynamic that exists between the past, the present and the future in neo-Victorian literature. Lynne Pearce, *Reading Dialogics* (London and New York: Edward Arnold, 1994).

²¹ Tatiana Kontou, *Spiritualism and Women’s Writing: From the Fin de Siècle to the Neo-Victorian* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 1, 2. Original emphasis.

²² Helen Davies, *Gender and Ventriloquism in Victorian and Neo-Victorian Fiction: Passionate Puppets* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

to suit contemporary concerns'.²³ These ethical issues are interrogated by Davies in further detail in relation to the representation of the 'freaky' or disabled bodies in neo-Victorian literature and culture in *Neo-Victorian Freakery: The Cultural Afterlife of the Victorian Freak Show* (2015).²⁴ Through an examination of how neo-Victorian literature engages with the nineteenth-century freak show performers, Davies takes up the lead of Kohlke and Gutleben in her recognition that 'neo-Victorian representations – traumatic or otherwise – are not always motivated by the "best of intentions"'.²⁵ As Davies observes, 'fictional reimaginings of the nineteenth century can also be sensationalist, cynical, trivialising, coarse'.²⁶ However, despite the aforementioned ethical concerns, Davies also acknowledges the significance of neo-Victorian literature and culture in opening up 'possibilities for understanding and empathy'.²⁷ As we will see in the following chapters, this thesis shares Davies's concern about the ethical agenda of neo-Victorianism in its examination of the different kinds of reading pleasures afforded by neo-Victorian literature. It also brings together different models of empathy from disciplines as various as psychology, phenomenology and aesthetics to interrogate the various kinds of text-reader relationship in neo-Victorian fiction.

As Kontou remarks, this kind of dialogic relationship between the Victorians and us is a 'spectral' one.²⁸ Indeed, some other critics of neo-Victorian fiction, including Patricia Pulham and Rosario Arias in their co-edited collection *Haunting and Spectrality in Neo-Victorian Fiction: Possessing the Past* (2010) as well as Mark Llewellyn in his 2008 essay, 'What Is Neo-Victorian Studies?', have used tropes such as 'haunting' and 'spectrality' in their consideration of how the unsettling or

²³ *Ventriloquism*, p. 11.

²⁴ Helen Davies, *Neo-Victorian Freakery: The Cultural Afterlife of the Victorian Freak Show* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

²⁵ *Freakery*, p. 8.

²⁶ Kohlke and Gutleben cited in Davies, *Freakery*, p. 8.

²⁷ *Freakery*, p. 15.

²⁸ Kontou, p. 2.

unresolved Victorian issues about gender, sexuality, race and empire are (re)negotiated in neo-Victorian fiction.²⁹ These tropes also highlight the link between the thematic content of the neo-Victorian novels (which often feature ghosts, mediums and other characters that mediate between past and present) and their metacritical political projects.

Other critical texts which deal, specifically, with this thematic preoccupation of the way in which past and present shadow one another include Kate Mitchell's *History and Cultural Memory in Neo-Victorian Fiction: Victorian Afterimages* (2010), which explores a range of narrative strategies that are used by novelists in putting the Victorian and the contemporary periods into dialogue (either explicitly or implicitly).³⁰ As Mitchell observes, novelists such as A. S. Byatt and Graham Swift use the structure of 'dual storylines' in their work *Possession: A Romance* (1990) and *Ever After* (1992) respectively; and these two novels engage critically with the 'straddling of two historical moments'.³¹ Others may be seen as 'ventriloquis[ing]' a variety of historical figures including authors and their fictional characters, such as Peter Ackroyd's *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* (1981), Colm Tóibín's *The Master* (2004), which depicts the life of Henry James, and Peter Carey's *Jack Maggs* (1997), which is an exploration of the character Magwitch from Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations* (1860-1), to name but a few.³² According to Mitchell's observation, there are also a group of writers who choose to adopt the form of 'a prequel, sequel or paralellquel' in exploring 'tangential, marginal or background events and/or characters' in the Victorian literary canon, such as Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*, which writes back

²⁹ *Haunting and Spectrality in Neo-Victorian Fiction: Possessing the Past*, ed. by Rosario Arias and Patricia Pulham (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010). Mark Llewellyn, 'What Is Neo-Victorian Studies?', *Neo-Victorian Studies*, 1.1 (2008), 164-85.

³⁰ Kate Mitchell, *History and Cultural Memory in Neo-Victorian Fiction: Victorian Afterimages* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 1-2.

³¹ Mitchell, p. 1.

³² Mitchell, p. 2.

subversively to Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) through the perspective of the shadowy figure of Bertha Mason – the violently mad first wife of Edward Rochester.³³ Mitchell further points out that some novelists create a Victorian period that is 'overtly informed by their twentieth-century knowledge', including Gail Jones in *Sixty Lights* (2004) and Sarah Waters in her debut novel, *Tipping the Velvet* (1998).³⁴

Critics have made various attempts to examine the poetics, aesthetics and politics of the dialogic engagement between the Victorian and the contemporary periods. Taking her cue from Dana Shiller, Louisa Hadley positions neo-Victorian fiction in relation to the genre of historical fiction in *Neo-Victorian Fiction and Historical Narrative: The Victorians and Us* (2010).³⁵ With a focus on different forms of historical narratives (i.e., biography and detective fiction), Hadley examines the ways in which the Victorian past is narrated in neo-Victorian fiction in demonstrating 'the complex combination of [the Victorians'] historical proximity to and distance from the contemporary era'.³⁶ Similarly, Mitchell's *History and Cultural Memory in Neo-Victorian Fiction* positions neo-Victorian fiction as a sort of 'historical recollection'.³⁷ Through a close examination of the 'modes, motivations and effects of [the neo-Victorian] engagement with the past', Mitchell highlights the genre's 'commit[ment] to the possibility and the value of striving for [historical] knowledge'.³⁸ Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn's *Neo-Victorianism: The Victorians in the Twenty-First Century, 1999-2009* (2009), by contrast, distinguishes the neo-Victorian genre from historical fiction set in the nineteenth century and links it specifically to Linda Hutcheon's notion

³³ Mitchell, p. 2.

³⁴ Mitchell, p. 2.

³⁵ Louisa Hadley, *Neo-Victorian Fiction and Historical Narrative: The Victorians and Us* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

³⁶ Hadley, p. 14.

³⁷ Mitchell, p. 3.

³⁸ Mitchell, pp. 4, 3.

of ‘historiographic metafiction’.³⁹ Their analysis and evaluation of the genre is thus preoccupied with the aesthetics and politics of postmodernism, as demonstrated by their definition of the field. For Heilmann and Llewellyn, the term neo-Victorianism is used to refer to texts – be they literary, filmic, audio/visual – which are in some respect ‘*self-consciously engaged with the act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision concerning the Victorians*’.⁴⁰ Through a detailed exploration of the self-conscious impulse in the neo-Victorian adaptation and appropriation of the Victorian, Heilmann and Llewellyn map out a dialogic and interactive relationship between the Victorian past and the millennium turn. For them, neo-Victorian literature and culture demonstrate both ‘the function of the past in contemporary culture and literature’ and ‘the various ways in which the present is negotiated through a range of (re)interpretations of the nineteenth century’.⁴¹ Building on Heilmann and Llewellyn’s work but taking a more precise focus, Kim Brindle furthers the discussion of the postmodern self-consciousness and self-reflexiveness in neo-Victorian literature in *Epistolary Encounters in Neo-Victorian Fiction: Diaries and Letters* (2014).⁴² With a specific focus on epistolary devices (e.g., diaries and letters), Brindle examines the ways in which the Victorian past is positioned as the ‘locus of an intertextual, dialogic, historicised self-understanding’ for the contemporary.⁴³ By taking the role of epistolary forms in the text-reader dynamic into consideration, Brindle also extends the discussion of the particular kind of dialogic relationship afforded by neo-Victorian literature from

³⁹ Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn, *Neo-Victorianism: The Victorians in the Twenty-First Century, 1999-2009* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 4.

⁴⁰ Heilmann and Llewellyn, p. 4. Original emphasis.

⁴¹ Heilmann and Llewellyn, p. 3.

⁴² Kym Brindle, *Epistolary Encounters in Neo-Victorian Fiction: Diaries and Letters* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

⁴³ George Letissier cited in Brindle, *Epistolary Encounters*, p. 13.

that between the Victorian era and the contemporary period to that between the writers of neo-Victorian texts and their readers.⁴⁴

All these critical explorations of the dialogic relationship between the Victorian and the contemporary periods aim to answer the following two questions that are promoted by the burgeoning of neo-Victorianism in the past few decades: ‘Why the Victorian(s)?’ and ‘Why now?’. Critics such as Heilmann and Llewellyn, who identify themselves as Victorianists, try to explain the contemporary interest in the Victorian past by highlighting the influences of the Victorian past in the here and now. Their attempt is to ‘read the nature of the Victorian now, and to examine what that enduring influence and afterlife means for contemporary culture, post-millennium’.⁴⁵ By foregrounding the role of the Victorians in the construction of the postmodern present, Heilmann and Llewellyn’s approach celebrates the Victorian legacy in contemporary literature, culture and politics, whilst also helping to construct a sense of historical continuity between the Victorian era and the contemporary period. Some earlier critics, including John Kucich and Dianne F. Sadoff, have also underlined the role of the nineteenth century in the theorisation of postmodernism.⁴⁶ In their introduction to their co-edited collection of essays *Victorian Afterlife: Postmodern Culture Rewrites the Nineteenth Century* (2000), Kucich and Sadoff remark that the Victorian period is characterised by ‘major critical texts that claim to have found in the nineteenth century the origins of contemporary consumerism (Baudrillard), sexual science (Foucault), gay culture (Sedgwick et al), and gender identity (Gilbert and Gubar, Showalter, Armstrong)’.⁴⁷ In this context, the nineteenth century, according to Elizabeth Ho,

⁴⁴ Brindle, pp. 5-14.

⁴⁵ Heilmann and Llewellyn, p. 3.

⁴⁶ John Kucich and Dianne F. Sadoff, ‘Introduction: Histories of the Present’, in *Victorian Afterlife: Postmodern Culture Rewrites the Nineteenth Century*, ed. by John Kucich and Dianne F. Sadoff (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), pp. ix-xxx.

⁴⁷ Kucich and Sadoff, pp. xiii-xiv.

serves as ‘a narcissistic mirror’ for the postmodern present to ‘reflect its own origins’, or a fertile soil for postmodernism’s identificatory needs.⁴⁸ In some aspects, Heilmann and Llewellyn share Kucich and Sadoff’s concern about the identity politics and ‘crisis’ of postmodernism. For example, they position the issue of adaptation as the generic characteristic of neo-Victorian text and foreground the Victorian as ‘the *Urtext*’ for the contemporary to engage with.⁴⁹ Also, their readings of selected neo-Victorian texts in *Neo-Victorianism* are informed by the work of theorists such as Baudrillard (Chapter 6) and Foucault (Chapter 1), and tropes which are linked with identity issues, such as ‘ancestral houses’ in Chapter 1, ‘glass’ in Chapter 4 and ‘mirrors’ in Chapter 5.

Admittedly, Heilmann and Llewellyn’s approach to the study of neo-Victorian literature and culture demonstrates the ways in which neo-Victorian texts invoke particular versions of the Victorian(s) and its related aesthetic and ethical implications. With a focus on the dynamic between the past and the present, their work illustrates how the contemporary attaches significance to the past and the present in the mode of continuous retrospection. Its preoccupation with the retrospective mode of narrative is, nevertheless, limited since narrative can hardly be retrospective without also being anticipatory, a point I take up from Mark Currie.⁵⁰ As I will explain in the next section, Currie’s work on narrative temporality makes it clear that narrative is both retrospective and future-oriented. In this context, it is important to examine how the present is structured by both retrospection and anticipation.

Another feature of Heilmann and Llewellyn’s stance on neo-Victorian fiction is their premise on the ‘knowing reader’, who is able to acknowledge the points of

⁴⁸ Elizabeth Ho, *Neo-Victorianism and the Memory of Empire* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2012; repr., 2013), p. 7.

⁴⁹ Heilmann and Llewellyn, p. 65. Original emphasis.

⁵⁰ *About Time*, p. 5.

Victorian references in neo-Victorian texts.⁵¹ The political implications of this line of argument are something that Marie-Luise Kohlke has taken issue with and challenged by showing why extensive historical knowledge and other kinds of ‘cultural capital’ are *not* necessary for the enjoyment of these texts. As Kohlke maintains:

The success of neo-Victorian revisitations with variation [...] is not necessarily dependent on any clear-cut recognition of *what* exactly is being replicated or *how* it is being varied. It stems as readily from the manipulation of readers’ generalised, frequently stereotyped, and ritually comforting preconceptions of the ‘Victorian’ and the ‘Victorians’.⁵²

By suggesting that the pleasure of reading neo-Victorian fiction is not limited to a self-confirming critical knowingness or omniscience, Kohlke also proposes a different approach to the study of neo-Victorian literature: one that focuses on the needs, desires and anxieties of the present featured in neo-Victorian literature rather than the ‘living’ presence of the Victorian past in contemporary discourse. Unlike Heilmann and Llewellyn’s historical approach, Kohlke is more concerned with how the contemporary addresses itself by responding to the ‘other’ which takes the form of the ‘generalised’ and ‘frequently stereotyped’ Victorian(s). As Kohlke suggests, ‘[n]eo-Victorian literature may be better understood in terms of a liminal “zone”’, a concept she takes up from Jay Clayton in presenting the nineteenth-century’s afterlife as what Clayton

⁵¹ In their joint-work *Neo-Victorianism*, Heilmann and Llewellyn acknowledge that the distinction they made between ‘the “ordinary” reader’ and ‘the more “knowledgeable” critical reader’ is controversial. Heilmann and Llewellyn, pp. 17-18.

⁵² Marie-Luise Kohlke, ‘Mining the Neo-Victorian Vein: Prospecting for Gold, Buried Treasure and Uncertain Metal’, in *Neo-Victorian Literature and Culture: Immersions and Revisitations*, ed. by Nadine Boehm-Schnitker and Susanne Gruss (New York and London: Routledge, 2014), pp. 21-37 (p. 25). Original emphasis.

calls a ‘contingent field of relevance’.⁵³ In this context, Kohlke argues that neo-Victorian literature ‘intersect[s]’ but is also ‘discrepant with historical fiction as a whole’.⁵⁴ Following Kohlke, this thesis approaches the concept of neo-Victorianism from the broadest perspective and considers any ‘text’ – be it literary, filmic, or cultural – that engages with the nineteenth century as a kind of neo-Victorian practice.

Even more important for the thesis I am pursuing here is the fact that Kohlke also highlights the role of the neo-Victorian representation of the Victorian(s) in the construction of the future. Through the trope of trauma, Kohlke presents neo-Victorian fiction as a transformative space in which the contemporary imaginatively confronts and works through past traumas, therefore linking the imperative to rewrite the past in neo-Victorian texts with the impulse to reconfigure the future.⁵⁵ Indeed, there are a good number of physically disabled, traumatised and psychologically disturbed characters in neo-Victorian fiction, as can be seen in novels such as Margaret Atwood’s *Alias Grace* (1996), Sarah Waters’s *Affinity* (1999) and *Fingersmith* (2002), Darin Strauss’s *Chang and Eng* (2001), Michael Cox’s *The Meaning of Night* (2006) and Julian Barnes’s *Arthur & George* (2005). According to Kohlke, these past traumas are evoked and worked through in neo-Victorian fiction in the interests of the present and the future. As Kohlke and Christian Gutleben suggest in their introduction to the edited collection of essays *Neo-Victorian Tropes of Trauma: The Politics of Bearing After-Witness to Nineteenth-Century Suffering* (2010), neo-Victorian literature may be construed as ‘a belated abreaction or “working through” of nineteenth-century traumas, as well as those of our own times, albeit more obliquely’.⁵⁶ By challenging the

⁵³ ‘Mining the Neo-Victorian Vein’, p. 29.

⁵⁴ ‘Mining the Neo-Victorian Vein’, p. 29.

⁵⁵ ‘Mining the Neo-Victorian Vein’, p. 26.

⁵⁶ Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben, ‘Introduction: Bearing After-Witness to the Nineteenth Century’, in *Neo-Victorian Tropes of Trauma: The Politics of Bearing After-Witness to Nineteenth*

dramatic opposition between the (post)modern self and the Victorian other, Kohlke and Gutleben argue that in neo-Victorian fiction the ‘traumatised subject of modernity pre/rediscovers *itself* in its manifold nineteenth-century others’.⁵⁷ In this regard, Kohlke and Gutleben present historical traumas as ‘interactive foils or mirrors of present-day traumas’, and highlight the importance of reconfiguring past traumas in projecting and figuring the future.⁵⁸ As they observe, the imaginative acts of retelling past traumas are essential in ‘transmitting the meaning of past events to the next generation’.⁵⁹ By approaching the issue of telling and retelling in neo-Victorian literature from the perspective of trauma rather than adaptation (as in Heilmann and Llewellyn’s work), Kohlke and Gutleben extend the discussion of the dialogic relationship between the past and the present in neo-Victorian studies to that between the past, the present and the future.

Elizabeth Ho’s 2012 book, *Neo-Victorianism and the Memory of Empire*, treads similar ground in her post-colonial approach to neo-Victorian literature and culture. Through an engagement with Ian Baucom’s Freudian discussion of Britain’s post-imperialism and Paul Gilroy’s conceptualisation of ‘postcolonial melancholia’, Ho examines the ways in which neo-Victorianism is construed by critics as part of ‘a “pathology” of memory’ in the context of post-imperial Britain.⁶⁰ Ho also challenges this Anglo-centric understanding of neo-Victorianism by moving to an exploration of what she calls ‘a sea change in postmillennial neo-Victorian fiction’, a term she uses quite literally to conceptualise novels which are based on sea voyages such as Matthew

Century Trauma, ed. by Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2010), pp. 1-34 (p. 3).

⁵⁷ ‘Bearing After-Witness’, pp. 13-14. Original emphasis.

⁵⁸ ‘Bearing After-Witness’, p. 13.

⁵⁹ Paul Ricoeur cited in Kohlke and Gutleben, ‘Bearing After-Witness’, p. 21.

⁶⁰ *The Memory of Empire*, pp. 14-15, 26.

Kneale's *English Passengers* (2000) and Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* (2008).⁶¹ In doing so, Ho identifies a shift in neo-Victorian fiction which 'free[s] the genre from the referent of Britain' and positions the neo-Victorian project as one that is concerned with 'a global politics'.⁶² In the context of Ho's discussion, neo-Victorianism – as a wider movement involving literature, film, arts and culture in general – is defined as 'a deliberate misreading, reconstruction or staged return of the nineteenth century in and for the present across genres and media'.⁶³ Like Kohlke, Ho considers the neo-Victorian text as a critical and transformative space in which 'the Victorian is consistently misread, misremembered, stereotyped and forcefully adapted to give expression to desires for identification, consolation, compensation and reparation in the present', therefore linking the neo-Victorian project with 'ideas of reparation, political and economic compensation, the righting of injustice, demand for witness and apology'.⁶⁴ Meanwhile, by examining what kinds of – and in which ways – contemporary desires, anxieties, uncertainties and traumas are explored and negotiated in the neo-Victorian fantasy of the Victorian, Ho also commits her study of neo-Victorianism to an exploration of how neo-Victorian literature and culture participate in navigating the '*political future* in which we, as readers and citizens, do have a voice and a role to play'.⁶⁵ This approach brings the role of readers into consideration and gives prominence to their responsibilities for the construction of a different future, a point that will be further explored in relation to Eve Sedgwick's conceptualisation of 'reparative reading' in the next section.⁶⁶

⁶¹ *The Memory of Empire*, p. 25.

⁶² *The Memory of Empire*, p. 26.

⁶³ *The Memory of Empire*, p. 5.

⁶⁴ *The Memory of Empire*, pp. 26, 17.

⁶⁵ Cora Kaplan cited in Ho, *The Memory of Empire*, p. 8. My emphasis.

⁶⁶ Sedgwick developed her ideas of paranoid and reparative reading practices in a series of essays she published between 1996 and 2003. These two terms firstly appeared in a four-page introduction to the 1996 special issue of the journal *Studies in the Novel* under the title 'Queerer than Fiction'. In 1997, Sedgwick extended her discussion into a thirty-seven page long essay and titled it as 'Paranoid Reading

In this project, I follow Kohlke and Ho in presenting neo-Victorian fiction as a genre that ‘stages’ the ‘problem of telling and retelling’ through its ‘self-reflexive textuality’ *vis-à-vis* the wider ethical and political issues that Currie, Sedgwick and Gregory have associated with narrative temporality.⁶⁷ With a focus on the modes and effects of storytelling and reading, I examine the ways in which neo-Victorian fiction involves the reader in the (construction of the) textual world affectively. I also explore the way the text ‘disrupts’ the reader’s affective attachment and investment through an interrogation of the portrayal of the often painful and unsettling – as opposed to celebratory and comforting – version of the past. In light of Lauren Berlant’s work on the politics of affect, I propose that this kind of disruption challenges the reader’s ‘habituated processing of affective responses to’ what they encounter in both textual and material worlds and prompts them to see the present in a ‘*historical*’ manner.⁶⁸ By considering the concept of empathy in relation to the affective landscape of neo-Victorian texts, this thesis therefore shifts the study of neo-Victorian literature from a postmodern critique of Linda Hutcheon’s formulation of historiographic metafiction to an ethical interrogation of the reader-text relationship. This breathes new life into the debates surrounding the texts, and in doing so illustrates how these texts enfold the past within the present, constraining or enabling action for the future.

Narrative temporality

This section begins with an introduction to Mark Currie’s narratological and philosophical discussion of time in narrative fiction in his 2007 book *About Time:*

and Reparative Reading; or, You’re So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Introduction is About You’, and published it as an introduction to the collection of essays *Novel Gazing: Queer Readings in Fiction* (1997). Later, this essay has been slightly revised and published in her 2003 book *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*.

⁶⁷ *The Memory of Empire*, p. 19.

⁶⁸ Lauren Berlant, ‘Thinking about Feeling Historical’, *Emotion, Space and Society*, 1.1 (2008), 4-9 (p. 5). Original emphasis.

Narrative, Fiction and the Philosophy of Time. As I will be arguing, Currie's identification of the sense of anticipation at the core of narrative consciousness helps to explain that although my research is on the issue of temporality in neo-Victorian literature and culture, I do not necessarily need to look at novels which thematise the issue of time explicitly, such as steampunk, a subgenre of science fiction.⁶⁹ I then demonstrate the ways in which Currie's narratological discussion of time informs this project's examination of neo-Victorianism and the ethics of reading.

By taking the temporality of writing and storytelling into consideration, Currie points out that narrative is structured around a kind of 'double time', referring to the temporal structure of both retrospection and anticipation.⁷⁰ Through his engagement with the concept of time prompted by Derrida's theorisation of 'archive fever' (see below), Currie challenges the dominant understanding of narrative as being 'retrospective', an idea derived from the observation that writers or tellers normally 'loo[k] back on events and relat[e] them in the past tense' (p. 29). Derrida's own observations on the Janus-faced nature of any archiving project are worth quoting here:

[T]he archive, as printing, writing, prosthesis, or hypomnesic technique in general is not only the place for stocking and for conserving an archivable content of *the past* which would exist in any case, such as, without the archive, one still believes it was or will have been. No, the technical structure of the *archiving* archive also determines the structure of the *archivable* content even

⁶⁹ As Cynthia J. Miler and Julie Anne Taddeo note, the term 'steampunk' is originally coined in the 1980s to describe 'a group of nineteenth-century-inspired technofantasies', referring to novels such as K. W. Jeter's *Morlock Night* (1979), *Infernal Devices* (1987), James P. Blaylock's *Homonculus* (1986) and Tim Powers's *The Anubis Gates* (1983). These novels, according to Ken Dvorak, reimagine both the Victorian past and the future through 'a neo-Victorian lens'. Cynthia J. Miler and Julie Anne Taddeo, 'Introduction', in *Steaming into a Victorian Future: A Steampunk Anthology*, ed. by Cynthia J. Miler and Julie Anne Taddeo (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013), pp. xv-xxvi (p. xv). Ken Dvorak, 'Foreword', in *Steaming into a Victorian Future*, pp. ix-xi (p. ix).

⁷⁰ *About Time*, p. 89. Further references to this book are given after quotations in the text unless otherwise stated.

in its very coming into existence and in its relationship to the future. The archivization produces as much as it records the event. This is also our political experience of the so-called news media.⁷¹

As mentioned at the beginning of this introduction, for Currie, Derrida's depiction of our experience of 'the so-called news media' reveals an important truth; that is, 'an event is recorded not because it happens, but it happens because it is recorded' (p. 11). This reversed cause-and-effect sequence of an event does not suggest that the future actually happens before the past. Rather, it highlights the fact that our narration of the present is structured by 'a future orientation', or 'a mode of anticipation' (ibid.). This point is vividly illustrated by the following example Currie gives on video recording:

The act of recording installs in the present an anticipated future from which the present will be re-experienced as representation of the past, or an infinite sequence of future presents from which the moment can be recollected. (p. 41)

Currie's example demonstrates that the way we record the world now is informed by an anticipatory thought about the function of the video in the future. Following Currie, the act of capturing some specific moments in the present through a lens makes it possible for the audience to revisit these moments as part of the past in the future (p. 41). In this context, the present is structured as 'the object of a future memory' (p. 40). According to Currie, this temporal logic also informs the act of storytelling. Like the archiving archive, storytelling plays a double role in shaping our memory of the past and envisaging the future:

⁷¹ Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. by Eric Prenowitz (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996), pp. 16-17. Original emphasis.

If, in order to look back at what has happened, we tell a story, we must also know that the present is a story yet to be told. The present is the object of a future memory, and we live it as such, in anticipation of the story we will tell later, envisaging the present as past. The present might be lived in anticipation of some future present from which it is narrated, but this may also entail the anticipation of events between the present present and the future present from which it is narrated which will also be part of that story. (pp. 5-6)

Currie's account makes it clear that narrative is shaped by the present we are in – that we look back, retrospectively, from here and now to see what happened before – as well as the future we expect to arrive at in the sense that we know that the stories we are telling now will be 'past' narratives in the future. In this context, anticipation and retrospection bear upon each other. Currie's foregrounding of the double time in narrative not only challenges the retrospective model of narrative (which, to Currie, includes Hutcheon's historiographic metafiction), but also shifts the critical attention to the ways in which we, quoting Currie, 'attach significance to present moments' in 'the mode of continuous anticipation' (p. 6).

This temporal structure is also inherent in the act of reading. Here Currie moves to the work of Peter Brooks who attaches similar significance to tense in the act of reading. As Brooks, writing in *Reading for the Plot: Designing and Invention in Narrative* (1984), observes:

If the past is to be read as present, it is a curious present that we know to be past in relation to a future we know to be already in place, already in wait for us to reach it. Perhaps we would do best to speak of the *anticipation of retrospection*

as our chief tool in making sense of narrative, the master trope of its strange logic.⁷²

As Currie's critique of Paul Ricoeur's work reveals, the act of reading is often perceived as a process of presentification, or 'the presentifying of the past' (Ricoeur cited in Currie, p. 5). The passage quoted from Brooks, nevertheless, challenges and complicates Ricoeur's argument by suggesting that during the reading process, readers are encouraged to see the present in relation to the future, which is the ending of the fictional narrative. Notably, the future of written narrative, as Currie highlights, is marked by an 'already-thereness', in the sense that the ending of a narrative fiction is already there, waiting, like 'the reel of a film' (J. R. Lucas cited in Currie, p. 19). Thus the sense of futurity at the core of narrative consciousness is at odds with our lived experience, which is characterised, instead, by the provisionality and what Currie calls 'the unreality of the future' (p. 19). However, for Currie, although the sense of futurity evoked by reading fiction and lived experience is different in this respect, the act of reading fiction practises the reader's ability to explore the present in relation to the future, thus preparing them for 'the continuous anticipation that takes place in non-fictional life' (p. 6). By highlighting the similarities between our experience of time and the temporal logic of narrative, Currie demonstrates the significance of reading fiction for the material life, a point that is essential to my following discussion of ethical criticism.

For the study of neo-Victorian fiction, a genre which seems, on the surface, to be predominantly retrospective, Currie's discussion of narrative temporality offers a useful model for the exploration of the dynamic between the past, the present and the

⁷² Peter Brooks, *Reading for Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), p. 23. Original emphasis.

future in neo-Victorian fiction from the perspective of narratology. As I will explain in detail in the chapter outline that follows, in the context of Currie's argument, this thesis examines in ways in which writers experiment with the temporal structure of different narrative genres such as crime fiction and *Bildungsroman* in involving the reader in the consumption of, and also critical reflection on, the re-imagined past. In what follows, I therefore attempt to link Currie's narratological discussion of 'double time' with issues of ethics and reader responsibility in connection with the work of Sedgwick and Gregory, both of whom are relevant to a future-orientated approach to neo-Victorian literature.

Reparation and ethics

With a focus on the power dynamic between the text and the critical reader, Sedgwick proposes two different projects of critical enterprise, namely, paranoid and reparative reading practices. As I will be arguing, both practices involve a future-orientated model of thinking, although their attitudes towards the future vary. By paranoid reading, Sedgwick means a criticism premised on what she calls 'the protocols of unveiling', referring to '[s]ubversive and demystifying parody, suspicious archaeologies of the present, the detection of hidden patterns of violence and their exposure'.⁷³ Put simply, paranoid reading places 'suspicion' as its central methodology. This critical approach is exemplified by 'the hermeneutics of suspicion', a term coined by Paul Ricoeur in his discussion of the similar traits between the work of Marx, Nietzsche and Freud (p. 125). As Ricoeur argues:

⁷³ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay is About You', in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003), pp. 123-52 (p.125). Further references to this version of the essay are given after quotations in the text unless otherwise stated.

For Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, the fundamental category of consciousness is the relation hidden-shown or, if you prefer, simulated-manifested. ... Thus the distinguishing characteristic of Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche is the general hypothesis concerning both the process of false consciousness and the method of deciphering. The two go together, since the man of suspicion carries out in reverse the work of falsification of the man of guile. (cited in Sedgwick, p. 125)

Ricoeur's account points out that the work of Marx, Nietzsche and Freud is premised on the belief that the 'true' meaning of the text is hidden, and will be discovered through critical interpretation only. In this process, suspicion plays a vital role, rendering this kind of critical enterprise what Sedgwick calls a 'defensive' practice (p. 147). According to Sedgwick, a paranoid reader needs to read in a vigilant manner constantly in order to reveal the 'true' meaning of the text, which may result in a hostile text-reader relationship. As Sedgwick's choice of vocabulary – 'paranoia' – suggests, this type of reading involves a 'dogged' and 'stif[f]' temporality, which traps the reader in an anxious mode of anticipation (p. 147). This paranoid temporality is described by Sedgwick as 'a distinctly Oedipal regularity and repetitiveness' or, put differently, the belief that 'yesterday can't be allowed to have differed from today and tomorrow must be even more so' (ibid.). Sedgwick's engagement with D. A. Miller's *The Novel and the Police* (1988) explains how a paranoid temporality traps the critic in the loop or constant negotiation between fear of humiliation and the feeling of humiliation. As Sedgwick notes in her reading of Miller, paranoia is averse to 'bad surprises' as its first imperative is '*There must be no bad surprise*' (Miller cited in Sedgwick, p. 130, original emphasis). The aversion to surprise determines the anticipatory mechanism of paranoia, thus rendering the practice of reading what Miller

calls a ‘frightening incentive’ (ibid.). As Sedgwick, quoting from Miller, observes, ‘[s]urprise ... is precisely what the paranoid seeks to eliminate, but it is also what, in the event, he survives by reading as a frightening incentive: he can never be paranoid enough’ (ibid.). In this context, the reader will be trapped in a compulsive cycle of repetition, since s/he would ‘inevitably be suspicious of the interpretations [they] inspire’ (Leo Bersani cited in Sedgwick, p. 126). In other words, a paranoid reader needs to read in a vigilant manner constantly – to outsmart or master the text – in order to protect what Robyn Wiegman has referred to as his/her ‘critical sovereignty’.⁷⁴ The problem with this tendency is that under the reader’s constant and vigilant pursuit of critical omnipotence, there will be no space for any alternative approaches. As Sedgwick describes, reading in a paranoid manner is like growing ‘a crystal in a hypersaturated solution, blotting out any sense of the possibility of alternative ways of understanding *or* things to understand’ (p. 131, original emphasis).

On this point it is, nevertheless, important to acknowledge that Sedgwick is not disavowing the importance of paranoid reading in and of itself. Rather, she is concerned with its hegemonic status in literary criticism. Her purpose is to highlight the fact that paranoid inquiry is just ‘one kind of cognitive/affective practice among other, alternative kinds’ (p. 126). As she observes, ‘[p]aranoia knows some things well and others poorly’ (p. 130). This then leads Sedgwick to an ethical discussion of the power relationship between the text and the reader in examining the problems brought out by ‘the faith in exposure’ placed by paranoia, a point which is essential to my reassessment of the neo-Victorian genre (ibid.).

To a certain extent, neo-Victorian literature plays with this kind of paranoid critical impulse or agenda in both its thematics and narratology. By rewriting the

⁷⁴ Robyn Wiegman, ‘The Times We’re In: Queer Feminist Criticism and the Reparative “Turn”’, *Feminist Theory*, 15.1 (2014), 4-25 (p. 16).

Victorians through the prism of the present, neo-Victorian fiction may be seen as fulfilling the contemporary reader's expository desire to demystify and expose systemic oppressions in the past. For example, we see same-sex desire in Victorian England in Sarah Waters's neo-Victorian trio – *Tipping the Velvet* (1998), *Affinity* (1999) and *Fingersmith* (2002) – and the ideologically interpellated figures such as criminals, immigrants, and prostitutes in novels include Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* (1996), Michel Faber's *The Crimson Petal and the White* (2002), and Julian Barnes's *Arthur & George* (2005), to name but a few. This impulse to expose past oppressions is nicely summarised by David Pike, who remarks that 'postmodern Victorianism [...] sees itself as overturning or unearthing the conventions of "standard" or "heritage" Victorianism, continuing a process begun by Lytton Strachey, extended by Steven Marcus in *The Other Victorians* and capped by Foucault's *History of Sexuality*'.⁷⁵ The problem of this kind of paranoid reading, as Sedgwick points out, is that 'visibility itself constitutes much of the violence' (p. 142). As the leading textual example of this thesis, Atwood's *Alias Grace* self-consciously and self-reflexively explores the paranoid impulse behind reader's expository desire to access the hidden past and its related ethical issues. By presenting how other fictional characters consume the experience of the protagonist Grace – the convicted murderess of the notorious 1843 murders of Thomas Kinnear and his housekeeper Nancy Montgomery in Upper Canada – in a prurient manner, Atwood encourages her readers to drop their suspicion and attend to the needs of the vulnerable other in order to construct a different future rather than repeating the same traumatic experience.

In response to the ethical issues promoted by the paranoid agenda, Sedgwick proposes an alternative model of critical practice called 'reparative reading', a term she

⁷⁵ David Pike, 'Afterimages of the Victorian City', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 15.2 (2010), 254-67 (p. 254).

develops from the work of the psychoanalyst Melanie Klein (p. 128). As Sedgwick explains, this critical position surrenders a ‘knowing, anxious, paranoid determination’ towards its textual object, thus leaving the reader some room to realise that ‘the future may be different from the present’ (p. 146). To read reparatively, as Sedgwick elaborates *vis-à-vis* queer criticism, is to read without any ‘proscribed object choice, aim, site or identification’; to read for ‘important news about herself, without knowing what form that news will take’; to read with ‘only the patchiest familiarity with its codes; without, even, more than hungrily hypothesizing to what questions this news may proffer an answer’.⁷⁶ Unlike paranoid reading, this ‘speculative’, ‘superstitious’, and ‘methodologically adventurous’ reading will bring the reader something surprising, but not necessarily positive.⁷⁷ Here Sedgwick also suggests an understanding of pleasure beyond the Freudian scheme. For Sedgwick, the Freudian scheme is problematic since it ‘subsumes pleasure seeking and pain avoidance together under the rubric of the supposedly primordial “pleasure principle”’, in spite of the radical difference between the two motives (p. 137). It also neglects the fact that it is simply impossible to avoid pain and surprise (*ibid.*). As Sedgwick herself explains, the paranoid imperative of forestalling pain and surprise will leave pleasure seeking as ‘an always presumable, unexaminable, inexhaustible underground wellspring of supposedly “natural” motive’ (*ibid.*). In contrast to the paranoid Freudian epistemology, Sedgwick’s formulation of reparative reading suggests that it is possible for the reader to enjoy the surprise of finding some truths accidentally and to understand mistakes more positively (p. 138). As Sedgwick notes, quoting from a personal communication between herself and Joseph Litvak, ‘Doesn’t reading queer

⁷⁶ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, ‘Paranoid and Reparative Reading; or, You’re So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Introduction is About You’, in *Novel Gazing: Queer Readings in Fiction*, ed. by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1997), pp. 1-40 (pp. 2-3).

⁷⁷ *Novel Gazing*, p. 3.

mean learning, among other things, that mistakes can be good rather than bad surprises?’ (p. 147).

As Robyn Wiegman argues in her reading of Sedgwick, unlike the paranoid reader who ‘prepare[s] for a vigilant stand against repetition’, a reparative reader responds to the future with ‘affirmative richness’ and hope.⁷⁸ The fact that hope – as Sedgwick explains – is often ‘fracturing’ and even ‘a traumatic thing to experience’ suggests that reading reparatively does not guarantee any less of a traumatic reading experience than the paranoid one, which, as noted before, could result in a damage of the critic’s sovereignty (p. 146). Indeed, as Ellis Hanson remarks, reparative reading is ‘grounded in disillusion rather than infatuation’ and arises from ‘the obvious fact that our world is damaged and dangerous’.⁷⁹ But instead of ‘repeat[ing] the bad news’, it seeks to ‘build or rebuild some more sustaining relation to the objects in our world’.⁸⁰ In this context, the notion of hope installed in a reparative reading resembles Derrida’s ‘utopian hope’, which, as Andrew Gibson explains, ‘is no longer teleological and would not proceed on the assumption of a determinate logic binding what is to come to “our present”’.⁸¹ Rather, it is linked with ‘an undecidable future’ which we – as readers and critics – can have a voice on.⁸²

Before moving to a further discussion of the link between reparation and ethical criticism, I would like to spend a bit more time discussing the relationship between paranoid and reparative readings. The dynamic between these two practices is essential for our understanding of the complicated temporal structure of neo-Victorian fiction,

⁷⁸ Wiegman, p. 11.

⁷⁹ Ellis Hanson, ‘The Languorous Critic’, *New Literary History*, 43.3 (2012), 547-64 (p. 547).

⁸⁰ Hanson, p. 547.

⁸¹ Andrew Gibson, *Postmodernity, Ethics and the Novel: From Leavis to Levinas* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 4.

⁸² Gibson, p. 4.

which, as my early engagement with Simon Joyce suggests, is about how the genre gestures towards the future by looking backward.

As argued previously, paranoia and reparation are informed by different attitudes towards the future. Having said so, it does not mean that these two impulses act against each other. For Sedgwick, paranoid and reparative critical practices are ‘changing and heterogeneous *relational* stances’ (p. 128, my emphasis). This relational dynamic between paranoia and reparation is investigated in detail by Jackie Stacey.⁸³ Taking up Melanie Klein’s theorisation of the paranoid-schizoid position, Stacey discusses the infant’s conflicted or ambivalent relation to its mother – in particular, her breast – and considers how this informs an oscillating relationship between paranoia and reparation. As Stacey notes from her reading of Klein’s famous essay ‘Love, Guilt and Reparation’ (1937), ‘the infant loves the good object that feeds and satisfies it but it hates the bad object that inevitably frustrates its needs’.⁸⁴ In this context, the figure of the breast/mother is split into a good and bad object. According to Klein, this good/bad division will result in the infant’s ‘fear and suspicion’ of the breast (a phrase Klein registers as the paranoid/schizoid position), which is challenged or ‘superseded’ by the later discovery that the breast it hates and loves is the same one (the Kleinian depressive position).⁸⁵ Klein’s model therefore suggests that the infant is in a ‘constant *interaction* of love and hate’ towards the same object.⁸⁶ Taking up Klein’s conceptualisation of the infant’s conflicted relation to objects, Stacey argues that reparation is not a process ‘born solely of love’.⁸⁷ Rather, it is in an oscillatory relationship with paranoia since they are actually from the same source.

⁸³ Jackie Stacey, ‘Wishing Away Ambivalence’, *Feminist Theory*, 15.1 (2014), 39-49.

⁸⁴ Stacey, p. 44.

⁸⁵ Stacey, p. 44.

⁸⁶ Klein cited in Stacey, p. 44. Original emphasis.

⁸⁷ Stacey, p. 43.

The oscillating relationship between paranoia and reparation provides us with a useful model for the examination of how neo-Victorian fiction, a genre that seems to be preoccupied with a paranoid impulse to demystify the past, could prompt the reader to read reparatively. By staging a nostalgic, if paranoid, longing for what Nadine Boehm-Schintker and Susanne Gruss call an ‘immersion’ into the (alternative) past, neo-Victorian literature plays with the readers’ generic reading expectations and desires.⁸⁸ It also urges readers to reflect upon their reading motivations and desires by confronting them with often painful and unsettling versions of the past. As my following discussion of Marshall Gregory’s work on ethical criticism will demonstrate, this kind of critical reflection is the first step towards the construction of a different future.

Unlike early ethical critics such as Wayne Booth who focus on the ways in which literary work teaches the reader important ethical ‘lessons’, Gregory positions the ethical content of the work of literary art in its ‘*power of invitation*’.⁸⁹ The notion of invitation is specified by Gregory as how literary work extends to the reader ‘*invitations to feeling*’, ‘*invitations to belief*’ and ‘*invitations to ethical judgment*’ through artistic and literary representation.⁹⁰ In other words, it is about how literary work involves the reader in a productive engagement with the textual world. Gregory’s choice of vocabulary – ‘invitation’ – makes it clear that for him, ethical criticism is premised on the fact that the reader needs to ‘accep[t] the work’s invitations’ in the first place.⁹¹ As he elaborates:

⁸⁸ Nadine Boehm-Schintker and Susanne Gruss, ‘Introduction: Fashioning the Neo-Victorian – Neo-Victorian Fashions’, in *Immersions and Revisitations*, pp. 1-20 (p. 7).

⁸⁹ Marshall Gregory, ‘Redefining Ethical Criticism: The Old vs. the New’, *JLT Articles*, 4.2 (2010), 273-302 (p. 290). Original emphasis.

⁹⁰ ‘Redefining Ethical Criticism’, p. 291. Original emphasis.

⁹¹ ‘Redefining Ethical Criticism’, p. 292.

[I]f a reader accepts the work's invitations – if he or she says 'yes' to the work's prodding to feel this emotion here, to believe this idea here, to approve of this character here – then *these* ethical valences of influence *may* follow.⁹²

Gregory's formulation of 'invitation' echoes the attitude that Coleridge identifies in *Biographia Literaria* as a 'willing suspension of disbelief'.⁹³ As Gregory explains, this is 'an agreement on the auditor's [or, the reader's] part not to reject any data of any story out of hand and not to start out truculent or combative'.⁹⁴ Gregory's model of ethical criticism therefore suggests that in accepting the 'invitation' of the literary work, the reader 'yield[s] to a story' and 'softens the membrane of ego in order to respond *not* as we might respond in real life, but as the *story* seems to require'.⁹⁵ The kind of reader Gregory presents here may be seen as a reparative reader who, as my previous engagement with Sedgwick suggests, is willing to open him/herself up to the text and let the text work on him/her (rather than the other way around). As Hilary Hinds nicely puts it, to read reparatively is to be 'intimate with or proximate to the object of study'; to open oneself to 'the surprises the text may spring'; and to be 'generous to the text's character and processes and to its manifest identifications of its agendas and purposes'.⁹⁶ Nevertheless, it does not mean that the reader is a passive figure who would simply respond to the text in an indifferent manner. As Gregory observes, 'an ethical influence [of the work of literary art] on a reader or listener depends more on a set of invitations that ask the reader to actively *do* something rather

⁹² 'Redefining Ethical Criticism', p. 292. Original emphasis.

⁹³ Cited in Marshall Gregory, *Shaped by Stories: The Ethical Power of Narratives* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009), p. 72.

⁹⁴ *Shaped by Stories*, p. 72.

⁹⁵ *Shaped by Stories*, p. 72. Original emphasis.

⁹⁶ Hilary Hinds, "'Let the More Loving One Be Me": The Paranoid and Reparative Dynamics of Editing Anna Trapnel's *Report and Plea* (1654)', *Journal of the Northern Renaissance*, 8 (2017) <<http://www.northernrenaissance.org/let-the-more-loving-one-be-me-the-paranoid-and-reparative-dynamics-of-editing-anna-trapnels-report-and-plea-1654/>> [accessed 15 August 2017] (para.10 of 29).

than to be passively impressed by a lesson'.⁹⁷ Gregory's foregrounding of the reader's input suggests that ethical criticism is a two-step process. The reader needs to accept the invitations of the literary work at first and then get actively involved in the construction of a possibly different future in the material world.

Gregory's model of ethical criticism also involves a temporal understanding of selfhood. For him, the self is always in a process of 'becoming':

The self that defines a person is a *process*, not a *thing*, and it is always in motion. It is always *becoming*; it never just *is*, and the *mechanism* of anyone's perpetually emerging selfhood is the pattern of the 'yeses' and 'noes' that the person extends to all of life's invitations.⁹⁸

Here Gregory presents human beings as agents who are in a constant negotiation with cultural and ideological forces:

We are never as free in our agency as we perhaps think we are, but never are we totally devoid of agency, either. As we respond to the world's invitations in this way or that way, we make up a self out of these responses because such responses configure – or, more accurately, they consistently *reconfigure* – our intellects, our beliefs, our emotions, and our ethical judgments.⁹⁹

Gregory's formulation of a dialogic relationship between the self and the world introduces a future-orientated model of ethical criticism: one that focuses on the

⁹⁷ 'Redefining Ethical Criticism', p. 292. Original emphasis.

⁹⁸ 'Redefining Ethical Criticism', p. 290. Original emphasis.

⁹⁹ 'Redefining Ethical Criticism', p. 291. Original emphasis.

readers' involvement in the textual world and their active participation in the construction of a different future in reality.

This thesis takes up Gregory's notion of ethical criticism and focuses on the way in which neo-Victorian literature 'invites' the reader to feel with, to believe in, and to make ethical judgments through its literary representation of the Victorian(s). It chooses to explore this kind of ethical agenda from the perspective of empathy, a concept that plays with the issue of intersubjectivity and subjectivity, as my following review of the study of empathy will demonstrate.

Narrative empathy

As a growing inter- and cross-disciplinary field of investigation, empathy has received a good deal of attention from several academic disciplines in recent years, including neuroscience, social psychology, philosophy and literary studies. Although empathy and its historical 'precursor' sympathy have played an important role in the Western intellectual tradition (a point to which I will return), empathy itself is a diffuse concept whose definition is under constant negotiation and interrogation. As Amy Coplan observes:

The number of competing conceptualizations circulating the literature has created a serious problem with the study of empathy by making it difficult to keep track of which process or mental state the term is being used to refer to in any given discussion.¹⁰⁰

¹⁰⁰ Amy Coplan, 'Understanding Empathy: Its Features and Effects', in *Empathy: Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives*, ed. by Amy Coplan and Peter Goldie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 3-18 (p. 4).

Taking up Coplan's point, this thesis traces the development of the concept of empathy and its role in different fields of philosophy, psychology and aesthetics, including the eighteenth-century Scottish moral philosophy on sentimental value (David Hume and Adam Smith), nineteenth-century German aesthetics (Robert Vischer), phenomenology (Edmund Husserl, Edith Stein and Dan Zahavi) and psychoanalysis (Heinz Kohut). In doing so, it provides a broader context for this project's examination of how neo-Victorianism engages with, and also contributes to, the contestation of empathy. Given its inherent dialogicality and preoccupation with issues such as intersubjectivity and subjectivity (as argued before), neo-Victorian literature is presented in this project as a useful platform for the exploration of the mechanism of empathy, its implications for morality and ethics in the reading process, and the related political controversies. In the rest of this section, I examine the link between empathy and literary criticism by taking up Suzanne Keen's conceptualisation of narrative empathy. My review of Keen's work on empathy and fiction focuses on the ways in which Keen draws upon the work of Hume and Smith on morality and sentimental value.

Keen defines empathy as 'a vicarious, spontaneous sharing of affect', a mechanism that can be 'provoked by witnessing another's emotional state, by hearing about another's condition, or even by reading':

It need not be a conscious response: the neonates who cry at the sound of other babies' cries are almost certainly unaware of their primitive empathy. Equipped with mirror neurons, the human brain appears to possess a system for automatically sharing feelings, what neuroscientists call a 'shared manifold for intersubjectivity'.¹⁰¹

¹⁰¹ *Empathy and the Novel*, p. 4.

Following neuroscientists' recent research on 'mirror neurons', Keen suggests that human minds are 'installed' with the ability to imitate each other's emotional state, and construes empathy as a 'spontaneous and responsive sharing of' other people's feeling.¹⁰² Her focus on the mechanism of mirroring and the transmissibility of emotions resembles Hume's characterisation of human minds as 'mirrors to one another', by which Hume meant that human beings can 'reflect each other's emotion' and these emotions 'may often be reverberated'.¹⁰³ Indeed, as Keen points out, certain aspects of empathy have been described by early philosophers such as Hume and Adam Smith under the term 'sympathy', since empathy as a word only enters English in the early twentieth century as a coined translation of the German word *Einfühlung* (a concept I examine in detail in Chapter Four).¹⁰⁴ Hume's *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739), for example, examined the psychological mechanism of sympathy and explained the transmission of certain emotions from one person to another in the following way:

When I see the *effects* of passion in the voice and gesture of any person, my mind immediately passes from these effects to their causes, and forms such a lively idea of the passion, as is presently converted into the passion itself. In

¹⁰² *Empathy and the Novel*, p. 4. The lab of the Italian neuroscientist Giacomo Rizzolatti 'discovered' the 'mirror neurons' about fifteen years ago in a series of experiments they conducted on pigtail macaque monkeys. According to their findings, there is 'a distinctive class of neurons' in their brain that 'discharge both when the monkey executes a motor act and when it observes another individual (a human being or another monkey) performing the same or a similar motor act'. Scientists therefore use the term 'mirror neurons' in a figurative way to explain the function of these neurons. Later, the mirror neuron system is used by a group of scientists to explain the mechanism of empathy. Giacomo Rizzolatti and Maddalena Fabbri Destro, 'Mirror Neurons', *Scholarpedia*, 3.1 (2008), (para. 1 of 19). For discussion of mirror neurons and empathy, see Giacomo Rizzolatti and Laila Craighero, 'The Mirror-Neuron System', *Annu. Rev. Neurosci.*, 27 (2004), 169-92; Jean Decety and Claus Lamm, 'Human Empathy Through the Lens of Social Neuroscience', *The Scientific World Journal*, 6 (2006), 1146-63.

¹⁰³ Cited in Keen, *Empathy and the Novel*, p. 42.

¹⁰⁴ *Empathy and the Novel*, p. 4. Edward B. Titchener translated the German word *Einfühlung* into the English term empathy. Edward B. Titchener, *Lectures on the Experimental Psychology of the Thought-Processes* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1909).

like manner, when I perceive the *causes* of any emotion, my mind is convey'd to the effects, and is actuated with a like emotion. Were I present at any of the more terrible operations of surgery, 'tis certain, that even before it began, the preparation of the instruments, the laying of the bandages in order, the heating of the irons, with all the signs of anxiety and concern in the patient and assistants, wou'd have a great effect upon my mind, and excite the strongest sentiments of pity and terror. No passion of another discovers itself immediately to the mind. We are only sensible of its causes or effects. From *these* we infer the passion: And consequently *these* give rise to our sympathy.¹⁰⁵

The example Hume gave highlights the importance of cognition in getting affectively involved in the other person's emotional state. The description of how the witness/perceiver tried to use the self as a model in the comprehension and prediction of the other's mental life suggests that Hume's model of sympathy may be read as an ego-centric method of simulation, which, to a certain extent, contributes to the contemporary debate on the difference between 'simulation theory' and 'theory theory' in the field of social science. As Karsten R. Stueber explains, simulation theory is 'best understood as denying the centrality of theory involvement in [...] our folk-psychological abilities', thus serving as an alternative to 'theory theory', a model that is often criticised for having presumed human subjects as 'rational agents' who have the ability to deploy some sort of theory for the understanding of other people.¹⁰⁶ Although this thesis is not interested in examining the development of, and relationship between, simulation theory and theory theory *per se*, the issues that dominate the contemporary discussion of these two different theoretical models, such as the mechanism of empathy

¹⁰⁵ Cited in Keen, *Empathy and the Novel*, p. 43. Original emphasis.

¹⁰⁶ Karsten R. Stueber, *Rediscovering Empathy: Agency, Folk Psychology, and the Human Sciences* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 2006), pp. 111, 32.

and the dynamic that exists between the perceiver/empathiser and the perceived/empathised, demonstrate the sort of tensions that exist in the different philosophical and psychological perspectives to sympathy/empathy as will be revealed in the chapters that follow.

With a focus on the role of imagination, Adam Smith proposed a different model of sympathy in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), and made it a central plank of his moral theory:

By the imagination we place ourselves in his situation, we conceive ourselves enduring all the same torments, we enter as it were into his body, and become in some measure the same person with him, and thence form some idea of his sensations, and even feel something, which, though weaker in degree, is not altogether unlike them.¹⁰⁷

Smith's emphasis on the role of imagination makes it clear that, for him, the mechanism of sympathy involves a *conscious* act of 'perspective-taking', a model that is taken and developed by the contemporary philosopher Amy Coplan, as we will see in Chapter One. It also positions the sympathiser as a human subject who has the cognitive and affective faculties to perceive, comprehend and vicariously experience the other's mental state, therefore bringing out an issue about the power relationship between the sympathiser and the sympathised. As Brigid Lowe suggests, Smith presented sympathy as 'a model of distance, spectatorship, impartiality, control and subjective consolidation'.¹⁰⁸ This issue about the dynamic that exists between the two

¹⁰⁷ Cited in Coplan and Goldie, 'Introduction', in *Empathy: Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives*, pp. ix-xlvii (p. xi).

¹⁰⁸ Brigid Lowe, *Victorian Fiction and the Insights of Sympathy: An Alternative to the Hermeneutics of Suspicion* (London: Anthem Press, 2007), p. 10.

subjects in the mechanism of sympathy – or empathy (in the case of my project) – is essential for my subsequent discussion of the ethics of reading, and will be interrogated through different conceptualisations of empathy in the chapters that follow. Also, as we will see in Chapter Four, Smith’s discussion of the significance of imagination in the mechanism of sympathy is shared by other theorists of empathy, such as the nineteenth-century German aesthetician Robert Vischer.

Suzanne Keen, meanwhile, takes up *both* Hume’s model of the embodied process of sharing and Smith’s conscious imaginative perspective-taking in her conceptualisation of narrative empathy as ‘the sharing of feeling and perspective-taking induced by reading, viewing, hearing, or imagining narratives of another’s situation and condition’.¹⁰⁹ Here it should be noted that although Keen’s understanding of narrative empathy is built upon the work of Hume and Smith on sympathy, she is aware of how these two terms – sympathy and empathy – differ from each other in the contemporary philosophical and psychological debates. As she explains, empathy is ‘a spontaneous, responsive sharing of an appropriate feeling’, while sympathy is a more complex and ‘differentiated feeling for another’.¹¹⁰ Put simply, in today’s Western culture empathy is typically understood as a mechanism by which we ‘feel with’, while sympathy is to ‘feel for’.¹¹¹ The difference between these two mechanisms is well illustrated by the following example Keen gives: that ‘I feel your pain’ is an empathetic gesture while ‘I feel pity for your pain’ is being sympathetic.¹¹² Following Keen, we can also see that the contemporary philosophical and psychological understanding of sympathy has drifted away from the eighteenth-century perspective. In the contemporary context, sympathy is not a faculty of affective communication; rather, it

¹⁰⁹ Suzanne Keen, ‘Narrative Empathy’, in *The Living Handbook of Narratology* <<http://www.lhn.uni-hamburg.de/article/narrative-empathy>> [accessed 7 August 2015] (para. 2).

¹¹⁰ *Empathy and the Novel*, p. 5.

¹¹¹ *Empathy and the Novel*, p. 5.

¹¹² *Empathy and the Novel*, p. 5.

entails a particular emotional or moral *attitude*. Also, as noted before, the earlier meaning of sympathy has been incorporated into the contemporary understanding of empathy.

Keen's work on empathy and narrative opens up further discussions about the power dynamic between the two subjects involved in the mechanism of empathy, and the ethical and political implications of empathy. In light of her research, this project examines the ways in which the neo-Victorian text – be it filmic, visual or cultural – involves the reader in an empathetic engagement with the textual other. It aims to answer the following two questions: Is empathy necessarily ethical? And in which ways does reading – or the empathetic engagement with the textual other – prompt the reader to imagine and possibly get involved in the projection and construction of a different future? Using neo-Victorianism as a platform for the exploration of the relationship between empathy and ethics, this thesis also takes up the link Mark Currie builds between acts of reading and living (as discussed above) in its engagement with the recent debate about the role empathy plays in contemporary political landscape. In what follows, I move to the discussion of the rhetoric of empathy in politics by drawing upon the work of Paul Bloom, Lauren Berlant, Meghan Marie Hammond and Sue J. Kim, in order to better contextualise the examination of the political and ethical implications of empathy.

The limits of empathy

The significance of empathy in contemporary politics is well illustrated by the huge amount of criticism Theresa May received after the tragic Grenfell Tower fire, which occurred in a block of public housing flats in North Kensington, West London on 14 June 2017. As *The Guardian* remarks in an editorial published after the devastating

accident, the prime minister has failed to show any ‘courage, imagination and empathy’, which, to them, are essential for leadership.¹¹³ Although the editorial does not provide the reader with any definition of empathy itself, it is clear that empathy is specified as the idea of ‘putting oneself in other’s shoes’ here, as evidenced by its portrayal and praise of May’s political opponent – Jeremy Corbyn’s – responses, that he ‘listened to people, he hugged them, he promised to find out the truth and told them he would speak for them’.¹¹⁴ Here empathy is positioned as a virtue which is essential for the construction of a fairer society. And the comparison the editorial draws between May and Corbyn seems to suggest that the reason for why the government failed its people is that its political leader is not empathetic enough.

Indeed, as Paul Bloom points out in his latest book *Against Empathy: The Case for Rational Compassion* (2016), the virtue of empathy has become a prevailing culture in contemporary politics.¹¹⁵ However, as the title of Bloom’s book makes clear, the idea of empathy as ‘a powerful force for goodness and moral change’ is exactly what he has taken issue with and challenged by suggesting that as ‘a spotlight focusing on certain people in the here and now’, empathy ‘leaves us insensitive to the long-term consequences of our acts and blind as well to the suffering of those we do not or cannot empathise with’.¹¹⁶ It is in this context that Bloom proposes ‘rational compassion’ as an alternative to empathy, which, to him, could avoid the shortcomings of empathy, such as its ‘narrow focus, specificity, and innumeracy’.¹¹⁷ According to Bloom, the ‘spotlight nature’ of empathy often leads to a serious issue, that ‘one individual can matter more

¹¹³ ‘The Guardian View on Grenfell Tower: Theresa May’s Hurricane Katrina’, *The Guardian*, Thursday 15 June 2017 <<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/commentisfree/2017/jun/15/the-guardian-view-on-grenfell-tower-theresa-may-hurricane-katrina>> [accessed 18 August 2017] [para. 1 of 5].

¹¹⁴ ‘The Guardian View’, para. 1.

¹¹⁵ Paul Bloom, *Against Empathy: The Case for Rational Compassion* (London: The Bodley Head, 2016), p. 2.

¹¹⁶ Bloom, pp. 2, 9.

¹¹⁷ Bloom, p. 95.

than a hundred because a single individual can evoke feelings in a way that a multitude cannot', a point that is well illustrated by Stalin's saying that 'One death is a tragedy; one million is a statistic'.¹¹⁸ Bloom's concerns have particular relevance for the highly developed capitalist media society we live in, since the media has the ability to put certain group of people under the spotlight.

Bloom is not the only critic who is sceptical of the idea of empathy as the solution to social and political issues, although the title he adopts – 'against empathy' – seems a bit overstated since empathy, as a way of understanding other people's feelings and experiences (as in Bloom's context), may help us shape the solution rather than being the solution itself. Indeed, as Suzanne Keen highlights, empathy often features a 'concern for others', which should be considered as 'a first step in a process'.¹¹⁹ Following Keen, it is clear that empathy itself will not lead to any political reactions directly, although it might contribute to the design of a particular political solution. This is also the thesis I am pursuing in this project, as we will see in the chapters that follow.

With a focus on the feeling of solidarity empathy entails, Lauren Berlant also gives us a trenchant critique of the rhetoric of empathy in politics.¹²⁰ As Berlant observes, 'affective identification and empathy' have been used to channel an illusory 'national sentimentality', which promises unity 'across fields of social difference' while serving to 'eradicate systemic social pain', referring to issues such as 'economic insecurity', 'racial discord', 'class conflict' and 'sexual unease'.¹²¹ Also, for Berlant, the way empathy operates in politics often risks depriving the empathised of agency:

¹¹⁸ Bloom, p. 89.

¹¹⁹ *Empathy and the Novel*, p. 16.

¹²⁰ Lauren Berlant, 'The Subject of True Feeling: Pain, Privacy and Politics', in *Transformations: Thinking Through Feminism*, ed. by Sara Ahmed and others (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 33–47 (p. 34).

¹²¹ 'The Subject of True Feeling', p. 35.

National sentimentality operates when relatively privileged citizens are exposed to the suffering of their intimate Others, so that to be virtuous requires feeling the pain of flawed or denied citizenship as their own pain.¹²²

In their introduction to the edited collection of essays *Rethinking Empathy Through Literature* (2014), Meghan Marie Hammond and Sue J. Kim share the concern of Berlant in their discussion of the role empathy plays in ‘political coalition’.¹²³ As they argue in their engagement with Berlant and Richard Delgado, empathy can be ‘politically dangerous’, since it constitutes a ‘liberal fantasy of knowing the Other without actually understanding histories of structural oppression and violence’.¹²⁴ As we will see in Chapter One, this critique of empathy has particular resonance in my selected neo-Victorian novels in this chapter, where characters from empowered groups try to empathise with the poor, or the marginal. Through the depiction of the prurient pleasures the privileged often take from the suffering of the vulnerable other, these texts thematise these ethical and political concerns about empathy. Indeed, as Martin L. Hoffman suggests, it is important to acknowledge that empathy is ‘not a panacea and has flaws’.¹²⁵ However, although empathy ‘can’t override powerful economic and political forces, ethnic divisions, natural disasters’, it may be ‘the only available human resource for keeping the diverse parts of society together’.¹²⁶ Also, as we will see in my engagement with different formulations of empathy in the chapters that follow, the ‘asymmetrical’ form of empathy that Berlant – along with other critics

¹²² ‘The Subject of True Feeling’, p. 35.

¹²³ Meghan Marie Hammond and Sue J. Kim, ‘Introduction’, in *Rethinking Empathy through Literature*, ed. by Meghan Marie Hammond and Sue J. Kim (New York and London: Routledge, 2014), pp. 1-18 (p. 9).

¹²⁴ Hammond and Kim, p. 9.

¹²⁵ Martin L. Hoffman, ‘Empathy, Justice, and Social Change’, in *Empathy and Morality*, ed. by Heidi L. Maibom (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 71-96 (p. 96).

¹²⁶ Hoffman, p. 96.

– is concerned with may be seen as one of many possible models of empathy. In order to better explain this thesis's responses to the aforementioned concerns about the ethical and political controversies associated with empathy, I move now to an overview of the individual chapters.

Chapter overview

This thesis is structured by five different approaches to the study of empathy *vis-à-vis* neo-Victorian literature and culture: the model of cognitive perspective-taking (Chapter One); the phenomenological conception of empathy (Chapter Two); the existentialist and the psychological approach to empathy (Chapter Three); and the aesthetic conceptualisation of *Einfühlung* – the German etymological origin of the English term empathy (Chapter Four). In each case, I examine how the reader's desire to empathise with the textual other is facilitated and/or challenged by neo-Victorian fiction, and demonstrate the ethical and political implications of the empathetic model of reading.

Through the model of reading as an empathetic event, this thesis complicates the discussion of the reading pleasures afforded by neo-Victorian literature, which, as argued in the previous section, is often limited to a self-confirming critical knowingness or omniscience. In light of my previous engagement with Sedgwick's critique of paranoid reading, I propose that this kind of 'readerly narcissism' makes it difficult for the reader to imagine a different future. With a focus on the way neo-Victorian fiction 'disrupts' the reader's identificatory and immersive reading process, this thesis also highlights the significance of unsettling and uncomfortable reading experiences in the reader's projection and construction of alternative futures in both fictional and material worlds.

Chapter One argues that, through the use of ‘hermeneutic uncertainty’, neo-Victorian fiction involves the reader in an unsettling empathetic engagement with the past, which prompts them to envisage, and ultimately work towards, alternative futures both in terms of textual outcomes and how they relate to ‘unknowable’ situations in the material world. Through a close reading of two neo-Victorian texts that are concerned with mystery-solving – Jane Harris’s *The Observations* (2006) and Margaret Atwood’s *Alias Grace* (1996) – I demonstrate the dynamic that exists between the expository (un)pleasures of reading and empathy in neo-Victorian literature. In particular, I focus on the ways in which these texts play with the narratological conventions of crime fiction in probing the question of whether the reader’s empathetic engagement with the text facilitates or frustrates the textual pleasures associated with mystery, suspense and problem-solving. To this end, I engage with Amy Coplan’s cognitive approach to empathy – and in particular, her differentiation between ‘self-orientated perspective-taking’ and ‘other-orientated perspective-taking’. This helps us to sketch out some of the complex ethical issues associated with the reading processes: notably, the often paranoid impulse to demystify the unsettling experience of engaging with the vulnerable characters that have become such a staple of neo-Victorian fiction. In terms of my textual rationale, Atwood’s *Alias Grace* is a fitting point of departure for an ethical approach to neo-Victorian literature on account of the way in which it both thematises and promotes the ethical issues associated with a ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’.

Chapter Two builds on the previous chapter in terms of a general argument; that is, neo-Victorian fiction often self-consciously promotes an ethical encounter with the textual other among its readers. However, it shifts our attention from the cryptic narrative properties of neo-Victorian texts and the mystery-solving (un)pleasures these

create for the reader, to the reader's affective relationship with the characters. It examines how the explicit focus on the extremely uncomfortable affect of shame in two neo-Victorian texts – Sarah Waters's *Tipping the Velvet* and *Affinity* – disrupts the readers' immersive consumption of the Victorian underworld and involves them in the character's shame/shaming. To this end, I take up a phenomenological conception of empathy and Sedgwick's development of Silvan Tomkins's theory of affect in demonstrating the 'productivity' of shame in any exploration of subjectivity and intersubjectivity. I argue that by involving the readers in, and encouraging them to open themselves up to, the shame of the fictional characters, neo-Victorian fiction tests the limits of the readers' affective empathy. Meanwhile, the reason I chose Waters's texts for this exploration is because their exploration of queer sexuality and lesbian desire provokes, as well as appeals, to the reader's 'shameless' (in Waters's word) reading expectations of – and desires for – an understanding of lesbian sexuality. Originally, these texts were going to feature as part of a chapter on 'disgust', but Sedgwick's focus on shame made me realise that this was a better way of explaining readers' alternating fascination and discomfort when engaging with the characters.

By contrast, Chapter Three moves to a discussion of the reader's more intellectual inability to empathise with certain fictional characters, narrators and implied authors and for reasons other than embarrassment or shame. With reference to Michael Cox's debut novel *The Meaning of Night*, the chapter proposes that this *failure of empathy* may be linked to issues of contingency and solipsism (as defined in Jean-Paul Sartre's account of existentialism in his philosophical novel *Nausea* (1938)) in the neo-Victorian text in question. Through a close reading of Sartre's novel and the American psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut's work on narcissism and empathy, I construe the inclusion of an 'interlocutory other' in Cox's novel as symptomatic of the text's

desire for an empathetic response to its morally reprehensible character – even if this is a response that we, as readers, are reluctant to give. Also, with reference to Sartre, I explain this reluctance in terms of the character’s ‘bad faith’ (i.e., his exercise of violence at the expense of the innocent other) and propose that the ‘nausea’ experienced by the character on account of his existential insecurity is quickly transferred to the reader. Cox’s text presented itself as an obvious choice for this discussion on account of its thematic engagement with contingency (the central protagonist, Edward Glyver, reflects upon his dilemma in language very similar to Sartre’s *Roquentin*) and the fact that it challenges the reader’s empathy for Edward by identifying him as a murderer on the very first page. In the Conclusion I then draw upon Graeme Macrae Burnet’s *His Bloody Project* (2015) – a recent neo-Victorian text which also seems to explain violence against others in existential rather than psychological terms – in presenting some of the most complex ways in which a reader’s ethical and moral stance is tested. While it is one thing to engage ‘reparatively’ with a text which features characters who are the victims of injustice, it is quite another to extend the same openness and generosity to texts whose characters’ reprehensible actions cannot be easily accounted for in terms of their psychology or social oppression.

Leaving the discussion of the reader’s empathetic engagement with fictional characters *per se*, in the fourth and final chapter I instead move to the exploration of the dynamic that exists between space, place and empathy in neo-Victorian literature and culture. Here, I trace the idea of empathy back to its origin in the nineteenth-century German aesthetics. By drawing upon Harry Francis Mallgrave and Eleftherios Ikonomou’s work on the writing of Robert Vischer, who coined the term *Einfühlung* in his 1873 doctoral thesis *Über das optische Formgefühl (On the Optical Sense of Form)*,

I demonstrate the role corporeal movement plays in involving the viewing subject affectively in both the art work and landscape. In order to better illustrate Vischer's idea, I begin this chapter with a discussion of the architectural replicas of the English townscapes in Shanghai, China. I suggest that although these replicas are not exclusively neo-Victorian in practice (being 'mash-ups' of many different historical periods), the dynamic they promote between the visitor and the landscape is similar to the one that exists between the (international) consumers and the simulated landscape of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century England in neo-Victorian filmic and TV adaptations.

However, the kind of immersive pleasure afforded by these filmic texts is arguably disrupted by a good deal of neo-Victorian *fiction*. With reference to Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* and Julian Barnes's *Arthur & George*, this chapter demonstrates the ways in which neo-Victorian literature frustrates the contemporary reader's desire to 'enter' or 'empathise with' (in Vischer's sense) the simulated landscape of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century England and mobilises space and place for different purposes. In the case of *Alias Grace*, the chapter examines the ways in which Grace's empathetic engagement with her surroundings is presented as part of her psychological disorder; Grace is, as it were, a subject who is 'too close' to the material spaces she inhabits. This is then contrasted with Barnes's characterisation of the protagonist George, a mixed-race (Scottish/Indian) solicitor, who is presented as a habitual walker and regular train commuter, and also distinguished by his peculiar inability to relate to the landscape through which he passes. Whereas Grace, then, is 'too close' to what she sees, George is too 'distant'. This comparative reading also demonstrates the (political) controversies associated with empathy, which have been at the heart of the thesis as a whole. While in Atwood's text, Grace's 'over-identification'

with the non-human ‘other’ questions the practise of empathy in terms which are similar to Vischer, Barnes’s portrayal of George’s alienation in terms of both place and nationhood reminds us how debilitating it can be not to have this emotional connection with your surroundings. While a good deal has now been written about *Arthur and George* in a neo-Victorian and postcolonial context, my focus on George’s ‘outsider’ status as an effect of his ‘failure of empathy’ lends a new dimension to the discussion by shifting our focus from the human to the non-human. This also relates to the chapter’s focus on the ways in which readers and viewers can sometimes struggle to immerse themselves in the ‘landscapes’ of texts unless they have pre-existing schemas or stereotypes available to help them.

By bringing recent cultural and theoretical research on narrative temporality, empathy and affect together, this thesis presents neo-Victorian literature as a genre defined by its experimentation with empathetic narrative. With a focus on the modes and effects of storytelling and reading, I examine the ways in which neo-Victorian fiction facilitates and/or challenges the empathetic engagement between the text and the reader. This kind of text-reader relationship, I argue, involves the reader in the (construction of the) textual world affectively. Also, through an interrogation of the portrayal of the often painful and unsettling version of the past in the text, I propose that neo-Victorian literature not only prompts the reader to critically reflect upon their reading expectations and strategies, as well as their wider ethical responsibilities, but also encourages them to envisage a potentially different future for both the character(s) in the text and human behaviour in general.

Chapter One

‘A Puzzle I Can’t Guess’: Voyeurism, Hermeneutics and Empathy

The novel concerns itself, above all, with time.

—Margaret Atwood, ‘In Search of *Alias Grace*’

A double story

Initially delivered as the Brodfman Lecture at the University of Ottawa in 1996, and subsequently published as an article in 1997, Margaret Atwood’s ‘In Search of *Alias Grace*: On Writing Canadian Historical Fiction’ traces her writing of the novel. There she uses the example of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) in demonstrating the importance of the past in making sense of, and building identity for, the present and the future:

However, it was out of this questioning and assessing climate – where did we come from, how did we get from there to here, where are we going, who are we now – that Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote *The Scarlet Letter*, a historical novel set in seventeenth-century New England. [...] *The Scarlet Letter* is not, of course, seventeenth century in any way the Puritans would have recognized [...]. Instead, it’s a novel that uses a seventeenth-century New England Colonial setting for the purposes of a newly forged nineteenth-century American Republic. And I think that’s part of the interest for writers and readers of Canadian historical fiction now: by taking a long hard look backwards, we place ourselves.¹

¹ Margaret Atwood, ‘In Search of *Alias Grace*: On Writing Canadian Historical Fiction’, *The American Historical Review*, 103.5 (1998), 1503-16 (p. 1512).

For Atwood, the imperative to revisit the past – as exemplified by the ‘spate of historical novels’ in the past few decades – is emblematic of contemporary culture.² It originates from the anxiety about, and desire for, a better understanding of the present (‘who are we now?’), which involves a rethinking of the past (‘where did we come from?’) and is essential for the anticipation of the future (‘where are we going?’). In a wider context, this ‘questioning and assessing climate’ of the contemporary has coincided with the complex self-consciousness about historical discourse which can be traced back to Hayden White’s critical examination of the act of historiography in a series of publications in the 1970s and 1980s.³ By drawing on the similarities between historical writing and storytelling, White proposes that history is a discursive and literary construction of reality, a point that is taken up and developed by Linda Hutcheon in her discussion of postmodern fiction.⁴ For Hutcheon, postmodern fiction is characterised by its foregrounding of ‘epistemological and ontological questions’ about the way we know the past and ‘the ontological status of that past’.⁵ These ‘postmodern’ concerns are echoed in Atwood’s speech, where she claims that contemporary culture is marked by its ‘uneasiness about the trustworthiness of memory, the reliability of story, and the continuity of time’.⁶ However, unlike Hutcheon’s model of ‘historiographic metafiction’, which is criticised by Mark Currie for being dominated by “retrospective” models of narrative’, Atwood’s reflection on the past in relation to her 1996 novel *Alias Grace* suggests a structure of ‘double time’, which, as outlined in the Introduction, evokes a simultaneous backwards narration (in

² ‘In Search of *Alias Grace*’, p. 1510.

³ For examples, see Hayden White, ‘The Historical Text as Literary Artifact’, in *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism*, by Hayden White (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1978), pp. 81-100; Hayden White, ‘The Question of Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory’, *History and Theory*, 23.1 (1984), 1-33.

⁴ Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (London and New York: 1988).

⁵ *Postmodernism*, p. 50.

⁶ ‘In Search of *Alias Grace*’, p. 1515.

terms of the text) and an onward journey (in terms of the reader's experience).⁷ Indeed, *Alias Grace* has structured and thematised the idea of double time in its representation of 'a double story' (which, as Currie argues in his engagement with Tzvetan Todorov, is characteristic of crime fiction): one about crime, the narration of which goes backwards; and one about investigation, the experience of which goes forwards in time.⁸ As we will see, the text revolves around the way in which the fictional doctor, Simon Jordan, tries to recover Grace's notionally repressed memory about her involvement in the murders of her employer Thomas Kinnear and his housekeeper Nancy Montgomery. In doing so, Atwood's *Alias Grace* thematises the process of investigation and readerly hermeneutics in its imaginative reconstruction of the notorious 1843 murders in Upper Canada, thus bringing the issue of the interpretation of historical narrative self-consciously to the fore.

The 'double-story' structure of *Alias Grace* can be seen in a number of neo-Victorian novels that will be examined in this thesis, including Jane Harris's *The Observations* in this chapter, Sarah Waters's *Tipping the Velvet* and *Affinity* in Chapter Two, as well as Michael Cox's *The Meaning of Night* in Chapter Three, although, as we will also see, the forms of double story these novels take are all slightly different and will be discussed from different critical perspectives. For this chapter, I choose to work on two novels that revolve around a riddle concerning the central protagonist – Harris's *The Observations* and Atwood's *Alias Grace* – in order to demonstrate how neo-Victorian literature plays with the dynamic between narrated time and the time of narration as well as the reader's positioning *vis-à-vis* both. As I will argue, this kind of interplay suggests that both novels tell a sort of double story: following Hutcheon, one is about the epistemological concerns of how we 'know' the past and the ontological

⁷ *About Time*, p. 6.

⁸ *About Time*, p. 87.

status of that past, the other is concerned with our empathetic engagement with the textual other. In light of Eve Sedgwick's formulation of paranoid and reparative reading practices, this idea of the double story thus illustrates the way in which neo-Victorian literature plays with the relationship between what Sedgwick calls the 'paranoid' impulse to expose the hidden 'truth' of the past and the 'reparative' desire to reimagine the past, a point that I have explained in detail in the Introduction. As we will see, Sedgwick's work on critical enterprise provides us with a useful alternative to Hutcheon's theory of 'historiographic metafiction' in the discussion of the complicated reading pleasures afforded by neo-Victorian literature. Following Sedgwick, it is arguable that neo-Victorian fiction involves the reader not only in the self-conscious and self-reflexive engagement with the past, but also the ethical encounter with the textual other, which plays an essential part in the construction of a different future.

In what follows, I begin the discussion with an examination of the different reading pleasures of this sort of fiction (i.e., voyeuristic, expository, empathetic) by looking at two texts – Claire Tomalin's *The Invisible Woman* (1990), a biography of Charles Dickens's mistress Nelly Ternan, and Jane Harris's *The Observations*.⁹ I then move to interrogate the self-conscious and self-reflexive nature of the narrative in *The Observations* as a way of demonstrating how neo-Victorian literature explicitly links empathy to the hermeneutic pleasures of reading and raises certain ethical concerns about the text-reader relationship. As I shall suggest, these ethical issues are answered in part by Atwood's *Alias Grace* where the *choices* available to the reader are much more obvious. By linking Amy Coplan's differentiation between empathy as 'self-orientated perspective-taking' and 'other-orientated perspective-taking' with

⁹ Although *The Invisible Woman* is not a neo-Victorian novel, its pre-occupation with the historically marginal character is shared by a great number of neo-Victorian texts and has become a staple of neo-Victorian fiction. Tomalin's text is therefore useful for the examination of the pleasures afforded by this kind of literary reconstruction.

Sedgwick's formulation of paranoid and reparative practices, I examine the way in which the intra-diegetic examples in Atwood's *Alias Grace* 'mirror' different readerly responses to the story of Grace Marks.¹⁰ I shall be concerned with the way in which the reader's empathetic engagement with the text facilitates or frustrates their textual pleasures associated with mystery, suspense and problem-solving, as well as the related complex ethical problems. In light of Currie's formulation of a future-orientated model of reading, I argue that *Alias Grace* encourages contemporary readers to drop their quest for the 'truth' about the past and to empathise with the textual other by taking what Coplan calls 'other-orientated perspective-taking', an act which inaugurates an ethical possibility and involves a concern about the future.

The 'guilty' pleasures of neo-Victorian literature

With a recurrent focus on Victorian 'otherness' (e.g. the figure of the criminal, maid, actress, etc.), neo-Victorian literature constitutes a repository of voyeuristic and cryptic pleasure for the contemporary reader. The imaginative reconstruction of the life of the historically excluded 'other' presents neo-Victorian fiction as what Marie-Luise Kohlke calls a 'literary voyeuristic excursion' into the past.¹¹ The beginning of Claire Tomalin's *The Invisible Woman*, a biography of Charles Dickens's mistress Nelly Terman from 1857 until his death in 1870, perfectly captures the cryptic reading pleasure, which, as we will see in the following analysis, is afforded by a great many neo-Victorian texts:

¹⁰ Coplan, 'Understanding Empathy', pp. 3-18.

¹¹ Marie-Luise Kohlke, 'The Neo-Victorian Sexsation: Literary Excursions into the Nineteenth-Century Erotic', in *Probing the Problematics: Sex and Sexuality*, ed. by Marie-Luise Kohlke and Luisa Orza (Oxford: Oxford Inter-Disciplinary Press, 2008), pp. 345-56 (p. 345). Ebook.

This is the story of someone who – almost – wasn't there; who vanished into thin air. Her name, dates, family and experiences very nearly disappeared from the record for good. What's more, she connived at her own obliteration; during her lifetime her children were quite ignorant of her history. Why and how this happened is the theme; and how – by a hair's breadth – she was reclaimed from oblivion despite strenuous efforts to keep her there.¹²

Tomalin's biographical account of this 'invisible' woman clearly induces the reader's curiosity, rendering their reading of the text a transhistorical journey with the promise of some remarkable discovery. The focus on how the text operates against the 'strenuous efforts' that have, in the past, been made to keep the history of the 'real' Nelly Terman invisible reinforces the liberal fantasies surrounding the ownership of 'knowledge'. By telling readers that the text they are reading will enable them to 'gaze' at an 'invisible' woman and her secret romance with the canonical English writer Charles Dickens, the text positions readers as the privileged voyeurs of a hermeneutic puzzle, a reading practice that is mirrored by the way Tomalin plays with the letter 'N' in the text:

She was 'N', otherwise Nelly, Miss Ellen, the Patient, the Princess, E. L. T., the Dear Girl, the Darling, the magic circle of one, the little riddle, Miss T., Miss Fernan, Miss Terman, Miss Teman, Miss Turnham and probably MrsTringham. She played a central part in the life of Charles Dickens at a time when he was perhaps the best-known man in Britain. The relationship lasted for nearly thirteen years, from 1857 until his death in 1870. Her full name was Ellen

¹² Claire Tomalin, *The Invisible Woman* (London: Penguin, 1991), p. 3. Further references to this book are given after quotations in the text.

Lawless Ternan, though she was almost always known as Nelly and will be called Nelly in these pages. She was born in 1839; was eighteen to Dickens's forty-five when they met; and outlived him by forty-four years. (p. 10)

Tomalin's account of what the letter 'N' stands for demonstrates how the narration of the historical other varies in different contexts, which, from a metacritical point of view, echoes Hayden White's aforementioned argument of history as a discursive and literary construction of reality. Also, the textual focus on Nelly's experience as a professional actress reveals the controversy around, and social position of, the actress in the Victorian period. This 'paranoid' agenda clearly feeds the contemporary reader's desire to 'peep into' the hidden patterns of repression and violence of the past.

Although Tomalin's *The Invisible Woman* is a historical biography rather than a neo-Victorian novel, the link it makes between voyeurism and the hermeneutic pleasures of reading can be found in a great many neo-Victorian novels. Harris's *The Observations*, for example, plays with the reader's desire for both voyeuristic consumption and exposition or mystery-solving through its use of a provocative intra-diegetic narrator. Set in and around the world of a rundown country estate in the vicinity of Edinburgh in 1863, the story is narrated by one of the many marginal figures of Victorian fiction, a fifteen-year-old Irish prostitute, Bessy Buckley. It revolves around how Bessy, who chances upon a job as a maid to Arabella Reid, the twenty-year-old mistress of the house, gradually falls under the spell of her eccentric mistress. The story finishes with the admittance of Arabella to a mental asylum, an ending that clearly engages with, and responds to, contemporary examinations of the Victorian construction of female madness.¹³ In terms of its formal structure, the text comprises a

¹³ For discussion, see Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture, 1830-1980* (London: Virago, 1987); Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic:*

collection of diaries and first-person reports addressed to specific audiences and/or the extra-diegetic reader. With a focus on the dialogic nature of Bessy's narrative, I examine how the text manipulates its readers by positioning them as voyeurs at first and then subtly embeds a metacritical comment on the reader's consumption of the other's suffering. By looking at the way the narrator plays with the idea of 'farewell' at the end of the text, I further demonstrate how – in light of Currie's work on narrative temporality – a future-orientated mode of reading encourages the reader to drop their desire to demystify the past suffering of the vulnerable other and to empathise with them instead.

Similar to the beginning of Tomalin's *The Invisible Woman* (as discussed above), Harris's *The Observations* actively engages the reader in the hermeneutic process by presenting the reading experience as a journey, complete with the promise of solving a riddle:

My missus often said to me, 'Now then Bessy, don't be calling me missus.' She said this especially when the minister was coming for his tea. My missus wanted me to call her 'marm' but I always forgot. At first I forgot by accident and then I forgot on purpose just to see the look on her face.¹⁴

Beginning with an out-of-context dialogue regarding the form of address between Bessy and her mistress, Harris's text makes both curiosity and suspense a feature of the reading process, setting up a hermeneutic quest to 'solve' the nature of the relationship between these two characters. The final message from Bessy at the end of this extract

The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination, 2nd edn (Yale: Yale Nota Bene Press, 2000).

¹⁴ Jane Harris, *The Observations* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p. vii. Further references to this novel are given after quotations in the text unless otherwise stated.

connects Bessy with the reader, who, at this stage in the novel may be given to believe that *s/he* is her intra-diegetic addressee of the text: ‘But wait on. I am getting ahead of myself. Let me begin nearer the beginning’ (p. vii). By revealing Bessy’s awareness of, and care for, her interlocutor, this message clearly indicates that Bessy and her interlocutor will travel together on the journey that lies ahead, thus causing the reader to drop their guard and get involved in ‘solving the mystery’. In addition, the fact that the novel begins with a material journey – from Glasgow to Edinburgh – reinforces the sense that the reader will travel with Bessy on the narrative journey that follows.

This process of expository reading is complicated by the text’s belated introduction to Bessy’s *intra*-diegetic addressees: the ‘gentlemen readers’ who first appear on page 63 of the novel: ‘I have been assured that this document is only for the PRIVATE perusal of one or two gentlemen’ (original emphasis). Bessy’s mention of her gentlemen readers instantly clarifies who the ‘real’ interlocutors of the text are and repositions the reader as a voyeur rather than a fellow-conspirator. This shift of textual positioning is arguably designed to provoke and reinforce the reader’s voyeuristic and erotic pleasures. By reinforcing the secrecy of Bessy’s narrative (‘[Dr Lawrence] has shown me the locked cupboard where the manuscript is to be kept’ (p. 520)), the text raises further questions about the status of Bessy’s account: for example, who has permitted the reader access to her writing? Who is mediating her writing for the gentlemen readers *to us*? The textual illusion that Bessy’s manuscript must have been prepared for publication by a third party other than Bessy herself caters for the reader’s voyeuristic interests. Further, if the readers pause for a moment, they will realise that all these layers of narration are the invention of the ‘real-life’ author, Jane Harris. The image of the secret, locked-away manuscript, in this context, makes all the readers somehow complicit in the revelation. This implied complicity presents the act of

reading a means of erotic manipulation. Although Bessy – the narrator – repeatedly warns her narratee(s) that ‘these extracts should *not* be reproduced by *anybody* in *any way shape or form whatsoever* without prior application to me’ (p. 107, original emphasis), we know that anyone who has access to the key would have access to her secret – and we hope that this will include ourselves as readers. As Lynne Pearce argues, whenever readers prepare to read a text they become ‘liable to’ – or look forward to – ‘enchantment’.¹⁵ Thus, this literal key reported upon in the text becomes a symbolic one: a code, as it were, for the readers to ‘crack’. Also, the associated meaning of the lock – a latent desire for being opened, being inserted into, and being occupied – presents the image of the locked-up manuscript as a tantalising, if cryptic, pleasure which permeates the text as a whole. It therefore produces two layers of pseudo-erotic pleasure for the reader; first, by simulation of a tactile encounter with the text, the reader is arguably ‘inserting’ themselves into its body when they open it. As Karin Littau suggests, the relation a reader has to a book is one between ‘two bodies’: ‘one made of paper and ink, the other flesh and blood’.¹⁶ And, from there, the reader is able to peep into, read, spy upon, and perhaps inhabit the physical body of Bessy during their reading of her story.

Indeed, by positioning readers as voyeurs of Bessy’s story, Harris’s text aligns its extra-diegetic readers with Bessy’s gentleman readers: they are united through the shared desire for the self-indulgent pleasure of consuming the other’s past. The complicity between the extra-diegetic readers and the intra-diegetic addressees is further established through the hint that Bessy’s manuscript has been leaked by her gentlemen readers and that they, themselves, are the ‘editors’ of the text that is now presented to us. By highlighting the fact that Dr Lawrence has the key to the drawer

¹⁵ *Feminism and the Politics of Reading*, p. 86.

¹⁶ Karin Littau, *Theories of Reading: Books, Bodies and Bibliomania* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006), p. 2.

where the secret manuscript is locked, Bessy's account creates a textual illusion that Dr Lawrence is the 'leaker'. Her insistence on the secrecy of her writing and her trust in Dr Lawrence's promise of using her writing for medical research only serve to make the reader uncomfortably complicit in the text's production and consumption; arguably we are corrupted by sharing with the gentlemen readers a desire to consume Bessy's story without her permission.

The text's ethical imperative becomes evident when the 'other' role played by the gentleman figure in Bessy's life is revealed: i.e., their use of her as a prostitute. Despite Bessy's unwillingness to recall these events ('Indeed it makes me feel queasy to remember some of the terrible things that followed and I dread writing about it' (p. 152)), Dr Lawrence insists that Bessy should 'relay the story "warts and all"' (p. 520). In response to this 'authorial' request, Bessy recalls her first sexual encounter, which is, in effect, a violent rape:

He stroked my head and sighed. 'Yes, dear. And you are doing it very well. Just keep still and – let me –' He made some minor adjustment to my undergarments. 'That's better. Are you all right?'

I nodded, hoping that he could not see that my eyes had filled with tears. It was quite clear to me what was going to happen.

'Now then,' he says. 'All being well and as advertised, this should cause you a small amount of discomfort.'

When it came to it, I could not bear the thought of his dirty great jack anywhere near me and so I imagined in its place nothing more sinister than an umbrella (indeed it might as well have been an umbrella for the pain it caused me), a gentlemans umbrella, silky and unfurled [...]. (p. 237)

By using a quite pornographic and titillating image – ‘an umbrella’ – and a cue word for readerly participation – ‘imagine’ – the text corrupts its readers, associating them uncomfortably with Bessy’s gentlemen readers once again. Bessy’s subsequent account of her traumatic experience as a child prostitute seems to suggest that the pressure she is put under to tell her story could be viewed as a second rape: ‘I was a virgin on five more occasions that week, each time with a different man’ (p. 237). The extent to which Bessy has been exploited by Dr Lawrence and his associates becomes clear when it is later revealed that her story is supposedly incidental to their main object of investigation: Arabella’s ‘Observations’ – a treatise that adopts tools of phrenology and ethnography (i.e., observation, mapping, diagramming and charting) in the study of ‘*the nature, habits and training of the domestic class*’ of the nineteenth century (p. 90, original emphasis). If, as Bessy says, Dr Lawrence ‘only wishes to examine the case of missus, in the hope of being more help to her’ (p. 520), it is questionable why Bessy’s own early sexual experiences matter. Bessy’s later account of how she tries to publish Arabella’s *The Observations* gives us a hint. As Bessy narrates, a Mr G from a certain publishing house begs to know ‘the true identity of “the mysterious Arabella A”’, whom he assumes to be ‘a man, *pretending* to be a woman’ (p. 518, original emphasis). Mr G’s speculation brings to the fore the vicarious and scopophilic pleasures the gentlemen readers expect from the idiosyncratic accounts of the particularities of the domestic class, which also speaks to the experience of the extra-diegetic reader. By exposing the many layers of readerly intrigue surrounding the intertwined stories of Bessy and her mistress in this way, the text raises certain ethical concerns about the reader’s desire and expectation: are the readers, too, reading the text simply in order to gaze at Bessy’s ‘body’? In this context, the text may be seen as making a metacritical

comment on the way we, as readers, are implicated in a scopophilic and cannibalistic project.

The text further ‘mocks’ prurient readerly desire by revealing the ‘fictional’ nature of Bessy’s account at the end of the story:

Now that I am finished, Doctor Lawrence wants to know what I think of what I have wrote. All I can say is that it will be strange to be no longer doing it. I may have to think of another story to write to fill up those few hours between completing work and laying my head upon the pillow. (pp. 520-21)

Bessy’s choice of vocabulary – ‘another story’ – hints at the fact that all she has been reporting is only what people want to hear, but not necessarily the ‘truth’. Such a message is made explicit much earlier when Arabella asks Bessy to tell ‘the truth’ about her past:

‘Now then, Bessy,’ she says. ‘Tell the truth and shame the Devil.’

My mother was forever telling me I wouldn’t know the truth if it flew up my skirt and said ‘How do you do’. (pp. 16-17)

The foregrounding of Bessy’s exaggerated unreliability as a narrator, nevertheless, prompts the reader to reflect on the ethical consequences surrounding the prurient and voyeuristic consumption of the other. From the previous discussion, it is clear that the ‘unfavorable’ character traits of Bessy, such as her unreliability and slyness, are the only means through which she could resist the gentlemen readers’ attempt to consume her life for ‘squalid’ pleasures (p. 520).

Arguably, Bessy's appeal for the reader's empathetic engagement with her plight emerges from these layers of suspicion and intrigue, as evidenced by the 'double' message she leaves us at the end of the story: 'So there you go. Farewell. *Au revoir*. Or, as they say where I come from, safe home' (p. 521, original emphasis). Bessy's use of both 'Farewell' and '*Au revoir*' in her farewell message seems to address two different categories of readers. The fact that the French phrase '*Au revoir*' anticipates a future reunion seems to gesture towards the beginning of a different literary journey, a journey that she probably does not want to travel with her intra-diegetic gentlemen readers, but *us*. Here the implied sense of future-orientation, when seen in the light of Mark Currie's work on narrative temporality, has the potential to transform the meaning of preceding events in Bessy's account. In this context, we may suggest that Harris's *The Observations* tells – or at least promises – a kind of 'double' story: a retrospective one underpinned by a voyeuristic desire to consume the suffering of a vulnerable female subject; and, second, a future-orientated one which looks forward to travelling with Bessy as her friend and ally. Indeed, when we look at the text again, we come to realise that Bessy has advertised the doubleness of her story through her repeated use of the irreducible fraction ' $\frac{1}{2}$ ' throughout her account, which results from dividing one by two. Recognition of this sense of duality and provisionality at the cryptic heart of the texts calls upon the self-conscious reader to shift their positioning and review what they have read from the position of an empathiser rather than a voyeur.

From the above discussion, we can see how self-consciously neo-Victorian fiction plays with the reader's voyeuristic tendencies. Through its 'mirroring' of the reader's prurient consumption of the other's past in the intra-diegetic action, Harris's *The Observations* not only exposes our voyeuristic complicity as readers, but also

raises questions about what it takes to resist a voyeuristic reader-positioning. These ethical issues are, in part, answered by Atwood's *Alias Grace* where the choices available to the reader are much more clearly signposted. By telling us a story that is ultimately impossible to verify, *Alias Grace* reveals how both the law and hermeneutics flounder in the face of lack of evidence. In what follows, I focus on the intra-diegetic examples in the text which mirror the hermeneutic pleasure of reading and the empathetic engagement between the text and the reader. I take up Amy Coplan's conceptualisation of empathy as a kind of 'other-orientated perspective-taking' in this chapter since, as I shall illustrate, its preoccupation with the self-other dynamic resembles Eve Sedgwick's discussion of the text-reader relationship in her formulation of paranoid and reparative reading practices, a point that I have examined in detail in the Introduction.

Empathy and/as perspective-taking

With a focus on the dynamic between the empathiser and the empathised in the mechanism of empathy, Coplan suggests that there are at least two appreciably different forms of perspective-taking. For her, *self-orientated perspective-taking* is a 'default mode of mentalizing', referring to the imaginative process of how we 'imagine ourselves in the other's circumstances'.¹⁷ In this case, the aim of the self's engagement with the other is to 'understand and predict others' mental states' (p. 10). The problem of self-orientated perspective-taking, as Coplan points out, is that it is 'subject to [the] egocentric bias' since we attempt to 'imagine how the other is feeling or what she is thinking' with a belief in the 'greater similarity between self and other' (ibid.). Also, it might lead to what psychologists call 'false consensus effects' since self-orientated

¹⁷ 'Understanding Empathy', p. 10. Original emphasis. Further references to this chapter are given after quotations in the text unless otherwise stated.

perspective-taking can assume similarities that do not exist or fail to attend sufficiently to crucial areas of difference (p. 11). In this context, Coplan proposes that only *other-orientated perspective-taking* is the genuine form of empathy. Here she defines other-orientated perspective-taking as the representation of ‘the other’s situation from the other person’s point of view’ rather than imagining being oneself undergoing the other’s experience (p. 10). In other words, other-orientated perspective-taking focuses on the other and moves us beyond our own experiences (p. 11). Having said so, it does not mean that other-orientated perspective-taking is absolutely immune to different forms of potential bias, which may be linked with one’s familiarity and identification with the other. Nevertheless, as Coplan highlights, it helps to diminish ‘egocentric biases’ that are implicated in self-orientated perspective-taking (p. 10).

Coplan’s formulation of empathy involves a clear self-other differentiation and is a three-level process. First, the observer adopts the other’s perspective; secondly, the observer imagines being the other undergoing the other’s experience; thirdly, the observer empathises with the other while retaining a clear self-other distinction. As Coplan maintains, in empathy ‘[w]e relate to the other as an other but share in the other’s experience in a way that bridges but does not eliminate the gap between our experiences’ (p. 16). This self-other distinction thus makes it clear that we are not ‘introject[ing] the other’s feelings and thoughts or substituting them for [our] own’ in our empathetic encounter with the other (p. 15). In this context, as Coplan holds, empathetic engagement will not lead to any ‘personal distress, false consensus effects, and prediction errors’ (p. 17).

From the above discussion, we can see that Coplan’s conceptualisation of empathy is nevertheless quite restrictive, rendering empathy a highly ‘motivated and controlled process’ (p. 14). Indeed, as Coplan highlights, empathy requires a certain

level of ‘mental flexibility’ and ‘regulatory mechanisms’ that can help to ‘modulate our level of affective arousal and suppress our own perspective’ (ibid.). Following Coplan, empathy does not guarantee any cognitive understanding or comprehension of the other.¹⁸ Instead, it provides us with what she calls ‘experiential understanding’, which does not necessarily – although it may – ‘figure into the explanations, predictions, and even the actions of the observer’ (p. 17). As Coplan explains:

To say that empathy is ‘experiential’ is to say (1) that it is itself an experience for the observer; (2) that it is a representation of, among other things, the experience of a target; and (3) that it involves representations that are not representations of causes and effects. (p. 17)

Coplan’s account makes it clear that empathy does not foster ‘scientific explanations’ of the other, which, to her, are often ‘mechanistic’, ‘functional’, ‘dynamical’, ‘teleological’, or ‘genetic’ (p. 17). The point that empathy should be seen as ‘one source of data among many’ suggests empathy could help us understand another person from the ‘inside’ in a certain way, but not comprehensively (p. 18). In this context, we may consider Coplan’s formulation of empathy as a useful alternative to the hermeneutics of suspicion (see Introduction), a point that is essential for the discussion of the different reading positions available to the reader in this chapter.

With a focus on the other, it is also arguable that Coplan’s formulation of empathy inaugurates an ethical possibility, one that takes the form of ‘empathetic caring’ and refers to the way in which the self ‘attend[s] to the specific needs of

¹⁸ A similar argument may be seen in Stueber’s *Rediscovering Empathy*, where Stueber examines empathy in the context of contemporary philosophy of mind and the debate about the nature of our mindreading abilities. Like Coplan, Stueber acknowledges that although empathy could help us understand the other, there are certain limitations on its ability to make sense of the other.

particular others and attempt[s] to understand the situation from the other's point of view'.¹⁹ As Coplan and Peter Goldie note, the link between empathy and care is made by Nel Noddings in her influential but also controversial book *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (1984).²⁰ In her work, Noddings approaches different models of empathy from a gendered perspective. For her, the projection-model of empathy is 'a peculiarly rational, western, masculine way of looking at "feeling with"'.²¹ In this context, she considers empathy as a sort of receptivity (a similar argument will be seen in the phenomenological approach to empathy in the next chapter). This empathetic receptivity, or what Noddings calls 'engrossment', is not initiated with an attempt to analyse or to interpret the other's circumstances as objective data (although we may learn to do this during the process of empathetic engagement).²² Rather, it begins with attending to, and sharing, the other's feeling.²³ Noddings's discussion resembles the difference Coplan makes between empathy and scientific explanation. It nevertheless risks being criticised for suggesting an unequal caring relationship; that is, the carer gives what is good for the person who is cared for, without receiving care in return, a point that is well evidenced by Noddings's choice of the unidirectional mothering as an ideal model of caring.²⁴

The above ethical concerns about empathy are essential for my reading of neo-Victorian novels in this chapter, since Harris's *The Observations* and Atwood's *Alias Grace* engage with the issue of empathy at a metafictional level. In what follows, I move to the examination of the way in which the intra-diegetic examples in *Alias*

¹⁹ Coplan and Goldie, 'Introduction', p. xxvii.

²⁰ 'Introduction', p. xxvii.

²¹ Nel Noddings, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p. 30.

²² Noddings, p. 30.

²³ Noddings, p. 30.

²⁴ For discussion of Noddings's relational ethics, see Sarah Hoagland, 'Some Thoughts about "Caring"', in *Feminist Ethics*, ed. by Claudia Card (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1991), pp. 246-63.

Grace ‘mirror’ different different readerly responses to the story of the protagonist Grace Marks. By linking Coplan’s formulation of empathy with Sedgwick’s conceptualisation of paranoid and reparative reading practices, I illustrate how the text provokes, plays with, but then challenges the ‘irresistible’ pleasure of hermeneutic practice. In doing so, I take up Jackie Shead’s lead in arguing that Atwood’s *Alias Grace* provides the reader with the means to ‘interrogate and adjust’ their reading of not only the literary text but also the material world.²⁵

Empathy versus the hermeneutic pleasures of reading in *Alias Grace*

Margaret Atwood’s 1996 novel *Alias Grace* is a good example of how the concept of empathy may be interrogated in the following three ways. First, since Grace is represented as a member of – to quote Maria J. Lopez – ‘the marginal [and vulnerable] communities of immigrants, servants, and mad people’, the text epitomises a key issue for empathy studies; that is, in which ways do people empathise with, or express an emotional obligation toward, individuals that they would construe as outsiders?²⁶ Secondly, Grace’s position as a convicted murderess sets ethical and moral responsibilities in conflict with one another. Further, the deployment of first-person narration and other narrative techniques that seem to foster an empathetic engagement between the reader and the textual other highlights the problematic relationship between empathy and judgment. In this context, the text raises several questions about the ways in which the reader *can* empathise with a character whose behaviour is positioned outside the reader’s expected moral code. Thirdly, *Alias Grace* ‘mirrors’

²⁵ Jackie Shead, *Margaret Atwood: Crime Fiction Writer: The Reworkings of a Popular Genre* (London and New York: Routledge, 2015), p. 37.

²⁶ Maria J. Lopez, “‘You Are One of Us’”, *Communities of Marginality, Vulnerability, and Secrecy in Margaret Atwood’s *Alias Grace**, *English Studies in Canada*, 38.2 (2012), 157-77 (p. 157).

and anticipates possible reader responses through its portrayal of different intra-diegetic characters, such as Dr Simon Jordan, who – to a certain degree – functions as a ‘surrogate’ reader to ourselves due to our shared desire for understanding Grace; likewise, the Governor’s wife, who takes some pleasure in consuming the other’s life through her archiving of infamous murder stories. From a metacritical point of view, this mirroring demonstrates that a self-serving reading strategy could risk ignoring histories of structural oppression and therefore raises further ethical concerns. It also presents the reader with a *choice* about how they approach the text themselves. As we shall see, unlike Harris’s *The Observations*, *Alias Grace* not only offers a metacritical comment on the reader’s cannibalistic consumption of the other’s suffering, but also enables them to empathise with the character through the text’s exploitation of what Mark Llewellyn calls the ‘palimpsestuous’ existence of critical and creative narratives in the text.²⁷ As Llewellyn observes, these narratives speak ‘in odd, obscure, and different ways to one another’, thus leaving the reader with different reading choices.²⁸

As noted above, Atwood’s *Alias Grace* self-consciously links the hermeneutic pleasure of reading with empathy through its use of first-person narration, a narrative technique that is often deemed as facilitating the cognitive and affective engagement between the narrator and the reader. Beginning the story with Grace’s status as a convicted murderess and the quest to prove or deny her involvement in the murder, the text combines a cue towards empathetic reading with a simultaneous incentive to solve the mystery, which functions as what Roland Barthes calls the ‘hermeneutic code’ for the whole text.²⁹ As Grace puts it, ‘[i]f there has been a crime, they want to know who

²⁷ ‘What is Neo-Victorian Studies?’, p. 170.

²⁸ ‘What is Neo-Victorian Studies?’, p. 170.

²⁹ See Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. by Richard Miller (London: Cape, 1975).

did it'.³⁰ However, to a certain degree, the different underlying self-other dynamic makes the hermeneutic practice *incompatible* with what Coplan calls 'genuine empathy' (i.e., other-orientated perspective-taking) (p. 10). As my review of Sedgwick's critique of the hermeneutics of suspicion in the Introduction has already shown, hermeneutic critical practice is underpinned by a vigilant and self-defensive mechanism which puts the reader's needs before that of the textual subject. A similar argument may be found in Tammy Amiel-Houser and Adia Mendelson-Maoz's reading of the text. As they observe, 'the process of obtaining knowledge of an individual's mind is reductive, aggressive and grounded in oppressive power-relations'.³¹ Following Amiel-Houser and Mendelson-Maoz, the attempt to make sense of the other involves a desire for mastery over the other in order to inhabit their mind.

The proto-psychotherapy sessions between Dr Simon Jordan and Grace in the text well illustrate how the hermeneutics of suspicion, and its underlying oppressive power-relations, impedes Simon from empathising with Grace, or grasping in a more nuanced way what kind of person Grace is. Narrated from Grace's perspective, the following conversation presents the relationship between Simon and Grace as one between the analyst and the analysand:

He smiles his lopsided smile. What does Apple make you think of? he says.

I beg your pardon, Sir, I say. I do not understand you.

It must be a riddle. I think of Mary Whitney, and the apply peelings we threw over our shoulders that night, to see who we would marry. But I will not tell him that.

³⁰ Margaret Atwood, *Alias Grace* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 1996), p. 91. Further references to this novel are given after quotations in the text unless otherwise stated.

³¹ Tammy Amiel-Houser and Adia Mendelson-Maoz, 'Against Empathy: Levinas and Ethical Criticism in the 21st Century', *Journey of Literary Theory*, 8.1 (2014), 199-218 (p. 210).

I think you understand well enough, he says.

My sampler, I say.

Now it is his turn to know nothing. Your what? he says.

My sampler that I stitched as a child, I say. A is for Apple, B is for Bee.

Oh yes, he says. But what else?

I give my stupid look. Apple pie, I say.

Ah, he says. Something you eat.

Well I should hope you would, Sir, I say. That's what an apple pie is for.

And is there any kind of apple you should not eat? he says.

A rotten one, I suppose, I say.

He's playing a guessing game, like Dr. Bannerling at the Asylum. There is always a right answer, which is right because it is the one they want, and you can tell by their faces whether you have guessed what it is [...].

The apple of the Tree of Knowledge, is what he means. Good and evil. Any child could guess it. But I will not oblige. (p. 40)

Simon's questioning techniques vividly illustrate how the aversion to surprise traps what Sedgwick calls 'a paranoid reader' in a 'dogged' and 'stif[f]' temporality as well as an anxious mode of anticipation, a point that I have discussed in detail in the Introduction.³² Following Sedgwick, the paranoid approach Simon takes toward Grace makes it impossible for him to get rid of the formulaic description of Grace as 'a celebrated murderess' (p. 25). As we see from Grace's perspective, the questions he raises about the meaning of the apple subtly reveal his expectation for a biblical and

³² *Touching Feeling*, p. 147.

moral interpretation ('The apple of the Tree of Knowledge, is what he means.'), which also expresses his moral judgment ('Good and Evil'). Simon's attempt to 'prove' his presumption about Grace's personality is further exemplified by his 'cherry-picking' interpretive performance. Grace's initial response that apple means the 'sampler' she stitches as a child is quickly discarded by Simon. The other link she makes between apple and apple pie is closer to the 'right' answer Simon expects, as evidenced by his following question about whether there is 'any kind of apple you should not eat'. By guiding Grace to respond in a particular way and selectively picking up the information he needs, Simon's interrogation of Grace exemplifies the way 'paranoia' – as 'a highly organized way of interpreting information' – works.³³ As Sedgwick observes, during a paranoid reading practice, 'what is possibly relevant can be quickly abstracted and magnified, and the rest discarded'.³⁴ Following Sedgwick, it is arguable that Simon's prejudices make it impossible for him to empathise with – or genuinely understand – Grace, since he is not attending to Grace's own feelings and thoughts.

The text further complicates the discussion of the relationship between hermeneutics and empathy by suggesting that Grace is an unreliable narrator. Although it shifts between Grace's narration and Simon's, the text never gives the reader any chance to read any of the records Simon writes down during his conversations with Grace. This raises a few questions about Grace's reliability as a narrator: To what extent can we believe her account? When she says affirmatively that whatever she says would be twisted, how could we (dis)prove it? These questions would appear to deliberately encourage the reader to approach Grace's narration with suspicion. Like *The Observations, Alias Grace* challenges and, to a certain degree, tests the limit of readerly empathy through its portrayal of an unreliable narrator. As the real-life author

³³ Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, p. 135.

³⁴ Silvan Tomkins cited in Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, p. 135.

Margaret Atwood comments in the previously mentioned speech, Grace is ‘a storyteller’ and what she tells her audience (probably referring not only to Simon but also to us) is ‘selective’.³⁵ In this regard, reading *Alias Grace* is to be involved in a protracted ‘guessing game’ (p. 40). This paranoid imperative is made openly visible in both the thematic and the narrative structure of the text. Using the name of quilt patterns as the subtitle for each chapter, the text functions as an attempt to sew together, or to ‘complete’, all these shattered fragments of the past. Metaphorically, the text as a whole can also be read as a quilt pattern, the key part of which is missing. The metaphor of quilting can thus be read as embodying the reader-writer relationship at a metafictional level, which engages the reader in the hermeneutic practice. With a focus on the gendered nature of quilting, Earl G. Ingersoll presents a similar argument in his reading of *Alias Grace*. For Ingersoll, as a form of ‘women’s work’, quilting is full of ‘hidden messages’, through which author and reader, like quilter and observer, may look for ‘hints of hidden messages’.³⁶ In this regard, the text embeds a variety of ‘coding’, while the ‘code’ has been irrecoverably lost.³⁷

The textual refusal to provide a definite answer on whether Grace is innocent or guilty renders her case ‘a puzzle [the reader] could not guess’ (p. 202). By playing with the ambiguity about Grace’s involvement in the murders, *Alias Grace* lays all the traps and incentives towards a paranoid reading, which, following Jackie Stacey’s reading of Melanie Klein’s theory of paranoid and reparative positions (see Introduction), is

³⁵ ‘In Search of *Alias Grace*’, p. 1515.

³⁶ Earl G. Ingersoll, ‘Engendering Metafiction: Textuality and Closure in Margaret Atwood’s *Alias Grace*’, *American Review of Canadian Studies*, 31.3 (2001), 385-401 (p. 388).

³⁷ Ingersoll, pp. 388-89. Critics have discussed Atwood’s metaphorical use of quilting in this text from various perspectives, such as gender, historical narration, metafictionality, postmodern knowledge and truth. A few examples include but are not limited to: Kamala Gopalan, ‘Weaving New Patterns in *Alias Grace*’, in *Margaret Atwood: The Shape Shifter*, ed. by Coomi S. Vevaina and Coral Ann Howells (New Delhi: Creative Books, 1998), pp. 75-81; Coomi S. Vevaina, ‘Quilting Selves: Interpreting Margaret Atwood’s *Alias Grace*’, in *The Shape Shifter*, pp. 66-74; Margaret Rogerson, ‘Reading the Patchworks in *Alias Grace*’, *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 33.1 (1988), 5-22; Magali Cornier Michael, ‘Rethinking History as Patchwork: The Case of Atwood’s *Alias Grace*’, *Modern Fiction Studies*, 47.2 (2001), 421-47.

something very few of us can resist.³⁸ The following account of Grace's inner monologue on her bewildering personality demonstrates the irresistible pleasure of hermeneutic reading and the challenge of trying *not to* weave the known facts into a plausible narrative:

I think of all the things that have been written about me – that I am an inhuman female demon, that I am an innocent victim of a blackguard forced against my will and in danger of my own life, that I was too ignorant to know how to act and that to hang me would be judicial murder, [...] that I am of a sullen disposition with a quarrelsome temper, that I have the appearance of a person rather above my humble station, that I am a good girl with a pliable nature and no harm is told of me, that I am cunning and devious, that I am soft in the head and little better than an idiot. And I wonder, how can I be all of these different things at once? (p. 23)

In light of Sedgwick's formulation of paranoid reading, this observation may be seen to illustrate how the paranoid imperative to demystify the hidden 'truth' about Grace's involvement in the murders could trap the reader, too, in a compulsive cycle of repetition: by trying to interpret Grace's personality from all possible perspectives, the reader could end up with a highly contradictory impression of Grace (she is 'innocent', 'ignorant'; but also 'cunning' and 'devious'). In this manner, the text raises an epistemological question about how we approach a historical subject whose story has been mediated in too many contradicted, fragmented, and layered ways, and also an

³⁸ Stacey, p. 45.

ontological question about the nature of our relationship with the other(s) we find in history.

A similar process can be seen in Simon's reflection on Grace's behaviour, where the text self-consciously and self-reflexively shows how the hermeneutic practice – as exemplified by the reader's desire to weave known facts into a plausible cause-and-effect narrative – will inevitably trap them in a circuit of ambivalence.

Narrated from Simon's perspective:

She hasn't refused to talk – far from it. She's told him a great deal; but she's told him only what she's chosen to tell. What he wants is what she refuses to tell; what she chooses perhaps not even to know. Knowledge of guilt, or else of innocence: either could be concealed. But he'll pry it out of her yet. He's got the hook in her mouth, but can he pull her out? Up, out of the abyss, up to the light. Out of the deep blue sea. [...]

What he wants is certainty, one way or the other; and that is precisely what she's withholding from him. (p. 322)

This extract fully demonstrates that Simon's approach to Grace is premised on what Sedgwick calls 'the protocols of unveiling'.³⁹ The metaphors he uses in describing his relationship with Grace – that '[h]e's got the hook in her mouth' in order to pull Grace 'out of the abyss, up to the light. Out of the deep blue sea' – illustrates again the point Sedgwick makes about the paranoid position, during which distrust plays a central role. As argued in the Introduction, this kind of critical enterprise begins with the hypothesis that the 'true' meaning of the text is hidden and will only be discovered through critical

³⁹ *Touching Feeling*, p. 143.

and vigilant interpretation. With a focus on the hostile text-reader relationship afforded by this kind of paranoid practice, Sedgwick points out that the paranoid reader survives only by approaching reading through the incentive of fear: '[s/he] *can never be paranoid enough*'.⁴⁰ In this context, the reader will be trapped in a compulsive cycle of repetition, since s/he would 'inevitably be suspicious of the interpretations [they] inspire'.⁴¹ Indeed, as we see from Simon's account, his desire for the 'truth' – or 'certainty' as he puts it – traps him in a cycle of self-doubt: 'Perhaps he's been too tentative, too accommodating'; or 'it's his methods that have been at fault' (p. 322). In this context, the text may be seen as making a metacritical comment on the paranoid strategy. Trying to pin down the past does not help Simon understand Grace in any plausible way, which proves, again, Sedgwick's argument that '[p]aranoia knows some things well and others poorly'.⁴²

Indeed, Atwood's *Alias Grace* self-consciously promotes this hermeneutic quest by incorporating various medical, poetical, journalistic and legal texts about Grace's experience into the pages of the novel, all of which centre on the question of Grace's innocence or guilt. However, the self-conscious textual engagement with this paranoid impulse ultimately seems to mock this kind of approach. Through the use of intra-diegetic examples, the text challenges the reader's attempt to reveal the 'truth' from an ethical perspective by linking together the ideas of exposure and violence. The metaphors Simon uses to describe his relationship with Grace are characterised by images of what Jeanette King terms 'penetration'.⁴³ He imagines himself 'open[ing] her up like an oyster' (p. 133); he describes his approach towards Grace's mind 'as if it is a locked box, to which [he] must find the right key' (ibid.). Similarly, in the case of

⁴⁰ *Touching Feeling*, p. 127. Original emphasis.

⁴¹ Bersani cited in Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, p. 126.

⁴² *Touching Feeling*, p. 130.

⁴³ Jeannette King, *The Victorian Woman Question in Contemporary Feminist Fiction* (Basingstoke: Palsgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 74.

Grace's husband, James Walsh, the mechanisms of exposure are deployed repeatedly in order to fulfil his prurient and self-indulgent pleasure of consuming the other's suffering. Narrated from Grace's perspective, the following account illustrates how James 'likes to picture the sufferings [...] like a child listening to a fairy tale' (p. 456):

If I put in the chilblains and the shivering at night under the thin blanket, and the whipping if you complained, he is in raptures; and if I add the improper behaviour of Dr. Bannerling towards me, and the cold baths naked and wrapped in a sheet, and the strait-waistcoat in the darkened room, he is almost in ecstasies; but his favourite part of the story is when poor James McDermott was hauling me all around the house at Mr. Kinnear's, looking for a bed fit for his wicked purposes, with Nancy and Mr. Kinnear lying dead in the cellar, and me almost out of my wits with terror; and he blames himself that he wasn't there to rescue me. (p. 457)

Indeed, the fact that the scenario ends with James's claiming responsibility for Grace's sufferings exposes the perversity of the 'empathy' that has invaded in this relationship:

Every once in a while Mr. Walsh becomes very sad; he takes hold of my hand and gazes at me with the tears in his eyes, and he says, To think of the sufferings I have caused you.

I tell him he did not cause me any sufferings – it was others that caused them, and also having plain bad luck and bad judgment – but he likes to think it was him that was the author of all, and I believe he would claim the death of my poor mother too, if he could think of a way to do it. (p. 456)

This disturbing account of James's obsessive fascination with, and avid penchant for, stories of Grace's suffering and exploitation raises huge questions about what the readers are doing when they attempt to empathise with the suffering of others. Grace's narrative of her past is the means by which James arrives at a comprehensive possession of her. And at the end of the novel, this is literally true: Grace marries James after being granted a pardon, and since then 'all trace of her vanishes' (p. 465). James's reaction to Grace's story graphically illustrates how he takes self-indulgent pleasure from the paranoid repetition of his fantasies, explicitly linking violence and sexual harassment with the hermeneutics of exposure.

However, before we lay any moral judgment on the prurient fantasies of Dr Jordan and Mr Walsh, it is essential for the reader to reflect on their own hermeneutic reading of Grace's story: are we complicit in the same act of violence against Grace when we, too, desire and expect to get a clear answer about whether she is guilty or innocent of her crime, something that always 'she refuses to tell' (p. 322)? Are we, too, indulging some prurient pleasure when we desire to travel back to the murder scene? By sharing the interior monologues of our 'surrogate reader', Simon, during his trip to Thomas Kinnear's house, the place where Grace used to live and where the murders took place, the text urges its readers to reflect upon the ethical implications of the hermeneutic textual practice. Before Simon makes a tour around Mr Kinnear's house, he questions himself about '[w]hat can be gained from looking [at the house]' apart from 'a vulgar frisson, and the indulgence of morbid interest' (p. 384). For Simon, as for ourselves as readers, the pleasure of self-indulgence is not easy to resist. Although Simon is aware that actual experiences 'are always a disappointment', '[n]evertheless he knocks at the front door, then knocks again' (ibid.). When Simon arrives at the

cellar, the place where bodies of Mr Kinnear and Nancy Montgomery are found, the voyeuristic desire to peep into the underground vault becomes overwhelming:

With a fine showmanship, the housekeeper saves the cellar till the last. She lights a candle and descends first, cautioning him against slipping. The light is dim, the corners cobwebbed. There's a dank smell, of earth and stored vegetables. 'He was found right here,' says the housekeeper with relish, 'and she was hid over by that wall. Though why they bothered to hide her, I don't know. Crime will out, and out it did. It's a pity that they didn't hang that Grace, and I'm not alone in saying so.'

'I am sure you aren't,' says Simon. He's seen enough, he wants to be gone. At the front door he gives her a coin – it seems the right thing – and she nods and pockets it. 'You can see the graves, too, in the churchyard in town,' she tells him. 'There's no names, but you can't miss them. They're the only ones with pickets round.'

Simon thanks her. He feels he's sneaking away after some discreditable peepshow. What sort of a voyeur has he become? A thoroughgoing one, apparently, as he heads straight for the Presbyterian church; easy to find, since it's the only steeple in sight. (pp. 385-86)

Following the guide of the omniscient narrator, the reader may also walk into the cellar together with Simon, a place which has been depicted in particular detail. Compared to other parts of the house, which have been quickly dealt with by the intra-diegetic narrator ('He is shown the dining room, the library, the winter kitchen; the summer kitchen, the stable and loft' (p. 385)), the description of the cellar extends to several

paragraphs. It is stereotypically gloomy and depressing, as evidenced by the narrator's choice of vocabulary – 'dim', 'cobwebbed', 'dank'. Here again we see how the pleasure of voyeurism overrides ethical concerns. Although Simon is worrying about '[w]hat sort of a voyeur [he has] become', and he 'wants to be gone', he then 'heads straight for the Presbyterian church'. In this scenario, voyeurism relates not only to 'a perverse [sexual] fantasy' (p. 389), as illustrated by Simon's desire 'to marry a suspected murderess (Grace)' (ibid.), but also a paranoid obsession in that Simon wants to visit the grave of Mary Whitney, in order to 'make sure that she really exists' (p. 387). In this manner, Simon's behaviour 'mirrors' the reader's complex erotic and expository desires. It also leads to a further concern, as my previous reading of Sedgwick has already shown, about where this paranoid impulse – the compulsion to repeat – will lead the reader. Following Simon's thorough research of Grace's past, he comes to realise that 'Nothing has been proved. But nothing has been disproved, either' (p. 388).

However, in light of Jackie Stacey's discussion of the relational stances between paranoia and reparation (see Introduction), this ambivalence suggests that paranoid and reparative reading practices always exist in an oscillating relationship with each other. Just as the metaphor of quilting in *Alias Grace* could be understood as a representation of hermeneutic practice, it may also refer to a reparative one, since, as Aritha van Herk describes, the art of quilting is 'an art that pulls together pieces of the past into a cover promising *a warm future*'.⁴⁴ In what follows, I take up van Herk's future-orientated interpretation of the central metaphor of the text and move to the examination of the 'second' story *Alias Grace* tells: one that shifts away from the investigation of the 'truth value' of historical reconstruction, and is more concerned

⁴⁴ Aritha van Herk, 'Partners in Crime', *Canadian Literature: A Quarterly of Criticism and Review*, 156 (1998), 110-13 (p. 110). My emphasis.

with the reader's responsibility for the other. As Atwood remarks in the 1996 Brodfman Lecture, it is important to acknowledge that 'although there undoubtedly was a truth – somebody did kill Nancy Montgomery – truth is sometimes unknowable, at least by us'.⁴⁵ By abandoning what Sedgwick describes as a 'knowing, anxious, paranoid determination' towards the text, the reader could enjoy a constructive and reparative relationship with it, which will enable them to respond to the future with 'affirmative richness' and hope.⁴⁶ In this context, the reading of *Alias Grace* inaugurates a potentially different, if not necessarily better, future.

Reparations

By evoking massively conflicted feelings in the reader, Atwood's *Alias Grace* involves us in the ambivalent circuit of paranoia and reparation. As Jackie Shead states, the text 'interrogate[s] our appetite for scandal, our credulity, and our capacity for empathy'.⁴⁷ With respect to the latter it is clear that Grace's 'confessional' narration of her earlier traumatic experience invites the reader's empathetic engagement, inducing them to abandon their quest to establish her innocence or guilt. Indeed, as Burkhard Niederhoff remarks, 'Grace comes across as a compassionate, reliable and sensible woman, the last person on earth we would suspect of committing the murders she has been charged with'.⁴⁸ However, her textual positioning as an unreliable narrator and her 'real life' conviction as a murderer keep challenging the reader's empathetic tendencies. By playing with the ambivalence between paranoid and reparative reading positions, *Alias Grace* foregrounds a wide range of possible interpretations. In this regard, the novel

⁴⁵ 'In Search of *Alias Grace*', p. 1515.

⁴⁶ *Touching Feeling*, p. 146.

⁴⁷ Shead, p. 165.

⁴⁸ Burkhard Niederhoff, 'The Return of the Dead in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* and *Alias Grace*', *Connotations: A Journal for Critical Debate*, 16.1-3 (2006-2007), pp. 60-91 (p. 77).

becomes what Andrew Gibson calls ‘a form for and expression of an ethics of free, democratic pluralism’, which constitutes Gibson’s understanding of ‘the ethical power of fiction’, a point he takes up from Richard Rorty.⁴⁹ As Rorty elaborates:

The novelist’s substitute for the appearance-reality distinction is a display of diversity of viewpoints, a plurality of descriptions of the same events. What the novelist [as opposed to the philosopher] finds especially comic is the attempt to privilege one of these descriptions. ... What he finds more heroic is not the ability sternly to reject all descriptions save one, but rather the ability to move back and forth between them.⁵⁰

Following Rorty and Gibson, *Alias Grace* may therefore be seen as a good example of a text promoting ethical practice on the reader’s part, since it moves ‘back and forth’ quite nicely between different interpretations of the protagonist Grace. If we consider the text as a *trial* of Grace, as illustrated by the way in which it sets itself up as a hermeneutic quest for the ‘truth’, then the ultimate futility of such an approach quickly becomes clear: having examined hundreds of pages of evidence (along with the intra-diegetic characters), we are still no closer to knowing whether she was innocent or guilty. By the same token, this opens up possibilities for ‘reading’ Grace – and the text – reparatively; that is, as Atwood puts it in her 1996 lecture, the importance of ‘listening’ first.⁵¹

As I have already suggested, the invitation to ‘listen’ empathetically to – or with – Grace begins with the first-person narrative of her earlier life experience and the observation that she ‘would like to be found’ and ‘to be seen’ (p. 379). Grace’s desire

⁴⁹ Gibson, p. 8.

⁵⁰ Cited in Gibson, p. 7.

⁵¹ ‘In Search of *Alias Grace*’, p. 1515.

for empathy is also to be found in her subsequent narrative, where she shares her feelings and thoughts with the reader in detail. In this part of narration, Grace traces the family's poverty in Ireland, the miserable journey the family takes to Canada, the traumatic loss of her mother during the voyage, the wretched death of her best friend Mary, and the sexual harassment she suffers throughout her life. Indeed, the nature of this narration challenges our stereotype of Grace as 'a celebrated murderess' (p. 25). As Marie Thérèse Blanc observes, Grace's narration of her life story 'constitutes a *counternarrative* to the novel's collected narratives of her arraignment for murder, of her trial, of her post-trial confession, and of her conviction and incarceration'.⁵²

Blanc's point of 'counternarrative' speaks to my previous discussion of the use of 'double story' in a number of neo-Victorian novels. As I have argued in my reading of *The Observations* in the previous section, the 'second' or 'hidden' story encourages the reader to engage empathetically with the vulnerable other. *Alias Grace* may be seen as adopting a similar strategy: by telling an alternative story about Grace's 'drenched' and miserable life, the text appeals to the reader's feminist concern for the exploitation and mistreatment of women then as now.

The heavily symbolic use of water imagery to conjure up the nature of Grace's oppression is well illustrated by Grace's repeated mention of the different scenes of drowning she has experienced in her life. The first scene of drowning comes when Grace's mother dies of seasickness during their voyage from Ireland to Canada. Grace's family has to dispatch their mother's body to what Ian Baucom describes as the 'unplaceable deeps of the Atlantic Ocean', which traps Grace in an uncanny anxiety and a deep sense of shame.⁵³ This complex feeling is demonstrated in Grace's

⁵² Marie Thérèse Blanc, 'Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* and the Construction of a Trial Narrative', *English Studies in Canada*, 32.4 (2006), 101-27 (p. 106). Original emphasis.

⁵³ Ian Baucom's article 'Found Drowned: The Irish Atlantic' examines the history of Irish immigrants who lost their lives on their voyage to the Atlantic after the Great Famine. I think it is fair to suggest

interpretation of the broken teapot, a souvenir that is given to her mother by Aunt Pauline when they leave Ireland. Clearly the teapot symbolises a powerful maternal family line, and its demise echoes that of her mother. As she says:

I thought it was my mother's spirit, trapped in the bottom of the ship because we could not open a window, and angry at me because of the second-best sheet. And now she would be caught in there for ever and ever, down below in the hold like a moth in a bottle, sailing back and forth across the hideous dark ocean, with the emigrants going one way and the logs of wood the other. (p. 122)

The image of the mother's body as 'a moth in a bottle' sailing back and forth within an enclosed space is powerful and affective. It also highlights the ambivalent situation with which the body itself is confronted. Although enjoying some mobility, in that it can sail 'back and forth', it has been trapped. Further, the use of the past tense in Grace's narrative seems to position the body both historically and ahistorically; it is an event that has happened, but one that will persist 'for ever and ever'. This ambivalence may be seen to signal the predicament of the female body more generally. The agony caused by this state of perpetual suspension is graphically evoked in Grace's description:

I hadn't thought about where she was going until this moment, and there was something dreadful about it, to picture her floating down in a white sheet

that Atwood is responding to this part of Irish history by depicting such a typical image of the traumatic history. Ian Baucom, 'Found Drowned: The Irish Atlantic', *Nineteenth-Century Contexts*, 22.1 (2000), 103-38 (p. 111).

among all the staring fish. It was worse than being put into the earth, because if a person is in the earth at least you know where they are. (p. 121)

Through the use of the cue phrase 'to picture', Grace's vivid account of the nightmare voyage calls for the reader's unreserved empathetic engagement. Indeed, this is a good illustration of how the text self-consciously plays with the empathetic reading position. After recalling the traumatic scene, Grace addresses her intra-diegetic interlocutor, Simon, in the following way: 'Perhaps you would like to open the window' (p. 116), revealing her awareness of how stifling and claustrophobic her narrative is. From a metacritical point of view, this is clearly also an address to the reader. As well as raising uncomfortable questions about the reader's responsibilities to textual others like Grace, it also raises questions about how we deal with the suffering of the vulnerable subjects in the material reality of the present and the future.

In the text, the idea of drowning is associated with female death more than once: Grace's mother's death is but the first of many. It is also a recurrent motif in Grace's own psyche and imagination. When Grace's friend Mary dies of an abortion, she recalls:

[W]hen I did wake up I did not seem to know where I was, or what had happened; and I kept asking where Grace had gone. And when they told me that I myself was Grace, I would not believe them, but cried, and tried to run out of the house, because I said that Grace was lost, and had gone into the lake, and I needed to search for her. (p. 180)

This waterlogged image – tears and the lake – illustrates how Grace has inherited this particular form of ‘feminine death’.⁵⁴ The desire to search for the psychologically drowned self seems to be a compensated attempt to search for the lost mother. Also, the attempt to ‘run out of the house’, with the implication of feeling trapped, resembles Grace’s imagination of her mother being trapped ‘down below in the hold like a moth in a bottle’, ‘sailing back and forth’ without being able to sail beyond ‘the hideous dark ocean’ (p. 122). Here, without confronting the death of Mary, Grace seems to project the sense of loss on herself by using the third-person pronoun to refer to herself and insists that ‘Grace had gone’ (p. 180), repeating the matrilineal heritage as embodied by the unburied, and thus permanently lost, mother’s body. In this regard, the textual portrayal of Grace’s loss dramatises the erasure of the maternal genealogy within patriarchal culture and history, calling for the reader’s attention to the female wellbeing, a point which becomes recurrent in their empathetic engagement with Grace.

As may be seen in the previous discussion, Grace emerges from her own narrative as a complex and multi-faceted character. In light of Coplan’s formulation of empathy, I propose that the complexity of Grace calls for *an advanced empathetic engagement*: one that is underpinned by the reader’s full attention to her situation and their recognition of the circumstances which make her who and what she is. In this regard, the reader, taking the cue from Atwood’s text, needs to let go their hermeneutic quest for the ‘truth’. Here the text’s imaginative reconstruction of Grace’s relationship with Jeremiah the peddler (later Dr DuPont) may be seen as introducing what a ‘reparative’ approach to, and an advanced empathetic engagement with, a vulnerable

⁵⁴ In his discussion of the ‘Ophelia Complex’, Gaston Bachelard traces the symbolic link between women, water and death, remarking that ‘drowning’ becomes ‘the truly feminine death in the dramas of literature and life’. Cited in Elaine Showalter, ‘Representing Ophelia: Women, Madness, and the Responsibilities of Feminist Criticism’, in *Shakespeare and the Question of Theory*, ed. by Patricia Parker and Geoffrey Hartman (New York and London: Routledge, 1985), pp. 77-94 (p. 81).

other looks like. As we will see, Jeremiah is arguably the only character in the story who cares for Grace in a disinterested way and, interestingly, tries to rescue her from her fate from the vantage point of knowing, or guessing, the future; or, to invoke Mark Currie, by taking a ‘future-orientated’ approach to her situation.

Jeremiah is first introduced to the reader as a peddler who visits the servants at the Alderman Parkinson house. His position as a peddler – i.e., he is a ‘giver’ – makes him different from all the other people in Grace’s life, since ‘[n]o one comes to see [Grace] unless they want something’ (p. 38). This time, Jeremiah gives Grace an extra button for the four she has already purchased, because four is considered as ‘an unlucky number’ while ‘[f]ive [is] for luck’ (p. 154). He also reminds Grace that ‘[t]here are sharp rocks ahead’ (ibid.). In hindsight, these words sound prophetic, since shortly after this Mary Whitney becomes pregnant, and dies of an abortion. This is not the only time Jeremiah informs Grace of the forthcoming tragedy in her life. After Grace starts working at Mr. Kinnear’s, she meets Jeremiah again in the kitchen and shares with him the story of Mary and her experience at Mr. Kinnear’s. Jeremiah suggests that Grace should ‘come away’ with him, because Grace would ‘be safer with [him]’ rather than staying at Mr. Kinnear’s (pp. 267, 268). Jeremiah’s ability to foresee Grace’s future and his concern with Grace’s safety seem to suggest that he is ‘one of us’ (p. 155, my emphasis), the extra-diegetic readers, who have a responsibility of care towards Grace after reading/hearing her miserable early life experience. As Jeremiah says to Grace: ‘For I wish you well, and am willing to help you, and care for you. And I tell you truly that you are surrounded by dangers here’ (p. 269).

To a large extent, Jeremiah is the only symbol of hope in Grace’s life, since he never comes to Grace *for* anything. Rather, as Grace says herself, as an ‘old friend’, Jeremiah represents all the past ‘better times’ in her life (p. 265). On many occasions,

Jeremiah is also an embodiment of the reader's desire to save Grace. When Grace is sexually harassed by the coachman during her trip to Richmond Hill, Jeremiah happens to be there and rescues her from further abuse. As Grace recalls:

Jeremiah took his stick, and brought it down on the man's arm, and he let go of me; and then Jeremiah pushed him, and he staggered backwards against the wall of the inn, and sat down in a pat of horse dung; at which the others now jeered at him, as that sort will always jeer at those who are getting the worst of it. (pp. 206-07)

This scenario is thus a good example of the empathy that exists between Jeremiah and Grace. Grace's remark that 'he was trying to look into my mind, but in a kindly way' presents Jeremiah as a caring and gentle person (p. 265). In contrast to what other male characters in this text would do (i.e., Dr Simon Jordan, Mr. Kinnear, Jamie Walsh), Jeremiah does not take any prurient pleasure from Grace's suffering, as we see in the previous extract: although he initially 'looked over in a puzzled way', he quickly 'hurried over' (p. 206). He also refers to Grace as a 'lady' (ibid.).

In this manner, the character of Jeremiah the peddler may be seen to embody the values and behaviour of a reparative reader of the text; a point that is made explicit in Grace's response to the letter that Jeremiah sends her after the Hypnotism:

I hope this will reach you, but if it does, I don't know how you will get word back to me, as any letter I might have they would be sure to open. However I think you did send me a message, as some months ago I received a bone button, addressed to me though with no signature, and the Matron said, Grace, why

would anyone send you a single button? And I said I did not know. But as it was the same pattern as the button you gave to me in the kitchen at Mrs. Alderman Parkinson's, I felt it must be you, to let me know I was not altogether forgotten. Perhaps there was another message in it also, as a button is for keeping things closed up, or else for opening them; and you may have been telling me to keep silent, about certain things we both know of. Dr. Jordan believed that even common and unregarded objects can have a meaning, or else recall to memory a thing forgotten; and you may only have been reminding me of yourself, which indeed was not needed, as I have never forgotten you and your kindnesses to me, nor ever will. (p. 428)

By comparing the hermeneutics of exposure, as exemplified by Simon's belief in the existence of 'hidden' meaning behind any 'common and unregarded' object, with Jeremiah's empathetic silence and lack of judgment – a kind of silence that is 'out of affection and fellow-feeling' (p. 428) – the account may be seen to signal the value of empathetic openness as an alternative to the hermeneutics of suspicion. Also, by positioning Jeremiah as the attentive listener, Grace's account helps to illustrate Coplan's formulation of other-orientated perspective-taking and the ethical possibility it inaugurates, which, as argued before, may take the form of a responsibility for care. Following Jeremiah's lead, the way to empathise with Grace is to surrender a 'knowing, anxious, paranoid determination', and to acknowledge her suffering, including her isolation and starvation in jail, her traumatic experience of sexual harassment, her vulnerability to objectification and prurient consumption.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, p. 146.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have discussed three different reading positions (i.e., voyeuristic, expository and empathetic) available to the readers in neo-Victorian literature by focusing on Harris's *The Observations* and Atwood's *Alias Grace*. With a focus on the interplay between the narrated time and the time of narration, I have argued that neo-Victorian literature involves the reader in a kind of 'double story': one is about what Hutcheon has suggested as the epistemological concerns about how we access the past and the ontological status of that past; the other involves an ethical investigation of the reader's relationship with the textual other. Following Currie, these two approaches involve two different types of narrative temporality: the former one is dominated by a retrospective mode of narration; the latter is future-orientated. Further, by linking Coplan's formulation of empathy with Sedgwick's discussion of two different critical enterprises – paranoid and reparative readings – I have demonstrated that, through the use of intra-diegetic examples, neo-Victorian literature may prompt the reader to reflect critically upon their own readerly desires and encourage them to adopt a more ethical approach to their reading and – by extension – their human interactions in the material world.

In the next chapter, I move to the discussion of how the reader's empathetic and reparative tendency is often tested in neo-Victorian fiction through the uncomfortable experience of shame. With a focus on the 'intersubjective' nature of shame and a similar self-other dynamic in the phenomenological approach to empathy (i.e., Edmund Husserl, Edith Stein and Dan Zahavi), I suggest that this model of empathy helps us better understand the mechanism by which we come to inhabit other's shame. I then explore how the characters in Sarah Waters's first two neo-Victorian novels – *Tipping the Velvet* and *Affinity* – may be seen to experience shame and how this uncomfortable

feeling is transmitted to the extra-diegetic readers. In contrast to *Alias Grace*, a text which ‘teaches’ the reader the importance of ethical reading through its storyline as well as the way it positions us, Waters’s *Tipping the Velvet* and *Affinity* interrogate the way empathy works through the unsettling feeling of shame. With a focus on the process of how this feeling is transmitted from the characters to the readers, the next chapter thus examines the ways in which the reader’s empathetic response is invoked, tested and challenged.

Chapter Two

Awkward Encounters with Sarah Waters: Shame and Empathy

On my first weekend back to University at the beginning of my third year as a PhD student, I took the bus into town with one of my Asian colleagues for some coffee. We sat on the upper deck of the bus, and started chatting about each other's research progress. For some reason, the blonde female student sitting in front of us turned around and stared at me. She then made a few complaints to her friend, who was sitting on the other side of the bus. Unfortunately I failed to catch what she was complaining about due to the hustle of the bus. But somehow, I felt overwhelmed by a sense of shame and self-hatred at that moment, and could not talk to my colleague any more.

These two students got off the bus after a few stops. When they got off the bus, I tried very hard not to look at them; while at the same time, I wished I could have a look at them without being noticed; or that I could be looked at when I was fully prepared. This ambivalent feeling trapped me painfully, as I started thinking that by 'disappearing' rather than 'being present' I could 'serve others best'.¹

The sense of self-negation impeded me from normal life for the next few days, since I could not do anything but keep thinking about 'Why?' and 'Why me?' The gaze from this particular person – a white, blonde, and possibly British, female – '[s]entenced [me] without trial'.² As Jennifer Biddle elaborates, this kind of gaze 'judges, ridicules, terrorises whatever pretence we might hold of being autonomous, successful, self-determining subjects'.³ Biddle is right – I remember how eager I was to talk to other staff in my department (those who were generally friendly and supportive towards me) about what happened on the bus. I also tried very hard to bring out the issue about the gaze with my Asian colleague, the one who was sitting next to me on

¹ Michael L. Morgan, *On Shame* (New York: Routledge, 2008), p. 24.

² Jennifer Biddle, 'Shame', *Australian Feminist Studies*, 12.26 (1997), 227-39 (p. 227).

³ Biddle, p. 227.

the bus, since I thought we were *the same*. Disappointingly (for me), she said ‘Oh no I didn’t notice that! I didn’t realise you were so upset with it!’ Her remarks made me aware that it is actually shameful to talk about shame to the wrong person. I also had a few tries with other people. Some tried to comfort me by suggesting ‘You probably misunderstood that gaze. Probably that student didn’t mean to look at you – she might just have happened to look back at something.’ Despite its seeming plausibility, this response, nevertheless, denied my feeling of shame and further threatened my sense of autonomy. By contrast, the college wellbeing officer’s reaction helped to relieve my anxiety, since she listened to my narrative without showing any attempt to judge or correct me. The way she helped me to explore my feelings made me feel like she was *empathetic* towards me.

Different people’s reactions to my narrative of shame have made me think about the following questions. First, how does the other’s gaze trigger shame? Why is shame so detrimental to the subject who has been shamed? And, then – thinking about the issue from the interlocutor’s point of view – in what ways can we empathise with the other’s shame? These relationships between self and other, shame and empathy, form the primary critical framework of this chapter. With a focus on shame, this chapter continues the discussion of the reading (un)pleasures afforded by neo-Victorian literature. It examines the ways in which neo-Victorian fiction evokes and plays with the reader’s desire to empathise with characters who are either living or deemed to be living with shame. Also, by tracing out a similar self-other relationship in the mechanism of shame and empathy – in particular, the phenomenological take on it – this chapter explores the ontological and affective intertwinement between self and

other. In doing so, it tests Suzanne Keen's hypothesis that readers are more ready to respond empathetically to 'negative feeling states'.⁴

Shame plays an important role in contemporary writers' imaginative reconstruction of the nineteenth century, although, as far as I am aware, it has been mentioned only in passing by a small number of critics in the field of neo-Victorian studies.⁵ The portrayal of dark family history, sexual deviance, the female body and the 'racial' as well as disabled other in novels such as Sarah Waters's neo-Victorian trio – *Tipping the Velvet*, *Affinity* and *Fingersmith* – Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace*, Sarah Blake's *Grange House* (2001), Darin Strauss's *Chang and Eng* (2001), Barbara Chase-Ribound's *Hottentot Venus* (2003), Belinda Starling's *The Journal of Dora Damage* (2006) and Laura Fish's *Strange Music* (2008) presents readers with different kinds of shame (i.e., sexual, bodily, racial and moral). By revisiting and rewriting these past experiences of shame, neo-Victorian fiction may be seen as revealing – as well as challenging – the process of how these shame-related issues are discursively constructed. Helen Davies's *Neo-Victorian Freakery*, for example, presents a similar argument in her interrogation of the freak show in both Victorian and neo-Victorian contexts.⁶ As Davies argues, the re-imaginative presentation of 'the freak' in neo-Victorian fiction prompts contemporary readers to reflect upon their understanding of the boundary between "normalcy" and the "abnormal".⁷ In doing so, the genre raises important questions about 'social justice', a point that is identified by critics such as

⁴ *Empathy and the Novel*, p. 72.

⁵ A number of contributors to the collection of essays Kohlke and Gutleben edit mention shame in their discussion of sexuality, race, religion and the suffering of the child. *Neo-Victorian Families: Gender, Sexual and Cultural Politics*, ed. by Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2011).

⁶ *Freakery*, p. 15.

⁷ *Freakery*, p. 15.

Kohlke and Davies as a key social and political implication of neo-Victorian literature and culture.⁸

This focus on the discursive construction of shame sheds some light on the process of how subjects are interpellated. It nevertheless risks the danger of ignoring the fact that shame is, first of all, a visceral and bodily experience. As Sara Ahmed observes, shame is ‘a self-feeling that is felt by and on the body’.⁹ Taking into account the physicality of shame, critics such as Eve Sedgwick, Adam Frank and Elspeth Probyn have followed the lead of the American psychologist Silvan Tomkins in construing shame as a primitive ‘affect’.¹⁰ Here the word ‘affect’ is used to highlight the difference in critical interest in the study of shame. As Probyn explains, critics who are interested in ‘cognition, social expression, and the [cultural] interpretation’ of shame tend to use the word ‘emotion’ in their study.¹¹ Those interested in the ‘biological’ and ‘bodily aspects of shame’ prefer ‘affect’.¹² In short, ‘emotion refers to the social expression of affect, and affect in turn is the biological and physiological experience of it’.¹³ For Sedgwick and Frank, Tomkins’s affect theory interests them for its difference from social structure. As we shall see in the next section, their interest is not in establishing or reinforcing the opposition between cultural/discursive and biological/physiological explanations of shame. Rather, by moving between different models of shame, Sedgwick and Frank examine the transformative politics of shame,

⁸ Marie-Luise Kohlke, ‘Introduction: Speculations in and on the Neo-Victorian Encounter’, *Neo-Victorian Studies*, 1.1 (2008), 1-18 (p. 10). *Freakery*, p. 7.

⁹ Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004; repr. 2014), p. 103.

¹⁰ *Shame and Its Sisters: A Silvan Tomkins Reader*, ed. by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995). Elspeth Probyn, *Blush: Faces of Shame* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), p. xiii.

¹¹ Probyn, p. xv.

¹² Probyn, p. xv.

¹³ Probyn, p. 25.

which, as Claire Hemmings explains, refers to the capacity of shame to ‘reconstruct social meaning’.¹⁴

According to Sedgwick and Frank, Tomkins’s affect theory offers a useful alternative to the moralistic, teleological, and developmental understanding of shame, which is exemplified by Foucault’s ‘repressive hypothesis’, Freud’s drive theory and the various self-help and recovery programmes aimed at helping people get rid of shame respectively.¹⁵ As they state, Tomkins’s non-teleological approach to shame provides them with ‘a different place to begin’, which also, to a certain extent, speaks to my ‘discovery’ of their engagement with Tomkins on the issue of shame.¹⁶ As I will elaborate in detail in the next section, Sedgwick and Frank’s approach to shame provides a useful critical tool for this chapter’s examination of the *productivity* of revisiting the shameful past in two selected neo-Victorian novels – Sarah Waters’s *Tipping the Velvet* and *Affinity* – both of which adopt some kind of retrospective mode of narration (quasi-*Bildungsroman* for *Tipping the Velvet* and retrospective diary accounts for *Affinity*). The preoccupation with what Sedgwick later calls ‘an interminable temporality’ in their formulation of shame also suggests a different approach to understanding the relationship between the past, the present and the future in neo-Victorian literature.¹⁷

In what follows, I begin with Jean-Paul Sartre’s account of shame in order to contextualise the discussion of the relationship between shame, subjectivity and intersubjectivity. I then move to the writings of the philosophers Bernard Williams and Martha Nussbaum in demonstrating the process of how shame is constructed as a useful tool in moral development and its related issues respectively. By challenging the

¹⁴ Clare Hemmings, ‘Invoking Affect: Cultural Theory and the Ontological Turn’, *Cultural Studies*, 19.5 (2005), 548-67 (p. 550).

¹⁵ *Shame and Its Sisters*, p. 5.

¹⁶ *Shame and Its Sisters*, p. 7.

¹⁷ *Touching Feeling*, p. 80.

developmental understanding of shame in Nussbaum's work, I take up Sedgwick and Frank's lead in arguing for a non-teleological approach to shame. As I will demonstrate, this approach offers a more productive framework for examining the ontological and affective relationship between self and other, and also the complex relationship between the past, present and future. I finish the theoretical section with a discussion of how shame and empathy are conditioned by a similar self-other relationship by drawing upon the contemporary philosopher Dan Zahavi's work on the phenomenological understanding of empathy.¹⁸ This similarity, as we shall see, explains under which circumstances and in which ways we could possibly empathise with the other's shame.

Interpersonal shame

In his discussion of the role shame plays in our relationship with the other, Sartre tells a story about a voyeur who is looking through a keyhole behind a door.¹⁹ As Sartre narrates, the voyeur feels a sudden sense of shame when he hears footsteps in the hall and realises that someone else might be looking at him at the same time. Although he later finds out that nobody is there, he is ashamed of himself since the imagined other makes him aware that he is the object of the other's consciousness, the object which, quoting Sartre, 'the Other is looking at and judging'.²⁰ Shame, in this context, is the 'original' and vulnerable feeling of 'having my being *outside*'.²¹ In other words, shame is constituted in and through the self's encounter with 'the Other', the figure of which

¹⁸ As Zahavi acknowledges, although phenomenologists such as Max Scheler, Edmund Husserl and Edith Stein have different accounts of empathy, their shared interest in the phenomenology of empathy – and in particular, 'the givenness of others' – provides us with a model of empathy that is different from models such as mirroring and projection. Dan Zahavi, *Self and Other: Exploring Subjectivity, Empathy, and Shame* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 111.

¹⁹ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. by Hazel E. Barnes (London: Methuen & Co Ltd., 1958), p. 259.

²⁰ *Being and Nothingness*, p. 261.

²¹ *Being and Nothingness*, p. 288. Original emphasis.

is abstracted and need not be a particular individual, or an embodiment of any particular judgment. As Sartre elaborates:

Pure shame is not a feeling of being this or that guilty object but in general of being *an* object; that is, of *recognizing myself* in this degraded, fixed, and dependent being which I am for the Other. Shame is the feeling of an *original fall*, not because of the fact that I may have committed this or that particular fault but simply that I have ‘fallen’ into the world in the midst of things and that I need the mediation of the Other in order to be what I am.²²

As Zahavi explains, Sartre’s foregrounding of the other in shame makes it clear that for him shame reveals ‘our relationality’ and ‘our being for others’.²³ In Sartre’s context, this awareness is also painful and ‘merciles[s]’ since ‘I’ cannot know myself in the same way as others can due to the lack of ‘required self-distance’.²⁴ In this regard, Sartre’s account of shame may be seen as presupposing a hostile or negative relationship between self and other. As we shall see, this understanding of self-other relationship is taken up by Bernard Williams and Martha Nussbaum in their respective interrogations of the role shame plays in moral construction and social justice.

Applying Sartre’s story on voyeurism to his discussion of ‘social shame’, Williams demonstrates the role ‘the other’ – be it imaginary or real – plays in the discursive construction of shame:

[T]he imaginary observer can enter very early in the progression towards more generalised social shame. Sartre describes a man who is looking through a

²² *Being and Nothingness*, pp. 288-89. Original emphasis.

²³ Zahavi, p. 213.

²⁴ Zahavi, p. 213.

keyhole and suddenly realises that he is being watched. He might think that it was shameful to do it, not just to be seen doing it, and in that case, an imagined watcher could be enough to trigger the reactions of shame.²⁵

As Williams argues, the fact that the voyeur in Sartre's story does not necessarily need to be caught in order to be ashamed suggests that shame could be ethically valuable for, or function constructively in, moral development. In Williams's development and application of Sartre's work, shame is not only a matter of being seen, but of being seen by an observer 'with a certain view'.²⁶ Shame is therefore construed as a kind of judgment that operates between people of 'heteronomous' values.²⁷ In this context, the act of anticipating shame (in order to avoid it) could help to guide a future action: that the self might change the way s/he behaves by anticipating what the other will see. As Stuart Zane Charmé points out, this understanding of shame is linked with the modern concept of civility, which functions as 'a mechanism for regulating relations between different individuals and groups within society'.²⁸

This presupposition of an antagonistic self-other relationship also renders the construction of social shame liable to prejudices and biases. As Sara Ahmed observes, due to the inherent hierarchy or 'asymmetry of power' between different social groups, it is possible that the marginal group might be shamed by the powerful ones for things that they probably should not be ashamed of, such as sexuality, gender and race.²⁹ This power dynamic between 'the shamer' and 'the shamed' is also an issue that Martha Nussbaum examines in her criticism of the use of shame/shaming in law and social

²⁵ Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), p. 82.

²⁶ Williams, p. 82.

²⁷ Williams, p. 78.

²⁸ Stuart Zane Charmé, 'Civility and Its Defenses: Shame, Bad Faith, and Religion', in *Vulgarity and Authenticity: Dimensions of Otherness in the World of Jean-Paul Sartre*, by Stuart Zane Charmé (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1991), pp. 42-76 (p. 42).

²⁹ Sara Ahmed, *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 9.

justice.³⁰ For Nussbaum, the use of shame in the public system of law risks the danger of ‘divid[ing] society into ranks and hierarchies’, which is against the ideology of a liberal democratic society (p. 232). Also, as Nussbaum warns, the fact that shame – unlike guilt – pertains to one’s sense of self rather than specific acts suggests that the use of shame penalties might further depress an already fragile ego, which would lead to ‘more, rather than less, violence [and aggression]’ (p. 236).

Nussbaum’s argument is built upon Max Scheler’s understanding of shame as ‘a painful awareness of inadequacy’ (p. 186). With the aid of object-relations theory, Nussbaum considers shame – and in particular, the attempt to get rid of ‘primitive shame’ – as central to the development of self. By examining the infant’s experience of shame, Nussbaum positions primitive shame as ‘the recognition of our own non-omnipotence and lack of control’ after we leave the mother’s womb and come to the uncontrollable external world:

[A]ll infant omnipotence is coupled with helplessness. When an infant realizes that it is dependent on others, and is by this time aware of itself as a definite being who is and ought to be the center of the world, we can therefore expect a primitive and rudimentary emotion of shame to ensue. For shame involves the realization that one is weak and inadequate in some way in which one expects oneself to be adequate. Its reflex is to hide from the eyes of those who will see one’s deficiency, to cover it. (p. 183)

Here Nussbaum makes it clear that although shame could begin in early infancy, the cognitive content of shame exists only when one becomes aware of ‘one’s own being’

³⁰ Martha Craven Nussbaum, *Hiding from Humanity: Disgust, Shame and the Law* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004; repr. 2006), p. 232. Further references to this book are given after quotations in the text unless otherwise stated.

(p. 184). By examining the interaction between the infant and the caregiver (i.e., the mother), Nussbaum argues that primitive shame is the consequence of the infant's attempt to control the mother who refuses to be controlled, which often results in the ambivalence of the child's early emotions. This state of ambivalence, which originates from the infant's awareness that his/her love and hate direct toward the same object, is also examined in the work of Melanie Klein. As argued in the Introduction, Klein's examination of the infant's relationship with what she calls 'the good breast' and 'the bad breast' fully illustrates how paranoia and reparation oscillate between each other. However, unlike the non-teleological temporality in Klein's formulation, Nussbaum's account of shame involves a developmental and progressive understanding of shame. She believes that one's maturity is marked by their departure from narcissism and primitive shame:

[A]t a certain point children will be able to renounce envy and jealousy along with other attempts to control. They will use the resources of gratitude and generosity that they have by now developed – and developed in part on account of their guilt and sorrow – to establish the relationship on a footing of equality and mutuality. They acknowledge that they will always need love and security, but they see that this can be pursued without a jealous attempt to possess and control. (p. 224)

The problem with this, as Nussbaum herself acknowledges, is that this process of 'genuine mutuality' is difficult to achieve since the primitive shame we experience as an infant may only be 'partially overcome by the later development of the child's own separateness and autonomy' (pp. 187, 185). Shame is therefore construed as a volatile

emotion that is difficult and sometimes impossible to control. It is in this context that Nussbaum argues against the use of ‘shame penalties’ since they might spoil one’s self-esteem and ego and lead to more aggression and depression (p. 236). As Nussbaum observes, the process of maturation or equilibrium is ‘highly prone to destabilization by forces both personal and social’ and is thus ‘a precarious achievement’ (p. 224).

In the context of Nussbaum’s argument, I propose that the imperative to undo shame may be seen as leaving the self *less* able to cope with shame when it does ‘erupt’ in adult life. It is arguable that the desire to get rid of shame will inevitably trap the self in shame, since shame – as in Nussbaum’s context – is about ‘lack of control’ (p. 261). As we have seen from Sartre, the sense of incompetence in shame is triggered by the vulnerable feeling of the self being objectified, a process which, to a certain extent, presupposes the existence of an omniscient other. In this context, it is impossible to get rid of the shameful feeling about lack of control. In his sociological study of shame, Jack Katz presents a similar argument:

[T]he other can see behind me, underneath me, the way I turn my torso and head to regulate my gaze. What is revealed to oneself in shame [...] is a kind of omniscience about oneself that only the Other can possess.³¹

Following Katz, the more we try to undo shame, the more we will feel ashamed, since the other possesses something we have been desiring but will never be able to regain.

But does this mean that there is nothing we can do with shame? Sedgwick and Frank’s conceptualisation of shame also takes up the concept of primitive shame from object-relations theory, but – in contrast to Nussbaum – they understand it as a sort of

³¹ Jack Katz, ‘Shameful Moments’, in *How Emotions Work*, by Jack Katz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), pp. 142-74 (p. 150).

‘origin myth’.³² This is not to say that Sedgwick and Frank perceive shame as something essentially biological or physiological. For them, the difference between biology and social construction is that between ‘differently structured residual essentialisms’ (p. 20). This is an essential point in Sedgwick and Frank’s critique of what they call the ‘hygiene of [...] antiessentialism’ in poststructuralist theory (p. 17). As Sedgwick and Frank point out, the question is about why specifying affect as “discursively constructed” rather than “natural” should claim the status of a theory’ (p. 16). For them, this theoretical decision of privileging the former runs the risk of essentialism as well, since it fails to take into account ‘the qualitative (i.e., biological) difference among [...] different affects’ (p. 17). By challenging the opposition between cultural/discursive and biological/physiological explanations of affect, Sedgwick and Frank call for a critical attention to how each individual subject *experiences* affect as profoundly ‘embodied’ and ‘essential’ regardless of how it circulates in society. Also, as we will see in the next section, by moving between object-relations theory and affect theory, Sedgwick and Frank offer a new way of understanding shame as being *politically productive*. This, in turn, relates to my later discussion of the ethical imperative that appears to be a feature of a number of neo-Victorian fictions and helps us distinguish between the different responses to ‘shameful content’ available to readers (i.e., voyeurism, vicarious consumption or empathetic responsiveness).

The ‘affective turn’

Silvan Tomkins’s writings on affect theory ‘startle’ Sedgwick and Frank, as they put it, ‘for their sharpness and daring, their amplitude, and a descriptive levelheadedness that in the dispiriting context sounds almost surreal’ (pp. 4-5). By positioning affect outside

³² *Shame and Its Sisters*, p. 5. Further references to this book are given after quotations in the text unless otherwise stated.

social signification, Tomkins's work interests Sedgwick and Frank since it provides them with an alternative to poststructuralist approaches to power and also, as Clare Hemmings points out, a useful tool for their formulation of 'social transformation'.³³

Tomkins considers interest, surprise, joy, anger, fear, distress, disgust, contempt and shame as 'innate' affects. His conceptualisation of innate affects is triggered by his observation of how an infant cries. As Tomkins's disciple – the psychologist Donald L. Nathanson – explains, the fact that the infant's first cry has no self-consciousness suggests to Tomkins that there must be some 'biological mechanism' or 'preexisting mechanism' that triggers the infant's cry.³⁴ Requiring no cognitive element, affect is something 'autotelic' in Tomkins's model; having an end or purpose in itself, as opposed to having a teleological drive.³⁵ The following passage from Tomkins is a good example that describes the self-referentiality of affect:

[I]t is enjoyable to enjoy. It is exciting to be excited. It is terrorizing to be terrorized and angering to be angered. Affect is self-validating with or without any further referent. (Cited in Sedgwick and Frank, p. 7)

In explaining the operation of innate affects, Tomkins identifies what he calls the 'density of neural firing' as something responsible for affect activation, which, as Nathanson explains, refers to 'the number and intensity of neural firings per unit time'.³⁶ The way different innate affects are activated by the density of neural firing is explained by the following diagram (see Figure 1), although, as Sedgwick and Frank note, Tomkins remains resistant to 'the specification of *where* or *in what* (presumably

³³ Hemmings, p. 550.

³⁴ Donald L. Nathanson, 'A Timetable for Shame', in *The Many Faces of Shame*, ed. by Donald L. Nathanson (New York: The Guilford Press, 1987), pp. 1-63 (p. 14).

³⁵ Hemmings, p. 552.

³⁶ Nathanson, p. 13.

functionally specialized) *neural locations* this firing is taking place' (p. 11, original emphasis).

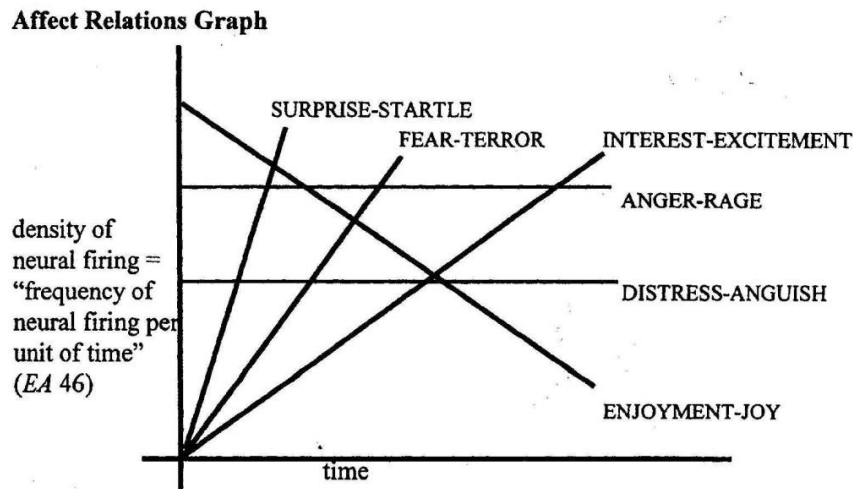


Figure 1: 'Affect Relations Graph'³⁷

Drawing on Anthony Wilden's work on 'digital' and 'analog' communications, Sedgwick and Frank consider the affect system as a kind of 'crossing between analog and digital forms of representation' (p. 9). Here 'digital' is used by Wilden to refer to the 'analytic and two-valued' model of communication, which, as Sedgwick and Frank suggest, can be illustrated by the on/off operation of the drive system (ibid.). 'Analog', instead, refers to the 'dialectical and many valued' form of communication (ibid.). As Sedgwick and Frank note, Tomkins's formulation of the affect system yields a model that encompasses both digital and analog communications, in which these two representations 'leap-frog or interleave with one another' (p. 13). This point is well illustrated by the way in which the on/off of neural firing will activate any of the affects over the dimension of time. Also, unlike the drive system, the affect system as a

³⁷ Silvan Tomkins, 'The Quest for Primary Motives: Biography and Autography of an Idea', in *Exploring Affect*, ed. by V. Virginia Demos (New York: The Press Syndicate at the University of Cambridge, 1995), pp. 27-63 (p. 46).

whole ‘has no single “output”’ and is ‘indifferent to the means-end difference’ (Tomkins cited in Sedgwick and Frank, p. 7). As Elspeth Probyn describes, it operates in an ‘and/and/and/and’ model.³⁸ Indeed, as illustrated by the diagram, there is a moment when certain affects (e.g., enjoyment-joy and distress-anguish, anger-rage and interest-excitement) may be seen to burst into life spontaneously. For Sedgwick and Frank, Tomkins’s formulations thus demonstrate ‘how things differentiate: how quantitative differences turn into qualitative ones’ (p. 13). As we will see in the following discussion, this understanding is essential in Sedgwick’s argumentation of the political productivity of shame.

The reason for why shame, along with contempt and disgust, is not included in the affect relations diagram is that shame, in Tomkins’s model, takes the form of a responsive or secondary affect and is positioned in relation to interest. As Tomkins observes:

Like disgust, [shame] operates only after interest or enjoyment has been activated, and inhibits one or the other or both. The innate activator of shame is the incomplete reduction of interest or joy. Hence any barrier to further exploration which partially reduces interest ... will activate the lowering of the head and eyes in shame and reduce further exploration or self-exposure. ... Such a barrier might be because one is suddenly looked at by one who is strange, or because one wishes to look at or commune with another person but suddenly cannot because he is strange, or one expected him to be familiar but he suddenly appears unfamiliar, or one started to smile but found one was smiling at a stranger. (cited in Sedgwick and Frank, p. 5)

³⁸ Probyn, p. 21.

Following Tomkins, shame is consequent upon interest in a particular object or event and comes about only when that interest is interrupted in some way. It is what Nathanson calls ‘a programmed response’ to an impediment to the preexisting affect – interest or joy – when there still remains a competent stimulus for the preexisting affect.³⁹ Or, as Sedgwick and Frank alternatively express it, shame is a response to ‘the *incomplete* reduction of interest or joy’ (p. 5, my emphasis). Taking the residual interest into consideration, Sedgwick suggests that shame may also be considered as ‘a desire to reconstitute the interpersonal bridge’.⁴⁰ Indeed, as my personal anecdote at the beginning of this chapter suggests, my sense of shame is triggered by the reduction or disruption of a particular kind of interest, which takes the form of my desire to become part of the local community and not to exist as the ‘racialised’ other. My subsequent attempt to reconnect with the other – be it the ‘shamer’ or any of my friends – fully illustrates how necessary it is to reconstruct interpersonal communication in order to alleviate that intense feeling of shame.

By linking shame with interest, Tomkins’s model provides us with a useful approach to understanding the way in which neo-Victorian fiction plays with the reader’s generic reading expectations and desires. As we will see in my following analysis of Sarah Waters’s *Tipping the Velvet* and *Affinity*, both texts deploy some ‘immersive strategies’ to provoke the reader’s voyeuristic and participatory reading interest at first.⁴¹ Both then ‘disrupt’ and – to a certain degree – reprimand or shame the reader’s passive consumption of queer sexuality in the re-imagined Victorian world, which may be seen as prompting the reader to reflect upon what an ‘appropriate’ ethical approach to the queer subject might look like. In light of Sedgwick’s account of

³⁹ Nathanson, p. 138.

⁴⁰ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, ‘Queer Performativity: Henry James’s *The Art of the Novel*’, *GLQ*, 1.1 (1993), 1-16 (p. 5).

⁴¹ Boehm-Schnitker and Gruss, ‘Fashioning the Neo-Victorian’, p. 5.

shame, this ethical encounter with the other involves a mechanism of – to paraphrase Sedgwick – ‘shame-proneness’, which refers to a kind of ‘empathetic receptivity’ to the other’s shame and will be explained in detail in the next section.⁴²

By linking the psychologist Michael Franz Basch’s object-relations approach to shame with Tomkins’s affect theory, Sedgwick positions shame as a productive force in the examination of subjectivity and intersubjectivity. Basch’s own writing on the relationship between shame and identity in the circuit of mirroring between the child and the caregiver is worth quoting here:

The infant’s behavioral adaptation is quite totally dependent on maintaining effective communication with the executive and coordinating part of the infant-mother system. The shame-humiliation response, when it appears, represents the failure or absence of the smile of contact, a reaction to the loss of feedback from others, indicating social isolation and signaling the need for relief from that condition.⁴³

As Sedgwick explains, the communication between the child and the caregiver – in the form of ‘mirroring expressions’ – constitutes ‘primary narcissism’.⁴⁴ Shame, in this context, ‘floods into being as [...] a disruptive moment’.⁴⁵ However, this sense of disruption does not mean that the process of identity formation is terminated. In fact, shame mediates between self and other. In the context of the traditional object-relations developmental narrative, shame is therefore perceived as what defines the space

⁴² ‘Queer Performativity’, p. 14. My use of the concept ‘empathetic receptivity’ is drawn from the work of Lou Agosta and will be explained in detail in the next section. Lou Agosta, *A Rumor of Empathy: Rewriting Empathy in the Context of Philosophy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

⁴³ Cited in Sedgwick, ‘Queer Performativity’, p. 5.

⁴⁴ ‘Queer Performativity’, p. 5.

⁴⁵ ‘Queer Performativity’, p. 5.

wherein a sense of self will develop, as evidenced by the psychiatrist Frank Broucek's claim that "shame is to self psychology what anxiety is to ego psychology – the keystone affect".⁴⁶ As we have also seen from Nussbaum, object-relations theory considers the mitigation of shame as a sign of maturity. However, in contrast to the progressive understanding of shame, Sedgwick and Frank position shame as a productive force in their interrogation of subjectivity and intersubjectivity. Their aim is not to find ways to help us get rid of shame. Rather, they are interested in exploring the way in which the self will be transformed *in* and *through* shame. And this is why Tomkins's affect theory interests them. As they argue, Tomkins's writing is not only '[s]ublimely alien' to 'the developmental presumption or prescription of a core self' (p. 7). It is also 'sublimely *resistant*' to such a presumption (ibid., original emphasis).

The way shame transforms the self is well illustrated by Sedgwick's analysis of the phrase 'Shame on you', which links to her use of J. L. Austin's speech act theory to explain the ways in which particular utterances are instrumental in conferring identity to the speakers concerned (e. g., 'I do' in the marriage ceremony):

The absence of an explicit verb from 'Shame on you' records the place in which an I, in conferring shame, has effaced itself and its own agency. Of course the desire for self-effacement is the defining trait of – what else? – shame. So the very grammatical truncation of 'Shame on you' marks it as the product of a history out of which an I, now withdrawn, is *projecting* shame – toward another I, an I deferred, that has yet and with difficulty to come into being, if at all, in the place of the shamed second person. The verblessness of this particular performative, then, implies a first person whose singular/plural status, whose

⁴⁶ 'Queer Performativity', p. 5.

past/present/future status, and indeed whose agency/passivity can only be questioned rather than presumed.⁴⁷

Sedgwick's analysis of how shame effaces the self suggests that the subjectivity of the shamed being 'remains to be specified' and is 'always belated'.⁴⁸ The idea of subjectivity as to-be-constituted further explains the role shame plays in the construction – or more precisely, transformation – of identity; shame is a state or moment of 'suspended' being in which the subject is 'without essence' and hence open to future metamorphosis. As Sedgwick states, 'shame and identity remain in very dynamic relation to one another, at once deconstituting and foundational'.⁴⁹

Shame and empathy

Following Sedgwick, the role shame plays in subjectivity and intersubjectivity suggests that shame is 'the affect that mantles the threshold between introversion and extroversion'.⁵⁰ Put differently, shame produces both 'painful individuation' and 'uncontrollable relationality'.⁵¹ This seemingly paradoxical situation is well illustrated by the following account Sedgwick gives of 'a shame-prone person':

One of the strangest features of shame, but perhaps also the one that offers the most conceptual leverage for political projects, is the way bad treatment of someone else, bad treatment *by* someone else, someone else's embarrassment, stigma, debility, bad smell, or strange behavior, seemingly having nothing to do

⁴⁷ 'Queer Performativity', p. 4. Original emphasis.

⁴⁸ 'Queer Performativity', p. 14.

⁴⁹ 'Queer Performativity', p. 5.

⁵⁰ *Touching Feeling*, p. 38.

⁵¹ *Touching Feeling*, p. 37.

with me, can so readily flood me – assuming I'm a shame-prone person – with this sensation whose very suffusiveness seems to delineate my precise, individual outlines in the most isolating way imaginable.⁵²

This scenario explains the ways in which shame could be transmitted from one person to another. By witnessing the other's shame, the self experiences it vicariously and in doing so s/he becomes aware of the exteriority of him/herself. This process of individualisation involves what the psychologist Doris Bischof-Köhler terms 'self-concept', which, as Dan Zahavi explains, refers to 'the conceptual knowledge we have of ourselves as objects' (p. 229). According to Zahavi, 'to possess a self-concept is to have the capacity to objectify oneself and to recognize one's outwardly appearance, one's exteriority, as (part of) oneself' (ibid.). Drawing upon Zahavi's reading of Bischof-Köhler, we may suggest that for a shame-prone person, the other's shame could evoke self-objectification of the self, which enables the self to experience the other's shame vicariously. Shame-proneness, in this context, is a kind of empathetic responsiveness, which, as Lou Agosta explains, is 'an act directed at the affectivity of the other'.⁵³ As we will see in the next section, by being receptively open to the other's experience, shame-proneness lends a useful perspective to exactly *how* readers can ethically engage with literary texts.

As Zahavi notes, for Bischof-Köhler, shame and empathy can be linked together since both possess a self-concept (p. 229). Indeed, as we have seen from Sartre, shame is triggered by self-objectification, a process that involves an antagonistic self-other relationship. The same holds true for empathy, which, as Zahavi points out, is 'other centred' in Bischof-Köhler's context (ibid.). In this regard, the

⁵² *Touching Feeling*, pp. 36-37. Original emphasis.

⁵³ Agosta, p. 4.

possession of a self-concept is positioned as ‘a critical precondition’ for both empathy and shame (ibid.). In the previous chapter, I have examined the difference between self-orientation and other-orientation in empathy by looking at Amy Coplan’s differentiation between self-orientated perspective-taking and other-orientated perspective-taking in her conceptualisation of empathy. In this chapter, I move to the discussion of the ontological and affective intertwining between self and other in empathy by drawing upon Zahavi’s work on the phenomenological understanding of empathy.

Zahavi observes that phenomenologists such as Max Scheler, Edmund Husserl and his PhD student, Edith Stein, consider empathy as a form of perception, a phenomenon that is conditioned by the differences rather than similarities between self and other. For Scheler, empathetic experience is about ‘the perception of others’, which means, unlike emotional contagion or mirroring, empathy orients towards the other’s feelings (cited in Zahavi, p. 118). A similar view can be found in Husserl’s *Phenomenological Psychology* (1962), where he defines empathy as ‘[t]he intentionality in one’s own ego that leads into the foreign (*fremde*) ego’ (cited in Zahavi, p. 125). As Agosta argues, empathy in Husserl’s context ‘articulates a structure of relatedness’ between self and other, which renders it a crucial step to escape solipsism (although Husserl does not step further by suggesting that the self-other relationship plays an essential role in the construction of subjectivity).⁵⁴ With a focus on the phenomenon of empathy, Husserl explores the way in which we come to know others. Like Scheler, Husserl considers empathy as a process of how we come to perceive – as opposed to infer – the foreign subjectivity:

⁵⁴ Agosta, p. 100.

It would be countersensical to say that it is inferred and not experienced when given in this original form of empathic presentation. For every hypothesis concerning a foreign subject already presupposes the ‘perception’ of this subject as foreign, and empathy is precisely this perception. (cited in Zahavi, p. 127)

Here empathy is seen as a kind of vicarious experience that originates from – and is directed – at the other. This understanding of empathy is taken up and further developed by Edith Stein in her 1917 dissertation *On the Problem of Empathy*, where Stein considers empathy as ‘a kind of act of perceiving *sui generis*’ and ‘the experience of foreign consciousness in general’.⁵⁵ As Agosta explains, this understanding of empathy presents empathy as ‘a form of receptivity to the lived expressions of animate life of the other individual’, which arguably positions the self as the object of the other’s consciousness.⁵⁶ It is in this context that Agosta argues that empathy could develop one’s self-understanding, since it helps the self to shift between different perspectives, a point which resembles my previous discussion of the role shame plays in the construction of subjectivity and intersubjectivity.

It should also be noted that from a phenomenological perspective, the experience of the empathised and that of the empathiser is fundamentally different. As Stein explains, empathy constitutes ‘the non-primordial experience’ which ‘announces a primordial one’:

[W]hile I am living in the other’s joy, I do not feel primordial joy. It does not issue live from my ‘I’. Neither does it have the character of once having lived

⁵⁵ Edith Stein, *On the Problem of Empathy*, trans. by Waltraut Stein (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1964), p. 11.

⁵⁶ Agosta, p. 103.

like remembered joy. But still much less is it merely fancied without actual life. This other subject is primordial although I do not experience its primordality; his joy is primordial although I do not experience is [*sic*] as primordial. In my non-primordial experience I feel, as it were, led by a primordial one not experienced by me but still there, manifesting itself in my non-primordial experience.⁵⁷

Stein's example makes it clear that the other's joy (which is his/her primordial experience) is not experienced by the self as primordial, although the vicarious experience of the other's joy is a primordial act for the self. Following Stein, empathy is an act that is 'primordial as present experience though non-primordial in content'.⁵⁸

Now we can see how both shame and empathy are conditioned by a similar self-other relationship. This link between shame and empathy helps us better understand Sedgwick's advocacy of shame's capacity for transformation both in the reading process and in the material world, which is exemplified by her claim that shame is 'a near-inexhaustible source of transformational energy' 'narratively, emotionally, and performatively'.⁵⁹ As argued before, shame pushes us to see the self in a relational way; that is, to see the self as an object for the other, which means to experience others as subjects who experience us as objects; and also to see others as being-for-me.⁶⁰ In this context, shame involves not only a questioning of the self but also a rethinking of the relationality between self and other and, by extension, one's own otherness. It is therefore considered by Sedgwick as the place 'where the *question*

⁵⁷ Stein, pp. 14, 11.

⁵⁸ Stein, p. 10.

⁵⁹ 'Queer Performativity', pp. 4, 11.

⁶⁰ As Sartre argues, 'the structures of my being-for-the-Other are identical to those of the Other's being-for-me'. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 339.

of identity arises most originarily and most relationally'.⁶¹ Also, the idea that shame as 'a disruptive moment' involves 'a desire to reconstitute the interpersonal bridge' suggests that, for Sedgwick, shame is an intense force for 'metamorphosis, reframing, refiguration, *transfiguration*, affective and symbolic loading and deformation'.⁶²

In what follows, I move to the analysis of two selected neo-Victorian novels – Waters's *Tipping the Velvet* and *Affinity* – both of which present the issue of shame in relation to subjectivity and intersubjectivity. As we shall see, Waters's imaginative reconstruction of lesbian subjectivity in both texts exemplifies Sedgwick's model of reparative practice (see Introduction), a point that is barely recognised and little explored by critics in the field of neo-Victorian studies. In fact, Waters's work is often viewed by critics through what Sedgwick would consider 'paranoid lenses', as evidenced by critical readings which consider her work as the contemporary attempt and desire to demystify hidden patterns of class, gender and sexual violence in Victorian England.⁶³ Waters's bawdy description of queer sexuality in *Tipping the Velvet* and sophisticated plotting of power and possession in *Affinity*, nevertheless, provide contemporary readers with startling, 'juicy', spooky, passionate, and arguably 'shameless' accounts of alternative historiographies of nineteenth-century lesbianism. These accounts evoke, cater to, and – to a certain extent – reprimand the contemporary reader's prurient desire for more knowledge about lesbian sexuality in the Victorian underworld. As we will see, by involving contemporary readers in the construction and consumption of queer subjectivity in the re-imagined nineteenth century, Waters's two texts prompt their readers to reflect upon the role they play in shaming, and the shame

⁶¹ *Touching Feeling*, p. 37. Original emphasis.

⁶² 'Queer Performativity', pp. 5, 13. Original emphasis.

⁶³ For examples, see Mark Llewellyn, "'Queer? I Should Say It Is Criminal!": Sarah Waters' *Affinity* (1999)', *Journal of Gender Studies*, 13.3 (2004), 203-14; Cheryl A. Wilson, 'From the Drawing Room to the Stage: Performing Sexuality in Sarah Waters's *Tipping the Velvet*', *Women's Studies*, 35.3 (2006), 285-305; Rachel Carroll, "'Becoming My Own Ghost": Spinsterhood and the "Invisibility" of Heterosexuality in Sarah Waters' *Affinity*', in *Rereading Heterosexuality: Feminism, Queer Theory and Contemporary Fiction*, by Rachel Carroll (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), pp. 25-44.

of, the other, and encourage them to think carefully about what an ‘appropriate’ ethical response to these texts might look like. In doing so, neo-Victorian fiction inaugurates a kind of ethical responsibility, which, as Sedgwick explains, takes the form of ‘a guilty, empathetic view of the other as at once good, damaged, integral, and requiring and eliciting love and care’.⁶⁴ It is in this context I propose that neo-Victorian literature involves the reader not only in the past, but also the present and the future. To paraphrase the character Nancy’s claim in Waters’s *Tipping the Velvet*, these narratives ‘change us, [...] discontent us with our pasts and offer us new futures’.⁶⁵

Shame, consumption and empathy in *Tipping the Velvet*

Set in Victorian England during the 1890s, Sarah Waters’s debut novel, *Tipping the Velvet*, can be read as what Emily Jeremiah describes as ‘a queer *Bildung*’ that depicts the sexual awakening journey of the protagonist Nancy (Nan) Astley.⁶⁶ The story traces the process of how Nan, a young oyster girl, makes her way to London and develops queer relationships with characters from different backgrounds and social classes. Through its thematic preoccupation with music hall, the text presents the lesbian romance, female bodies and queer sexuality in the form of a theatrical exhibition, which provokes, as well as appeals to, the reader’s desire to ‘feel’ and consume the nineteenth century. With a focus on Waters’s characterisation of the Victorian space, her deployment of Nan’s ‘shameles[s]’ (p. 41) narrative voice and seemingly bawdy description of queer sexuality, I examine how the text facilitates the reader’s voyeuristic and immersive consumption of the Victorian(s) in the first part. I then move

⁶⁴ *Touching Feeling*, p. 137.

⁶⁵ Sarah Waters, *Tipping the Velvet* (London: Virago, 1998; repr. 2002). Further references to this novel are given after quotations in the text.

⁶⁶ Emily Jeremiah, ‘The “I” Inside “Her”’: Queer Narration in Sarah Waters’s *Tipping the Velvet* and Wesley Stace’s *Misfortune*, *Women: A Cultural Review*, 18.2 (2007), 131-44 (p. 136).

to a discussion of the ways in which the text self-consciously stages the link between reading and consumption. In light of Tomkins's and Sedgwick's work on shame, I propose that the textual self-consciousness in *Tipping the Velvet* 'disrupts' the reader's immersive reading process and, to a certain degree, shames their prurient desire for more knowledge about lesbian sexuality, which prompts further discussion about the ethical and political implications of reading. In the final section, I explore how the textual mobilisation of Nan's past shame – in the form of retrospective narrative – involves a self-other dynamic that is similar to the text-reader relationship. This similarity, in light of Sedgwick's mechanism of 'shame-proneness', facilitates the reader's empathetic engagement with the text.

The opening paragraphs of *Tipping the Velvet* make it clear that the story is narrated retrospectively by Nan in later life. This retrospective mode of narration presents the whole story as the journey of Nan's sexual awakening, during which the reader is invited to assume the role of Nan's interlocutor:

Have you ever tasted a Whitstable oyster? If you have, you will remember it. Some quirk of the Kentish coastline makes Whitstable natives – as they are properly called – the largest and the juiciest, the savouriest yet the subtlest, oysters in the whole of England. Whitstable oysters are, quite rightly, famous. The French, who are known for their sensitive palates, regularly cross the Channel for them; they are shipped, in barrels of ice, to the dining-tables of Hamburg and Berlin. Why, the King himself, I heard, makes special trips to Whitstable with Mrs Keppel, to eat oyster suppers in a private hotel; and as for the old Queen – she dined on a native a day (or so they say) till the day she died.

Did you ever go to Whitstable, and see the oyster-parlours there? My father kept one; I was born in it – do you recall a narrow, weather-boarded house, painted a flaking blue, half-way between the High Street and the harbour? Do you remember the bulging sign that hung above the door, that said that *Astley's Oysters, the Best in Kent* were to be had within? Did you, perhaps, push at that door, and step into the dim, low-ceilinged, fragrant room beyond it? Can you recall the tables with their chequered cloths – the bill of fare chalked on a board – the spirit-lamps, the sweating slabs of butter? (p. 3, original emphasis)

In this way, the text purposefully mixes the tropes of gustatory and readerly pleasures through Waters's sensuous description of oysters, the image of which instantly conjures up erotic associations.⁶⁷ It also plays with the reader's hermeneutic desire to learn about and explore the fictional world by encouraging them to follow in Nan's steps and identify with the role of Nan's interlocutor through the text's use of the unidentified second-person pronoun 'you'. The textual details about the location, smell and decoration of the oyster-parlour Nan's family kept provide the reader with a fully-landscaped Victorian world, which provokes and caters to the reader's vicarious desire to enter the past. Waters's description of the corporeal experience of the space renders the act of reading a virtual journey, during which the reader needs to, in the words of Nadine Boehm-Schnitker and Susanne Gruss, 'follo[w] the guides offered by the script' and piece together fact and conjecture in order to fully immerse themselves in

⁶⁷ The use of oysters as symbols of sensual and erotic enjoyment can also be seen in Jeanette Winterson's 1985 novel *Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit*, where the first-person narrator compares the act of eating oranges to that of eating oysters: 'I dropped my pieces like oysters, far back into the throat'. Jeanette Winterson, *Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit* (London: Vintage, 1985; repr. 2001), p. 29.

the contemporary fantasy of a Victorian England that is marked by what Kohlke calls ‘erotic excess’.⁶⁸

In fact, readerly desire is a thematic preoccupation in a number of neo-Victorian fictions. The opening of Michel Faber’s *The Crimson Petal and the White* (2002) is a classic example. Here the narrator may be seen to taunt the readers by drawing attention to their desire for ‘immersion’ in the novel at the same time as reminding them that this is impossible:

This city I am bringing you to is vast and intricate, and you have not been here before. You may imagine, from other stories you’ve read, that you know it well, but those stories flattered you, welcoming you as a friend, treating you as if you belonged. The truth is that you are alien from another time and place altogether.⁶⁹

As Kohlke observes, such texts ‘entic[e] the reader to lose her/himself in the night time underworld of Victorian London’ but then remind them of the reasons that they cannot.⁷⁰ The reader’s consciousness is thus appropriated by the text in a ‘deliberate and paradoxical manner’, which, as Linda Hutcheon explains, refers to the complicated situation that the reader ‘must live within an *acknowledgedly* fictional universe as he reads’.⁷¹ Yet, as Hutcheon continues, the text constantly ‘demands responses comparable in scope and perhaps even in intensity to those of his (the reader’s) life

⁶⁸ Nadine Boehm-Schnitker and Susanne Gruss, ‘Introduction: Spectacles and Things – Visual and Material Culture and/in Neo-Victorianism’, *Neo-Victorian Studies*, 4.2 (2011), 1-23 (p. 5). Kohlke, ‘Sexsation and the Neo-Victorian Novel’, p. 54.

⁶⁹ Michel Faber, *The Crimson Petal and the White* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2002), p. 3.

⁷⁰ Kohlke, ‘Sexsation and the Neo-Victorian Novel’, pp. 54-55.

⁷¹ Linda Hutcheon, *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox* (New York and London: Methuen, 1980), p. 140. Original emphasis.

experience'.⁷² By positioning the act of reading as a process parallel to that of writing, Faber's *The Crimson Petal and the White* exemplifies the ways in which certain neo-Victorian texts put significant demands upon the reader's participation. A similar – but less metafictional – example is Jane Harris's *The Observations*. As we have seen in the previous chapter, the narrator Bessy's account at the beginning frames the whole story as a conversation between Bessy and her unidentified interlocutor: 'But wait on, I am getting ahead of myself. Let me begin nearer the beginning' (p. vii). This dialogic atmosphere invites the reader to follow Bessy and reinforces the sense of readerly participation by creating a parallel between Bessy's actual journey from Glasgow to Castle Haivers (where she meets her mistress Arabella and becomes attracted to her) and the reader's reading process.

Waters's *Tipping the Velvet* plays with this kind of participatory desire by invoking a multisensory, or what Boehm-Schnitker and Gruss call 'synaesthetic', experience of the vividly re-imagined Victorian world.⁷³ The following account of Nan's corporeal experience of the Canterbury Palace of Varieties, where she used to watch the performance of her first lover, Kitty Butler, further demonstrates the way in which the text facilitates the reader's vicarious consumption of a theatrical space:

The Palace was a small and, I suspect, a rather shabby theatre; but when I see it in my memories I see it still with my oyster-girl's eyes – I see the mirror-glass which lined the walls, the crimson plush upon the seats, the plaster cupids, painted gold, which swooped above the curtain. Like our oyster-house, it has its own particular scent – the scent, I know now, of music halls everywhere – the

⁷² *Narcissistic Narrative*, p. 140.

⁷³ 'Spectacles and Things', p. 5.

scent of wood and grease-paint and spilling beer, of gas and of tobacco and of hair-oil, all combined. (p. 6)

With a focus on the perceptible and sensory qualities of the theatre, this account presents a multisensory aesthetic experience of the theatrical space. It is marked by what Arnold Berleant calls ‘the perceptual dimensions through which we experience an environment directly – what we hear, see, and feel with our bodies as we move through it’.⁷⁴ As Berleant argues, ‘these sensory qualities combine with our knowledge and beliefs to create a unified experiential situation’.⁷⁵ Indeed, the textual description of Nan’s corporeal experience of the theatre – and in particular, the smell of it – reinforces the sense of experientiality, which helps to facilitate the reader’s vicarious consumption of the fictional space, a phenomenon that is termed by Boehm-Schnitker and Gruss as ‘vicarious synaesthesia’.⁷⁶ Through these means, then, the reader of *Tipping the Velvet*, like the other neo-Victorian texts mentioned in this section, is proactively seduced into immersing her/himself into the text through a variety of strategies until they become what Lynne Pearce calls ‘the ghostly reader’ who enjoys a ‘ghostly’ presence in the text, even though, at first, they will have no idea of what an uncomfortable experience this is destined to become.⁷⁷

The fact that the theatrical space featured in *Tipping the Velvet* is also linked with lesbian romance and queer sexuality adds another explicitly erotic dimension to the reading pleasures afforded by neo-Victorian fiction. As we see from the text, the relationship between Nan and Kitty develops from the time Kitty performs as a male impersonator at the local theatre to Nan following Kitty to London as the two begin to

⁷⁴ Arnold Berleant, *Living in the Landscape: Towards an Aesthetics of Environment* (Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1997), p. 42.

⁷⁵ Berleant, p. 42.

⁷⁶ ‘Spectacles and Things’, p. 5.

⁷⁷ *Feminism and the Politics of Reading*, p. 24.

work with one another as a singing and dancing double act. The text subsequently introduces the idea of reading as a clandestine and visceral pleasure through its portrayal of a lesbian love story under the cover of theatre performance. Narrated from Nan's perspective, the following account vividly illustrates the way Waters plays with the multiple meanings of – and hence different pleasures afforded by – ‘double act’:

A double act is always twice the act the audience thinks it: beyond our songs, our steps, our bits of business with coins and canes and flowers, there was a private language, in which we held an endless, delicate exchange of which the crowd knew nothing. This was a language not of the tongue but of the body, its vocabulary the pressure of a finger or a palm, the nudging of a hip, the holding or breaking of a gaze, that said, *You are too slow – you go too fast – not there, but here – that's good – that's better!* It was as if we walked before the crimson curtain, lay down upon the boards, and kissed and fondled – and were clapped, and cheered, and paid for it! As Kitty had said, when I had whispered that wearing trousers upon the stage would only make me want to kiss her: ‘What a show *that* would be!’ But, that *was* our show; only the crowd never knew it. They looked on, and saw another turn entirely. (p. 128, original emphasis)

By linking theatrical performance with sexual activity, and drawing attention to the gulf between what the audience sees and what the actors know, the reader is made complicit in the text in a way that is at the same time potentially erotically arousing and shameful. The use of italics explicitly draws the reader's attention to the sexual connotations of the onstage body movements of Nan and Kitty and encourages them to imagine what queer sexuality feels like (‘What a show *that* would be!’) with

information that denied the intra-diegetic audience (i.e., the theatre goers in the narrative).

The text thus draws the reader's attention to their privileged reading position and reinforces their clandestine reading pleasure by making it clear that Nan's 'sexual' performance is for private audiences, and sometimes, the reader's eyes only. After she finds out that Kitty is to marry their manager, Walter, Nan leaves Kitty and quits her performance in the theatre. She spends a few weeks dressing as a man and working as a rent boy on the streets of London. She then meets a wealthy widow, Diana, who is a well-known figure in the sexual underworld of Victorian London and turns Nan into an object of erotic consumption for herself and her friends. The text once again caters to the reader's voyeuristic and vicarious consumption in its illustration of Nan's 'performance' in the bathroom:

Diana's bathroom was a handsome one: I might spend an hour or more in there, soaking in the perfumed water, parting my hair, applying the macassar, examining myself before the glass for marks of beauty or for blemishes. In my old life I had made do with soap, with cold-cream and lavender scent and the occasional swipe of spit-black. Now, from the crown of my head to the curve of my toe-nails, there was an unguent for every part of me – oil for my eyebrows and cream for my lashes; a jar of tooth-powder, a box of *blanc-de-perle*; polish for my fingernails and a scarlet stick to redden my mouth; tweezers for drawing the hairs from my nipples, and a stone to take the hard flesh from my heels. (p. 264)

Waters's meticulous description of Nan's bath and her bodily self-examination in front of the glass displays the female body as a type of theatrical exhibition. The text self-consciously plays with this idea by remarking from Nan's perspective that that '[i]t was quite like dressing for the halls again' (p. 264). The image of glass also speaks to the reader's unsettling relationship with the textual world, in the sense that s/he is both 'trapped *in*' and 'led *through*' it.⁷⁸ Here the reader is, first of all, invited to consume Nan's body and queer sexuality in a visceral and vicarious manner and then led to be critical – and ashamed – of such prurience. By focusing on how Nan is consumed and displayed as an erotic object to Diana's Sapphic circle, *Tipping the Velvet* thus evokes, appeals to, and reprimands the reader's erotic involvement in the text and his/her consumption of lesbian sexuality. The voyeuristic nature of such fascinations is drawn out in the following reflection:

Diana kept me close, for the most part, and displayed me at home. She liked to limit the numbers who gazed at me, she said; she said she feared that like a photograph I might fade, from too much handling.

When I say *display*, of course, I mean it: it was part of Diana's mystery, to make real the words that other people said in metaphor or jest. I had posed for Maria and Dickie and Evelyn in my trousers with the scorch-mark and my underthings of silk. When they came a second time, with another lady, Diana had me pose for them again in a different suit. After that, it became a kind of sport with her, to put me in a new costume and have me walk before her guests, or among them, filling glasses, lighting cigarettes. (p. 280, original emphasis)

⁷⁸ Hutcheon, *Narcissistic Narrative*, p. 141. Original emphasis.

As Mandy Koolen observes, in these scenarios Nan is confined to ‘a figurative stage’ and ‘an object of desire’ for the gazes of Diana and her upper-class community.⁷⁹ Here the reader is made starkly aware of the ways in which a fascination with the ‘deviant other’ can lead into exploitation and, at a metacritical level, *disrupt* their earlier immersion in the text. Taking up Tomkins’s account of shame as outlined earlier, this disruption of the reader’s pleasurable consumption of the text could arguably trigger shame, which may be seen as prompting the reader to reflect upon the ethical implications of their prurient and voyeuristic consumption of the other. In what follows, I move to an examination of the use of retrospective narrative and intradiegetic examples in Waters’s text (i.e., the characters’ own experience of consumption, pleasure and shame) in demonstrating how the text puts the idea of consumption and the experience of shame into circulation, which, in turn, *purposefully* embarrasses and unsettles the readers.

By revealing Nan’s awareness of the audience’s/reader’s gaze, *Tipping the Velvet* self-consciously links the act of voyeuristic consumption with both pleasure and shame. In her account of the double act, Nan suggests that ‘Well, perhaps there were some who caught glimpses ...’ (p. 128). The use of ellipses indicates a significant sense of trailing off, which reinforces as well as challenges the clandestine pleasures afforded by Nan’s narrative. Here the textual reader is positioned as both Nan’s interlocutor, whose voyeuristic reading is appropriated by the text, and Nan’s collaborator in identifying the gaze of the intra-diegetic audience. In doing so, the text draws attention to the act of reading itself. This significant degree of involvement created by Nan’s narration is arguably designed to maximise the potential pleasure and pain of the experience. When Nan realises that Florence (her subsequent lover) might

⁷⁹ Mandy Koolen, ‘Historical Fiction and the Revaluating of Historical Continuity in Sarah Waters’s *Tipping the Velvet*’, *Contemporary Literature*, 51.2 (2010), 371-97 (p. 384).

take her as ‘some insolent *voyeur*’, she remarks that ‘[t]he thought gave me an odd mixture of shame and embarrassment and also, I must confess, pleasure’ (p. 221, original emphasis). This association between voyeurism, shame and pleasure is where my discussion now turns as I explore, further, the complicated reading (un)pleasures afforded by neo-Victorian fiction. Drawing on Sedgwick’s account of shame, I propose that Nan’s retrospective narrative in *Tipping the Velvet* creates a parallel or analogy between the textual construction of Nan’s identity (a process that foregrounds a self-other dynamic) and the text-reader relationship between Waters’s text and its readers. By involving the reader in shaming – and the shame of – the other, the text brings the reader within not only a textual circuit of desire/interest and shame, but also the processes involved in becoming a lesbian subject in the material world.

As we have already seen, Nan’s narrative in *Tipping the Velvet* is permeated by a self-conscious engagement with shame, and its ‘other-orientated, communicating and performing aspects’.⁸⁰ The following account of the younger Nan’s experience of doing some cleaning in Kitty’s dressing room well illustrates the volatile relationship between pleasure and shame:

While the tea simmered I would wipe her little table, and empty her ashtrays, and dust down the glass; I would tidy the cracked and faded old cigar-box in which she kept her sticks of grease-paint. They were acts of love, these humble little ministrations, and of pleasure – even, perhaps, of a kind of *self*-pleasure, for it made me feel strange and hot and almost shameful to perform them. (p. 38, original emphasis)

⁸⁰ Biddle, p. 229.

Here shame is registered and performed by Nan's tangible physiological reactions. By placing shame in this dynamic relation with 'self-pleasure', the passage exemplifies Tomkins's formulation of the 'affect polarity' between shame and interest. As we have seen from Tomkins, shame is triggered when pleasure is disrupted. This process is well illustrated by how Nan feels ashamed when she notices that the pleasure she has perceived is a form of self-pleasure, which presents the self as a subject who consumes itself by objectifying its actions. In this context, Nan's shame is consequent upon her self-concept, or self-objectification, a point that I have explained in relation to the work of Sartre and Bischof-Köhler above.

This self-objectification involves a self-other dynamic that is similar to the relationship between Waters's text and its readers. By mobilising her past shame, Nan 'confesses' her then clandestine queer desires to her interlocutor, an act which may be seen as seducing and satisfying the textual reader's secret and potentially shameful desire for knowledge of lesbian sexuality. In recalling a sexual dream of her youth, Nan mobilises the erotic content of the past dream for further consumption and exploitation:

How Kitty would have blushed, to know the part she played in my fierce dreamings – to know how shamelessly I took my memories of her, and turned them to my own improper advantage! Each night at the Palace she kissed me farewell; in my dreams her lips stayed at my cheek – were hot, were tender – moved to my brow, my ear, my throat, my mouth ... I was used to standing close to her, to fasten her collar-studs or brush her lapels; now, in my reveries, I did what I longed to do then – I leaned to place my lips upon the edges of her hair; I slid my hands beneath her coat, to where her breasts pressed warm against her stiff gent's shirt and rose to meet my strokings... (p. 41)

The erotic dream depicted in this passage is clearly another example of self-pleasure. The narrator Nan's comment on the 'shameless[ness]' of her younger self shames the past self. By projecting shame toward the younger self, the text may be seen as introducing an intersubjective relationship between the present self and the past one. Here Nan mobilises the previous self-pleasure or 'shame' (as experienced by the present self) for further consumption and exploitation. As she remarks, '[t]he memory [...] was overlaid, in this new setting, with a keen, expectant pleasure' (p. 235). In this context, the display of imagined queer sexuality and erotic female bodies in the form of reverie creates what Sedgwick describes as a 'pleasurable form of exhibitionistic flirtation' between different stages of the character Nan.⁸¹ Nan's retrospective fantasy narrative is also arguably intended to whet or satisfy the contemporary reader's desire for information about lesbian sexuality and the form it takes – and, indeed, to know what it is like to be touched by another woman. In this regard, we may see the phrase 'How Kitty would have blushed' playing directly with the reader's desire and shame. The reader is thereby positioned *as* or *alongside* Kitty and becomes the object of desire.

The way the text changes its positioning of the reader is further mirrored by Nan's reflection on how her relationship with Kitty is changed when they start performing together on stage:

Now, suddenly, it was I who wooed [the crowd], me at whom it gazed in envy and delight. I could not help it: I had fallen in love with Kitty; now, *becoming* Kitty, I feel in love a little with myself. I admired my hair, so neat and so sleek. I adored my legs – my legs which, while they had had skirts about them, I had

⁸¹ 'Queer Performativity', p. 10.

scarcely had a thought for; but which were, I discovered, rather long and lean and shapely.

I sound vain. I was not – then – and could never have been, while Kitty existed as the wider object of my self-love. (pp. 126-27, original emphasis)

To a certain extent, this account of Nan's self-display and auto-eroticisation speaks to the reader's practices and, in particular, their ability to be both the active interpreter and passive consumer of the text. In the same way that Nan alternatively makes Kitty and herself the object of her desire – and her gaze – so too the reader switches his/her identification from the character who is doing the seducing to the one who is being seduced. This also relates to their positioning *as* a reader: the first is an active voyeur, the second a passive reader, who awaits, following Roland Barthes, 'ravishment'.⁸² Here I take my cue from Pearce's application and development of Barthes's concept of ravishment in her discussion of text-reader relationship. As Pearce argues, the act of reading is predicated upon a self-other dynamic that is similar to romance.⁸³ Ravishment thus serves as a useful metaphor in illustrating the way in which the reader becomes 'liable to' – or looks forward to – 'enchantment' whenever they prepare to read a text.⁸⁴ Following Pearce, it is arguable that this passive reading position provides the reader with a chance to experience what it is like to be the 'object' of desire, an experience that, in light of the mechanism of 'shame-proneness', facilitates the reader's empathetic engagement with the textual other.

By suggesting a parallel or analogy between the self-other dynamic involved in the production of lesbian sexuality in the text and the one that exists between the text and its readers, *Tipping the Velvet* may be seen to be making a large claim for the

⁸² Pearce, *Feminism and the Politics of Reading*, pp. 85-133.

⁸³ *Feminism and the Politics of Reading*, p. 86.

⁸⁴ *Feminism and the Politics of Reading*, p. 86.

significance of readerly participation in textual production and the way in which the things we do and feel as readers relate closely to our emotional and affective practices in the material world. Indeed, this focus on readerly participation resembles Sedgwick's discussion of ethical possibility in relation to Foucault's 'care of the self'.⁸⁵ As Sedgwick explains, the empathy-based ethical possibility is 'founded on and coextensive with the subject's movement towards what Foucault calls "care of the self"', which refers to 'the often very fragile concern to provide the self with pleasure and nourishment in an environment that is perceived as not particularly offering them'.⁸⁶ This idea helps us understand the ways in which the act of reading could inaugurate an ethical possibility. By involving the reader in shaming – and the shame of – the other, Waters's text may be seen as facilitating their empathetic engagement with the text, which then – following Sedgwick – initiates an ethical possibility. Here I move from a discussion of the text's positioning of the reader *per se* to some reflections on how – following Sedgwick – s/he is not only brought within the textual circuit between shame and desire, but also the processes involved in becoming a lesbian subject.

As argued previously, Sedgwick and her co-author Adam Frank position shame as a productive force in the examination of subjectivity and intersubjectivity. This understanding of shame is particularly significant for the issue of queer subjectivity, which, as Sedgwick points out in her 1993 paper 'Queer Performativity', is lodged in 'refusals or deflections of (or by) the logic of the heterosexual supplement'.⁸⁷ Following Sedgwick, queer subjectivity is marked by a kind of suspension or negation, and remains to be specified and questioned rather than presumed. In this context, shame facilitates the construction of queer subjectivity by – in the words of Ashly

⁸⁵ *Touching Feeling*, p. 137.

⁸⁶ *Touching Feeling*, p. 137.

⁸⁷ 'Queer Performativity', p. 4.

Bennett – ‘usher[ing] in new forms of (identity-constitution) communication’.⁸⁸ The constant attempt to reconstitute the identificatory communication with the other is well illustrated by Nan’s claim that ‘I might have been Narcissus, embracing the pond in which I was about to drown’ (p. 132). The image of Narcissus nicely captures Nan’s queer subjectivity, one that – for many (though by no means all) theorists – has privileged sameness and is marked by what Leo Bersani calls ‘an indeterminate identity’.⁸⁹ As Bersani argues, ‘[h]omosexual desire is desire for the same from the perspective of a self already identified as different from itself’.⁹⁰ According to William F. Pinar, Bersani’s model of homosexuality suggests that queer subjectivity presents itself in the form of constant negotiations – or ‘dialogic encounters’ – between ‘self-differentiated selves’.⁹¹ Indeed, as argued previously, Waters’s description of Nan’s revisitations of her previous experiences of self-pleasure and shame presents an intersubjective relationship between the narrator Nan and her young self.

Tipping the Velvet plays with this understanding of queer subjectivity further by putting the characters’ shame and pleasure into circulation, during the process of which ‘the other’ (or ‘mirror’) plays an essential role. In recalling her experience of working as a male renter on the streets of London, Nan explicitly states her longing for the identificatory communication with the ‘knowing’ other:

I never felt my own lusts rise, raising theirs. I didn’t even need the coins they gave me. I was like a person who, having once been robbed of all he owns and loves, turns thief himself – not to enjoy his neighbour’s chattels, but to spoil

⁸⁸ Ashly Bennett, ‘Shameful Signification: Narrative and Feeling in *Jane Eyre*’, *Narrative*, 18.3 (2010), 300-23 (p. 303).

⁸⁹ Leo Bersani, *Homos* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), p. 59.

⁹⁰ Bersani, p. 5.

⁹¹ William F. Pinar, ‘Queer Theory in Education’, *Journal of Homosexuality*, 45.2-4 (2003), 357-60 (p. 359).

them. My one regret was that, though I was daily giving such marvellous performances, they had no audience. I would gaze about me at the dim and dreary place in which my gentleman and I leaned panting, and wish the cobbles were a stage, the bricks a curtain, the scuttling rats a set of blazing footlights. I would long for just one eye – just one! – to be fixed upon our couplings: a bold and knowing eye that saw how well I played my part, how gulled and humbled was my foolish, trustful partner. (p. 206)

Here the other's gaze is constructed as a 'mirror' through which Nan could confront her 'disrupted' and thus 'ashamed' being. Following Sedgwick, this mirror-like other is the one who could be empathetically receptive to Nan's suspended and ashamed subjectivity. The textual portrayal of the 'knowing' other therefore suggests that an 'appropriate' ethical approach to the other is being openly and empathetically receptive to their experience. Also, as Nan's self-image as Narcissus suggests, this 'mirroring' experience is essential in her journey towards a lesbian subject. In this context, *Tipping the Velvet* can be read as a text that vividly illustrates Sedgwick's model of the process whereby queer sexuality comes into being. The production of lesbian or queer sexuality may thus be seen to involve a dynamic similar to the one that I have demonstrated as existing between Waters's text and its readers. In the same way that the readers of the text have experienced what it is like to be an object of desire and/or 'mirror' in a lesbian relationship, so do we see how – in the intra-diegetic narrative – such mirroring processes are essential to Nan's journey towards discovering herself as a queer subject.

In what follows, I move to *Affinity*, the second novel by Waters, in order to further explain how neo-Victorian literature seduces, satisfies and then disrupts the contemporary reader's voyeuristic and vicarious consumption of queer sexuality in the

re-imagined Victorian world, a process which exemplifies Tomkins's affect polarity between interest and shame.

Voyeurism, empathetic narration and shame in *Affinity*

Set in 1870s Victorian England, *Affinity* tells a story about how Margaret Prior, a spinster from an upper-class family, falls in love with a female prisoner and spiritualist medium, Selina Dawes, during her visits to the Millbank Prison as a lady visitor.⁹² Like *Tipping the Velvet*, *Affinity* also focuses on the issue of queer desire and, as we will see, involves the reader in the circuit of shame. In this section, I approach the issue of shame and empathy via Meghan Marie Hammond's formulation of 'empathy-driven' narrative.⁹³ I begin the discussion with an examination of how the use of diary entries in the text plays with the dynamic between readerly immersion and textual disruption. I then move to a discussion of how the disclosure of the core secret at the end of the text prompts the reader to re-approach the text in a future-orientated mode, which, as we have seen from my previous engagement with Mark Currie's work on narrative temporality, transforms the way we understand the text. In doing so, I propose that Waters's *Affinity* not only frustrates and arguably shames the contemporary reader's desire for what Rachel Carroll describes as 'the retrospective materialisation into late Victorian existence of lesbian identity', but also presents empathetic responsiveness as the ethical approach to the queer subject.⁹⁴

⁹² Sarah Waters, *Affinity* (London: Virago, 1999). Further references to this novel are given after quotations in the text.

⁹³ Meghan Marie Hammond, *Empathy and the Psychology of Literary Modernism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), p. 4.

⁹⁴ "'Becoming My Own Ghost'", p. 25.

As Kym Brindle observes, by interpolating Margaret's diary into the narrative, the text constructs a 'framed communicative situation' in the text.⁹⁵ This communicative situation can also be read as what Hammond calls 'empathic narration', a concept she takes up and develops from Sylvia Adamson.⁹⁶ With a focus on autobiographical writing, Adamson traces the emergence of 'empathetic narrative' as a distinct narrative type to the seventeenth century and considers free indirect discourse, free direct discourse and internal monologue as classical empathetic narrative devices.⁹⁷ Hammond develops Adamson's idea in her work on literary modernism and proposes that narrative techniques such as 'interior monologue, stream-of-consciousness narration, narrative marked by anachrony and fragmentation, and rapidly shifting character focalisation' may also be construed as 'empathic narration' since they 'strive to provide [the reader with] an immediate sense of [the character's] thoughts and feelings'.⁹⁸ Following both Adamson and Hammond, the use of diary entries in Waters's *Affinity* is arguably designed to facilitate the reader's empathetic engagement with the text since, as Thomas Mallon observes, diary is a form of expression that 'emphatically embodies the expresser' and is 'the flesh made word'.⁹⁹ Indeed, Waters's text plays with the reader's generic expectation of diary entries by remarking from Margaret's perspective that her diary is 'where [she] wrote all [her] secrets – all [her] passion, all [her] love' (p. 339). Also, as Lucie Armit and Sarah Gamble suggest, by ascribing authorship to the self, Margaret's account presents her diary as a 'self-affirming' narrative, which does not encourage the reader to 'actively

⁹⁵ Kym Brindle, 'Diary as Queer Malady: Deflecting the Gaze in Sarah Waters's *Affinity*', *Neo-Victorian Studies*, 2.2 (2009/2010), 65-85 (p. 68). Original emphasis.

⁹⁶ Hammond, p. 4.

⁹⁷ Sylvia Adamson, 'The Rise and Fall of Empathetic Narrative: A Historical Perspective on Perspective', in *New Perspectives on Narrative Perspective*, ed. by Willie van Peer and Seymour Benjamin Chatman (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), pp. 83-99 (pp. 83).

⁹⁸ Hammond, p. 4.

⁹⁹ Cited in Brindle, 'Diary as Queer Malady', p. 79.

[...] challenge the truth-value of any of the material inscribed in them'.¹⁰⁰ In this regard, we may argue that diary, as a narrative device in the text, encourages the reader to approach Margaret empathetically; that is, to accept the validity of Margaret's perception of things. As we have seen from the discussion earlier in the chapter, for phenomenologists such as Edmund Husserl, this acceptance is the precondition of our experience of the other.¹⁰¹

However, at the same time, the fact that the diary represents a 'self-reflexive, inward-turned communion' complicates the relationship between the diarist and the reader.¹⁰² As Brindle argues, the reader is positioned as a voyeur whose access to the diary slides out of the diarist's view.¹⁰³ In this context, the use of diary entries in Waters's text may be seen as prompting, and catering for, the reader's voyeuristic and vicarious consumption of the textual other. Indeed, the voyeuristic nature of the reader's encounter with Margaret's diary is thematically highlighted in Waters's use of the trope of the panopticon in the text. As a type of institutional building designed by the English philosopher Jeremy Bentham, the panopticon is developed by Foucault in his *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* as a symbol for the disciplinary society of surveillance.¹⁰⁴ The character Margaret's description of the structure of Millbank Prison in Waters's text clearly echoes Bentham's model of the panopticon:

The prison, drawn in outline, has a curious kind of charm to it, the pentagons appearing as petals on a geometric flower [...]. [T]he tower is set at the centre

¹⁰⁰ Lucie Armit and Sarah Gamble, 'The Haunted Geometries of Sarah Waters's *Affinity*', *Textual Practice*, 20.1 (2006), 141-59 (p. 152).

¹⁰¹ Zahavi, p. 140.

¹⁰² 'Diary as Queer Malady', p. 66.

¹⁰³ 'Diary as Queer Malady', p. 66.

¹⁰⁴ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin Books, 1977; repr. 1991).

of the pentagon yards, so that the view from it is all of the walls and barred windows that make up the interior face of the women's building. (pp. 8, 10)

As Foucault explains, the architectural structure of the panopticon determines that the one who sees and the one who is being seen are in a power hierarchy: 'in the peripheric ring, one is totally seen, without ever seeing; in the central tower, one sees everything without ever being seen'.¹⁰⁵ Foucault's analysis of the panoptic gaze also speaks to the reader's experience. The use of diary entries provides the reader with an illusion that s/he is positioned in a privileged place – 'the central tower' – so that s/he could peep into Margaret's inner mind without being noticed. As Brindle observes, this privileged reading position makes the reader initially believe that they 'operate an all-seeing scrutiny of the diarist's private thoughts'.¹⁰⁶

The binary between empathetic engagement (in the form of vicarious experience) and voyeuristic consumption afforded by the use of diary entries in Waters's *Affinity* complicates the discussion of the reading pleasures associated with neo-Victorian literature. Although, as we have seen, the reader is positioned in a more privileged place, their reading pleasure largely depends on their 'willing suspension of disbelief' and engagement with Margaret in more typically 'realist' terms. In Ann Heilmann's reading of the text, she presents a similar argument by suggesting that the reader is 'likely to be seduced into suspending disbelief in the desire for a happy supernatural ending to the lesbian love story'.¹⁰⁷ In this regard, it is possible that the text's various narrative devices – such as the reader's access to Selina's journal and the revelation of Selina's spiritualist 'trick' at the beginning of the text – may cause readers

¹⁰⁵ Foucault, p. 202.

¹⁰⁶ 'Diary as Queer Malady', p. 68.

¹⁰⁷ Ann Heilmann, 'Doing It with Mirrors: Neo-Victorian Metatextual Magic in *Affinity*, *The Prestige* and *The Illusionist*', *Neo-Victorian Studies*, 2.2 (2009/2010), 18-42 (p. 26).

to suspend vigilance during their first reading experience, since these devices intrude upon their involvement with Margaret. However, Waters's text disrupts the reader's vicarious consumption of Margaret's queer desire by disclosing – at the end of the text – that the relationship between Margaret and Selina is a fraud designed and manipulated by the character Ruth Vigers, Selina's secret lover, who occupies a 'ghostly' presence in the text. In this context, it is arguable that the reader is positioned *as or alongside* Margaret. In the same way that Margaret's queer desire is manipulated and exploited by Selina and Ruth in a shameful manner in the intra-diegetic narrative, so do the readers of Waters's text experience how shameful it could be when their clandestine and voyeuristic interest in a lesbian fantasy is disrupted by the text.

In light of Currie's work on narrative temporality (see Introduction), I propose that the disclosure of the fraud at the end of *Affinity* prompts the reader to reflect upon their reading desire and to re-approach the text in a future-orientated manner. As Rachel Carroll points out, this disclosure generates 'a retrospective knowledge which transforms the meaning of preceding events'.¹⁰⁸ Margaret's diary entries, in this context, not only seduce and satisfy the reader's desire for a lesbian fantasy, but also demonstrate the importance of empathetic responsiveness in the construction of lesbian subjectivity. In what follows, I move from a discussion of textual positioning to an exploration of how – following Sedgwick – the reader is not only brought within the textual circuit between shame and desire, but also within the processes involved in becoming a lesbian subject in a manner that echoes – but is also slightly different from – the mechanism we have seen at work in *Tipping the Velvet*.

Margaret's hunger for empathetic responsiveness is well illustrated by her account of her relationship with her diary. As she says to Selina, '*that* book was like

¹⁰⁸ Rachel Carroll, 'Rethinking Generational History: Queer Histories of Sexuality in Neo-Victorian Feminist Fiction', *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, 39.2 (2006), 135-47 (p. 136).

my dearest friend. I told it all my closest thoughts, and it kept them secret' (p. 111, original emphasis). The analogy between the diary and the 'dearest friend' demonstrates Margaret's desire for coordinative interpersonal communication, the rupture of which, as argued before, is the performative of shame. In this scene the diary may be seen to play a similar role to the 'knowing' other that Nan searches out in *Tipping the Velvet*. Here, the fact that the diary the readers are confronted with is Margaret's second book further exemplifies Sedgwick's formulation of the role shame plays in subjectivity and intersubjectivity. Margaret starts writing her second diary after the death of her scholarly father and the defection of her lover, Helen, who wound up marrying Margaret's brother. From the contextual information, we know Margaret tried to commit suicide after her father's death. This suicidal behaviour is clearly a desire for self-effacement, which, as Sedgwick points out, is 'the defining trait' of shame.¹⁰⁹ Writing a second diary, a different one, in this context, represents Margaret's repeated attempt to construct a meaningful identity for herself; a move that echoes Nan's retrospective narration in *Tipping the Velvet*. As the opening pages indicate, this time Margaret attempts to write history from a different angle, one that may be contrasted with the histories her father dealt with, such as those of 'the great lives, the great works':

He (Margaret's father) would start it, I think, at the gate of Millbank, the point that every visitor must pass when they arrive to make their tour of the gaols. Let me begin my record there, then: I am being greeted by the prison porter, who is marking my name off in some great ledger; now a warder is leading me

¹⁰⁹ 'Queer Performativity', p. 4.

through a narrow arch, and I am about to step across the grounds towards the prison proper –. (pp. 7-8)

By drawing a comparison between the way her father writes history and her own narrative, Margaret shifts the focus from ‘the great lives’ to herself. Her diary entries therefore exemplify her *attempt* to record how she perceives, experiences and reflects on things through her own eyes, an attempt which is essential for her identity-formation. This sense of ‘trying’ – almost an experimentation of identity – is well illustrated by the dynamics between a tentative claim – ‘*Let me begin my record there*’ – and a series of first-person accounts – ‘I am being greeted...’ ‘I am about to step across...’ (my emphasis). One could also say it is phenomenological in method – or, at least in attempt – to re-capture the immediacy of the experience in the present tense. This very nuanced sense of uncertainty evokes the performative of shame, which, as noted from Sedgwick’s analysis of the grammatical truncation of ‘Shame on you’ in the previous section, calls forth a present self that is ‘deferred’, and ‘has yet and with difficulty to come into being’.¹¹⁰

This focus on Margaret’s desire for empathetic responsiveness may thus be seen to provide the readers with a different approach to understanding her relationship with Selina in the text. Like *Tipping the Velvet*, *Affinity* examines the issue of queer subjectivity in relation to the ‘mirroring’ experience between self and other, which is part of what Sedgwick calls ‘identity-constituting identificatory communication’ as explained before.¹¹¹ With the help of Ruth’s ‘intrusion’ into Margaret’s diary, Selina manipulates and plays with Margaret’s queer desire for the ‘mirrored’ other or what

¹¹⁰ ‘Queer Performativity’, p. 4.

¹¹¹ ‘Queer Performativity’, p. 4.

Leo Bersani calls ‘sameness’ (a point that is also discussed in detail in the previous section):

Not sure? Look at your own fingers. Are you not sure, if they are yours? Look at any part of you – it might be me that you are looking at! We are the same, you and I. We have been cut, two halves, from the same piece of shining matter. Oh, I could say, *I love you* – that is a simple thing to say, the sort of thing your sister might say to her husband. I could say that in a prison letter, four times a year. But my spirit does not love yours – it is *entwined* with it. Our flesh does not love: our flesh is the same, and longs to leap to itself. It must do that, or wither! *You are like me.* (p. 275, original emphasis)

By positioning herself as the ‘mirror’ or ‘object’ of Margaret’s desire, Selina’s account caters to Margaret’s longing for empathetic responsiveness, which plays an essential role in her identity constitution. When Margaret discovers that Ruth – the ghostly manipulator – is Selina’s ‘real’ lover, she is overwhelmed by the sense of shame, the performativity of which pushes her to question her self-identity again. The way shame questions her identity is vividly illustrated by Margaret’s clumsy response to the policeman’s inquiry about the robbery she desperately made up after she finds out that Selina and Ruth have already run away:

He looked at me strangely. He said, two women? – ‘Two women, and one of them my maid. And she is terribly cunning, and has abused me, cruelly! And the other – the other – ’

The other escaped, I meant to say next, *from Millbank Prison!* But instead of saying it, I took one quick icy breath and put my hand to my mouth.

For how should he suppose that I knew that?

Why were there clothes, for her to dress in?

Why was there money ready, why were there tickets?

Why was there a passport, made out in a fanciful name...?

The policeman waited. I said, 'I am not sure, I am not sure.' (p. 343, original emphasis)

Margaret's clumsy dissembling here, as illustrated by her equivocation – 'I am not sure, I am not sure' – draws our attention to her use of the double 'I'. In light of Sedgwick's model of queer subjectivity, this double 'I' can be read as both a sign of Margaret's identity crisis (as Armit and Gamble suggest in their reading) and a self-affirming attempt.¹¹² Waters's use of the double 'I' here thus vividly illustrates Sedgwick's account of how shame de-constitutes and then re-constitutes identity.¹¹³

Following Sedgwick, these intra-diegetic narratives about Margaret's relationship with the other – be it her former lover Helen, Selina, her first and second diary – demonstrate the process of how a queer subject may repeatedly attempt to reconstitute an interpersonal bridge with the other when there occurs an impediment to the previous relationship. In this regard, the ambiguous ending of the text – that the reader does not know whether Margaret jumps into the River Thames or not – need not be read as a 'tragic' one. It is arguable that this indeterminacy creates a sense of 'presentness', which involves the reader in the construction of the text and prompts them to respond empathetically to the text. In doing so, Waters's *Affinity* demonstrates

¹¹² Armit and Gamble, p. 157.

¹¹³ 'Queer Performativity', p. 5.

how the past is affectively here in the present, which, at the same time, enfolds the future.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have discussed how shame and empathy are predicated upon a similar self-other dynamic, which, in turn, explains the mechanism of how we empathise with the other's shame. I have also examined how neo-Victorian literature evokes, caters to and disrupts the reader's interest in lesbianism in light of Tomkins's 'affect polarity' (in particular, its focus on the dynamic between interest and shame). By tracing the parallels between the textual construction of queer subjectivity (a process that involves a self-other dynamic) and the relationship between Waters's two texts – *Tipping the Velvet* and *Affinity* – and their readers, I argue that neo-Victorian fiction is making a large claim for the role of readerly participation in textual production and the way in which the things we do and feel as readers relate closely to our emotional and affective practices in the material world.

In the next chapter, I continue the discussion of the complex, and often conflicted, text-reader relationship prompted by neo-Victorian fiction by exploring the dynamic that exists between readerly empathy, contingency and 'nausea': a Sartrean metaphor for the disorientation and meaninglessness that occurs when we lose our sense of the 'ground' or 'purpose' of our existence. I propose that a similar nausea may be seen to be at work in the reading of Michael Cox's *The Meaning of Night*, a neo-Victorian novel that challenges the reading subject's own ability to make sense of the world (both textual and material) and themselves.

Chapter Three

‘Sailing Back and Forth’: Nausea, Contingency and Empathy

In the ‘Broken Dishes’ chapter of *Alias Grace*, Margaret Atwood uses the image of ‘a moth in a bottle [...] sailing back and forth across the hideous dark ocean’ to illustrate Grace’s sorrow and uneasiness about her mother’s tragic death during their trans-Atlantic journey (p. 112). This image vividly evokes a feeling of disorientation, imprisonment, and vulnerability. Interestingly, for readers of *Alias Grace*, this particular image is also suggestive of their reading experience. The textual uncertainty about Grace’s involvement in the murder arguably upsets the reader, and traps them in a textual world of profound uncertainty whose unstable foundations – first the argument lists one way, then another – may be compared to seasickness.

This sense of disorientation poses an ‘existential’ question about the reader’s position and existence in the textual world, as well as challenging their affective and ethical investment in the text as argued in Chapter One. In this chapter, I continue the discussion of the text-reader relationship with regards to neo-Victorian fiction, now focusing on the dynamic that exists between readerly empathy and the existential concerns of contingency and ‘nausea’: a Sartrean metaphor for the disorientation and meaninglessness that occurs when we lose our sense of groundedness and the purpose of existence. As I will explain in more detail below, Sartre’s conceptualisation of existential nausea interrogates the human subject’s solipsistic concerns about the nature of existence and the individual subject’s purpose (or purposelessness) within it. This concern, which is typically figured as an anxiety about the (absent) meaning of life, is particularly important for neo-Victorian fiction, since it is a genre, as noted in Chapter One, dominated by the representation of marginal figures whose experiences repeatedly cause them – and the reader – to question the meaning of existence.

However, instead of understanding such crises in social and political terms (as so much contemporary neo-Victorian criticism has done), I propose that we revisit them in this wider philosophical and sometimes explicitly religious context. As we will see in the following analysis, a good deal of neo-Victorian fiction chooses to thematise existential concerns about agency, freedom and responsibility through its depiction of characters who attempt to break free from the chance circumstances they find themselves in and their endeavour to alter the course of ‘fate’.

As noted, this philosophical focus on the individual and his or her destiny is decidedly at odds with what has become the dominant way of reading neo-Victorian literature in recent years, much of which has been characterised by Foucauldian approaches or applications of Judith Butler’s work on gender (see Introduction). However, the fact that several neo-Victorian novels have inscribed a theoretical awareness of these issues into their textual worlds raises a question about the need for such criticism. Sarah Waters’s neo-Victorian novel *Affinity*, for example, is elaborately constructed by what Martin Paul Eve calls the ‘high-Theory reference point through Foucault’.¹ As Eve observes, the frames of reference used in *Affinity*, such as the Panopticon and its related issues of discipline and power relations, have ‘a strong bearing upon academic disciplinarity’.² Following Eve, it is arguable that ‘the intended discourse community’ for these Foucauldian references is academic readers who have a particular interest in the (neo-)Victorian.³ Waters’s *Affinity* may thus be seen as playing a game of what Eve calls ‘pre-empting and guessing’ with its critical readers at the

¹ Martin Paul Eve, “‘You Will See the Logic of the Design of This’: From Historiography to Taxonomography in the Contemporary Metafiction of Sarah Waters’s *Affinity*”, *Neo-Victorian Studies*, 6.1 (2013), 105-25 (p. 114).

² Eve, p. 113.

³ Eve, p. 115.

same time as raising questions about whether the process really needs spelling out again in scholarly articles.⁴

This kind of textual game, in light of Linda Hutcheon's work on metafiction, may indeed be seen to constitute a form of readerly 'narcissism'.⁵ Through the 'ironic allegorical reading of the Narcissus myth', Hutcheon uses the adjective 'narcissistic' in a figurative way to designate the embedded 'self-consciousness' and/or 'self-awareness' of metafiction.⁶ Hutcheon's formulation of narcissistic narrative also adds an existential dimension to the discussion of metafiction, which, as Brian McHale explains, refers to its preoccupation with 'the ontology of the literary text itself' and/or that of 'the world which it projects'.⁷ Notably, this instability and indeterminacy of meaning in the texts spills over into questions of contingency in the material world. Following both Hutcheon and McHale, it is clear that some neo-Victorian texts – in particular, the 'canonical' ones – have thematised and contextualised the existential concern about the contingency of existence by highlighting the artificiality and indeterminacy of fiction. Through the use of a range of literary devices – such as the 'found manuscript' plot in A. S. Byatt's *Possession: A Romance* and Michael Cox's *The Meaning of Night*, narrative anachronism in Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace*, the flagrant intervention of the authorial voice and direct address to the extra-diegetic reader in John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and Michel Faber's *Crimson Petal and the White* – these texts may be seen to be using the God-like status of the narrator and/or implied author to remind readers of their powerlessness at the hands of 'fate'. Similarly, the underlying desire to (re)-write the past in neo-Victorian fiction

⁴ Eve, p. 117.

⁵ *Narcissistic Narrative*, p. 1.

⁶ *Narcissistic Narrative*, p. 1.

⁷ Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (London: Methuen, 1987; London and New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 10. Here it should be noted that metafictional techniques are not exclusive to postmodernist fiction. Indeed, some of them can be traced back to early literary texts such as Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1759). However, as Hutcheon suggests, the development of postmodernism 'transform[s] the formal properties of fiction into its subject matter'. *Narcissistic Narrative*, p. 18.

and the widespread preference for the use of retrospective narrative may be seen as a comment on the human subject's desire to challenge such impotence and to alter the course of events. As we will see from the following discussion of Jean-Paul Sartre's philosophical novel *Nausea* (1938), this pre-occupation with the ability to 'act' (or not) goes to the heart of living existentially.

Hutcheon's conceptualisation of narcissistic narrative(s) is further developed by Mark Currie in his study of 'theoretical fiction', which is considered by Currie to be a sub-genre of metafiction.⁸ According to Currie, the difference between metafiction and theoretical fiction lies in their different thematic focus. As Currie explains, '[m]etafiction implies a difference between normal fiction and its metalanguage. [...] Theoretical fiction implies a convergence of theory and fiction'.⁹ Currie's formulation suggests that like all metafiction, theoretical fiction involves a self-conscious and/or self-reflexive narrative that depends on the reader's 'knowing' involvement. Further, it raises the same question I noted before about the critic's role in writing about such fiction:

[W]hat can the critic or theorist do to avoid the mere restatement of the novel's own critical and theoretical knowledge, or to save the theory-fiction relationship from the narcissistic self-affirmation of these tautologies?¹⁰

Currie's questioning of the 'felicitous reciprocity' between critic and narrative in the study of theory-inscribed literary text raises concerns about the 'narcissistic' and redundant aspects of literary criticism, which speaks especially to the study of neo-

⁸ Mark Currie, *Postmodern Narrative Theory* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1998; repr. 2011), p. 60.

⁹ *Postmodern Narrative Theory*, p. 60.

¹⁰ *Postmodern Narrative Theory*, p. 153.

Victorian literature.¹¹ In response to Hutcheon's and Currie's problematising of this 'narcissistic' trend within literary criticism, this chapter moves away from what has become an almost 'formulaic' reading of neo-Victorian fiction, one that is based upon an educated reader's pre-supposed knowledge of theorists like Foucault and Butler. Instead, it focuses on the profound existential dilemmas these texts are also concerned with. By positioning the reader alongside characters who struggle with having control (or not) over their fate, this chapter examines the ways in which neo-Victorian fiction can prompt the reader to reflect on their own existential freedom and responsibility.

This chapter also continues the discussion of reader-empathy. By drawing upon the American psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut's work, it establishes the link between empathy, narcissism and the human subject's attempt to overcome feelings of contingency and impotence. Further, in light of Lauren Berlant's work on affect and Currie's formulation of a future-orientated temporality (see Introduction), this chapter proposes that by being empathetically receptive to the character's experience of existential crisis in neo-Victorian fiction, the reader's immersive and pleasurable consumption of the contemporary fantasy of the Victorian underworld is disrupted, which pushes the reader to see the present in a 'historical' or future-orientated way.¹²

I begin the discussion which follows with a review of Sartre's conceptualisation of 'nausea' – a metaphor for the contingency of existence – in his first novel *Nausea*. Then, in light of Kohut's research on narcissism – and in particular, his conceptualisation of 'self-object' and the link he makes between narcissism and empathy – I argue that the reader in Sartre's text may be seen to be positioned as Roquentin's 'self-object': a projection which enables Roquentin to escape his feelings of paralysing groundlessness or 'seasickness'. With this focus on the dialogic and

¹¹ *Postmodern Narrative Theory*, p. 152.

¹² Berlant, 'Thinking About Feeling Historical', p. 5.

intersubjective nature of *Nausea*, and its use of literary devices such as retrospective narrative, journal entries and direct address to the reader, I further propose that although Sartre's text belongs to a very different literary tradition, its form and content provide us with a useful model for thinking through the relationship between nausea, contingency and empathy in the neo-Victorian genre. This discussion is then continued with a close reading of Michael Cox's neo-Victorian novel, *The Meaning of Night*, whose central protagonist, Edward Glyver, bears many similarities to Roquentin.

Nausea and contingency

Sartre's *Nausea* tells the story of how the 30-year-old Antoine Roquentin settles in the fictional French town of Bouville and tries to finish his research on the life of an eighteenth-century political figure, Monsieur de Rollebon. During the winter of 1932, Roquentin experiences a particular 'sweet disgust', 'a nausea' as he later calls it.¹³ For Roquentin, the sense of nausea is triggered by his tactile encounter with a pebble. As he writes in his diary:

Objects ought not to *touch*, since they are not alive. You use them, you put them back in place, you live among them: they are useful, nothing more. But they touch me, it's unbearable. I am afraid of entering in contact with them, just as if they were living animals.

Now I see; I remember better what I felt the other day on the sea-shore when I was holding that pebble. It was a sort of sweet disgust. How unpleasant it was! And it came from the pebble, I'm sure of that, it passed from the pebble

¹³ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*, trans. by Robert Baldick (London: Penguin Books, 2000), p. 22. Further references to this novel are given after quotations in the text.

into my hands. Yes, that's it, that's exactly it: a sort of nausea in the hands. (p. 22, original emphasis)

Sartre's writing depicts how Roquentin is made to question the nature – and necessity – of his own existence as he holds the pebble in his hand in 'sweet disgust'. The existence of the *inanimate* pebble evokes a questioning about the comparative meaning and value of the inanimate and animate (human) objects which, Sartre represents hyperbolically, as a kind of nausea, a point which is further developed in the following passage:

The essential thing is contingency. I mean that, by definition, existence is not necessity. To exist is simply *to be there*; what exists appears, lets itself be *encountered*, but you can never *deduce* it. [...] Everything is gratuitous, that park, this town, and myself. When you realize that, it turns your stomach over and everything starts floating about, [...] that is the Nausea [...]. (p. 188, original emphasis)

Here Sartre evokes the feeling of sickness – indeed, something strikingly akin to the experience of *seasickness* – to illustrate what he means by existential nausea.

Following Sartre, nausea may therefore be construed as a reaction to the 'gratuitousness' or 'nothingness' of existence; or, as Robert Solomon alternatively expresses it, a reaction to 'the intrusiveness of sheer existence'.¹⁴ This sense of gratuitousness, or contingency, refers to a void, or 'abyss', in the meaning-production circuit. Like the pebble in the extract cited above, its presence is nauseating because

¹⁴ Robert C. Solomon, 'Meditations on *Nausea*: Sartre's Phenomenological Ontology', in *Dark Feelings, Grim Thoughts: Experience and Reflection in Camus and Sartre*, by Robert C. Solomon (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 60-92 (p. 66).

Roquentin realises that it does not mean *for* him, or he *for* it. In the words of Solomon, the existential nausea has ‘no *intentionality*’.¹⁵ As we will see in the next section, Roquentin’s experience of the contingency of reality and his poignant feeling of meaninglessness are shared by many characters from neo-Victorian fiction.

As Winfried Menninghaus observes, although the advent of nausea is physiologically unpleasant, it is ‘an “event” of comprehensive revelatory quality’ in Sartre’s context.¹⁶ Indeed, in *Nausea*, the character Roquentin is ‘liberated’ (p. 143) after his awareness of contingency of his existence, since he realises that ‘existence is not necessary’ (p. 188). As Steven Churchill explains, this kind of liberation suggests that ‘[t]he world does not *have* to be as it is, such that things *could* be otherwise; indeed, nothing *need* be, at all’.¹⁷ In this regard, existential nausea brings Roquentin a particular freedom and also a profound political *responsibility*. In the context of *Nausea*, what Roquentin tries to liberate himself from is most probably a genealogical understanding of existence, as evidenced by his research subject – the historical figure Monsieur de Rollebon – who is constructed as the ‘surrogate’ for his own existence. As Sartre describes, Monsieur de Rollebon ‘represents the only justification for [Roquentin’s] existence’ (p. 105); hence, Roquentin’s purpose in life is to reveal the meaningfulness of his ‘alter-ego’, Monsieur de Rollebon. However, after the ‘revelatory’ and nauseating event – his encounter with the pebble – Roquentin realises the futility of undertaking historical research into either his or Monsieur de Rollebon’s existence. He claims that while ‘history talks about what has existed’, ‘an existent can never justify the existence of another existent’ (p. 252). Through the voice of the

¹⁵ Solomon, p. 63. Original emphasis.

¹⁶ Winfried Menninghaus, *Disgust: The Theory and History of a Strong Sensation*, trans. by Howard Eiland and Joel Golb (New York: State University of New York Press, 2003), p. 356.

¹⁷ Steven Churchill, ‘Contingency and Ego, Intentionality and Nausea’, in *Jean-Paul Sartre: Key Concepts*, ed. by Steven Churchill and Jack Reynolds (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), pp. 44-65 (p. 46). Original emphasis.

fictional character Roquentin, Sartre thus provides a trenchant critique of the linear and genealogical understanding of existence as derived from Christian theology. This is summarised in the following passage:

They explain the new by the old – and the old they have explained by the older still, like those historians who describe Lenin as a Russian Robespierre and Robespierre as a French Cromwell: when all is said and done, they have never understood anything at all... behind their self-importance you can distinguish a morose laziness: they see a procession of semblances pass by, they yawn, they think that there's nothing new under the sun. (p. 102)

The final biblical reference ('there's nothing new under the sun') demonstrates Sartre's critique of the theological understanding of human existence as being lazy, rigid, void and self-celebrated, which may be seen to echo Eve Sedgwick's psychological critique of Freudian fatalism as discussed in the Introduction. Similarly, Sartre's questioning of the seemingly fixed relationship between Roquentin and his 'surrogate', Monsieur de Rollebon, and by extension, that between 'the new' and 'the old', the present and the past, resembles Saussure's conceptualisation of the relation between the signified and the signifier of language being similarly arbitrary, thus explaining the means by which Sartre's existential philosophy was subsequently incorporated into the work of structuralist and post-structuralist thinkers. In Derridean terms, Sartre's critique of how historians understand historical figures, such as Lenin and Robespierre in the aforementioned extract, makes us aware that we structure the meaning of existence by *difference* and *deferral* ('Lenin [is] a Russian Robespierre and Robespierre is a French Cromwell'). In this context, Sartre proposes an ontological question about the meaning

of being human and the ways in which the self could ground itself *positively*. In the story of *Nausea*, Roquentin becomes aware that trying to ‘resuscitate Monsieur de Rollebon’ is a ‘mistake’ since it would not help him justify his own existence (p. 252). Rather, Roquentin promises the writing of another story at the end of the text, a story of ‘an adventure’ (ibid.), which is arguably his attempt to make meaning out of his contingent existence in terms of our freedom to ‘act’ and deliver change (i.e., the basic tenets of political existentialism). The act of writing what Steven Churchill calls a ‘semi-biographical fiction’ is thus presented as an attempted self-rescue.¹⁸ As I will demonstrate in the next section, this idea helps us to consider the widespread preference for the use of a first-person narrative and the engagement with the form of *Bildungsroman* in a number of neo-Victorian novels as an expression of the existential concerns of the central protagonists, not just a means of engaging readers and promoting readerly empathy.

Here the promise of another book at the end of *Nausea* suggests that the text we as readers are confronted with is a retrospective account of Roquentin’s thought process, or, in metafictional terms, a ‘document of its own making’.¹⁹ As Churchill similarly argues, we can therefore read *Nausea* as ‘Roquentin’s hypothetical novel, incorporating biographical elements with intrigues worthy of an adventure’.²⁰ In this regard, we can propose that Roquentin’s research has shifted from that of the historical figure – the eighteenth-century political figure Monsieur de Rollebon – to the (past) self. This shift from a (grand) history to a personal story may be interpreted in different ways. For example, Menninghaus’s reading of *Nausea* would seem to be modelled on a Foucauldian concern about subjectivity and agency, even allowing for the fact that Sartre and Foucault are coming from quite different philosophical traditions.

¹⁸ Churchill, p. 53.

¹⁹ James Wood, ‘Introduction’, in *Nausea*, pp. vii-xx (p. vii.).

²⁰ Churchill, p. 53.

Menninghaus's Foucauldian standpoint may be seen in his focus on Roquentin's liberation from 'the ideological patterns and social practices' that prevent him from 'becoming aware of the (absent) ground of [his] own existence'.²¹ Indeed, Menninghaus's interpretation of *Nausea* in this respect resembles what is arguably the dominant approach to the analysis of neo-Victorian fictional characters in recent neo-Victorian criticism. With a focus on the use of 'uncanny echoes and repetitions' in neo-Victorian Gothic fiction, Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben, for example, suggest that neo-Victorian literature poses questions about the way in which 'the inauthentic' self is 'interpellated' by the 'burdensome past', referring to 'ideologica[l]' forces that deprive these subjects of 'sincere autonom[y]' in particular.²² For me, this materialist or Foucauldian approach to the texts is not altogether adequate, since – if we embrace the questioning of subjectivity evoked by Sartre's *Nausea* – it is limited in historicisation. Also, as we have already seen, Sartre's formulation of the existential crisis is predicated upon a more fundamental concern about human existence that, I would suggest, finds its complement in a great many neo-Victorian texts. Shifting away from a socio-economic discussion of these neo-Victorian characters or subjects, as my reading in this chapter will hopefully demonstrate, may therefore help us recognise even greater complexity in the reading pleasures afforded by neo-Victorian literature. In order to make my hypothesis here clearer, I would first like to dwell some more on the aforementioned ending of the text *Nausea*.

First of all, it should be noted that although I am taking up Sartre's thinking on existential nausea in this chapter, I am not interested in developing a philosophical discussion of Sartre's existential concerns *per se*. Rather, I am focused on an examination of the first-person narration of this existential crisis, which means that I

²¹ Menninghaus, p. 356.

²² 'Neo-Victorian Gothic', pp. 15-16.

am more interested in reading *Nausea* as a philosophical *novel*. This focus on the act of *narrating* will complicate critical concerns about the solipsism of Sartre's 'nausea'. As we have seen, Sartre's particular ethical and political concern with existential nausea has its origins in the solipsistic subject. As Robert Solomon notes in his reading of *Nausea* and Sartre's later philosophical work, *Being and Nothingness*, the concept of 'Being-for-Others' which dominates the discussion in *Being and Nothingness* plays no role in his fiction *Nausea*.²³ Also, for Solomon, the form of the journal entries used in the text of *Nausea* is 'for the most part a solipsistic exercise'.²⁴ Solomon is right in pointing out the absence of 'Being-for-Others' in Sartre's formulation of existential nausea and its solipsism, and presenting it as the catalyst for his later politics. However, Solomon approaches the novel as a philosophical rather than a literary work, and neglects to take into account the *dialogic* nature of the text – and in particular the positioning/role of the implied reader – which, I propose, lends something new to our understanding of the Roquentin character and reveals the text to be less of an exposition of solipsism than might, at first, appear.

My proposition is that the anticipation of the reader's response at the end of the text adds a dialogic, if narcissistic, dimension to Roquentin's story. After sketching out Roquentin's plan for another book, Sartre describes Roquentin's anticipation of his future readers' flattering response to his book in the following way:

And there would be people who would read this novel and who would say: 'It was Antoine Roquentin who wrote it, he was a red-headed fellow who hung about in cafés', and they would think about my life as I think about the life of that Negress: as about something precious and almost legendary. (p. 252)

²³ Solomon, p. 63. Sartre's idea of 'Being-for-Others' has been discussed in detail in relation to shame in Chapter Two.

²⁴ Solomon, p. 71.

This reintroduction of ‘value’ and ‘meaningfulness’ into Roquentin’s life on account of his anticipation of readerly compliments and a recognition that his was, after all, a ‘precious’ and ‘legendary’ life, demonstrates Roquentin’s narcissistic response to the confrontation with deep existential concerns, and also the human subject’s inability to sustain his/her view of existence as one of absolute contingency. Here I am moving between a philosophical discussion of Roquentin’s experience and a psychological one in order to better understand the final message the text sends us. The direct address to the reader, as evidenced by the use of the second-person pronoun ‘you’ (p. 252) in mentioning Roquentin’s planning for his next book – ‘*you* would have to guess [the content of my next novel]’ (ibid., my emphasis) – makes explicit a dialogic relationship between Roquentin and his readers, hence interrogating the purported solipsism of his experience.

Notably, this is not the first time that Roquentin turns to the other – ‘you’ – in the text. Throughout the narration, the text moves seamlessly between first-, second- and third-person narratives. The following discussion about where to keep the past is a good example in this respect:

Where should I keep mine? You can’t put your past in your pocket; you have to have a house in which to store it. I possess nothing but my body; a man on his own, with nothing but his body, can’t stop memories; they pass through him. (p. 97)

This brief passage once again demonstrates the inherently dialogic nature of the text, since the narrative voice shifts between first-, second- and third-person pronouns smoothly. Although in colloquial English ‘you’ sometimes substitutes for ‘one’,

choosing ‘you’ rather than ‘one’ is often the mark of an inclusively and shared experience. This shifting between different pronouns may be seen as Roquentin’s attempt to organise his ‘self-experience’ in ‘a constitutive intersubjective context’, a phrase that I borrow from Robert D. Stolorow and George E. Atwood’s Kohutian reading and will get back to in the next section.²⁵ Or, it might be an example of a struggling negotiation between different pieces of oneself, which further suggests Roquentin’s inability to exist wholly. As James Woods remarks, Roquentin is ‘a sufferer and a militant’ who is at war with ‘pieces of himself’.²⁶ This poignant sense of struggling is vividly illustrated by the following passage:

Now when I say ‘I’, it seems hollow to me. I can no longer manage to feel myself, I am so forgotten. The only real thing left in me is some existence which can feel itself existing. I give a long, voluptuous yawn. Nobody. Antoine Roquentin exists for Nobody. That amuses me. And exactly what is Antoine Roquentin? An abstraction. A pale little memory of myself wavers in my consciousness. Antoine Roquentin... And suddenly the I pales, pales and finally goes out. (p. 241)

This questioning of ‘I’ presents an image of a modern man who suffers from the absence of meaning – which used to be represented by ‘myth’ or ‘God’ as discussed before. Roquentin’s experience is, paraphrasing the title of Milan Kundera’s 1984 novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, the unbearable meaninglessness of being.²⁷

²⁵ Robert D. Stolorow and George E. Atwood, ‘The Myth of the Isolated Mind’, in *Progress in Self-Psychology: V. 10: A Decade of Progress*, ed. by Arnold I. Goldberg (Hillsdale: The Analytic Press, 1994), pp. 233-50 (p. 241).

²⁶ Wood, p. ix.

²⁷ Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, trans. by Michael Henry Heim (London: Faber, 1985).

As suggested earlier, Roquentin's anticipation of the readerly compliments to his story at the end of the text ('they would think about my life [...] as about something precious and almost legendary' (p. 252)) reveals his narcissistic responses to the poignant existential crisis he is confronted with. Narcissism, in this context, may be seen as a means for Roquentin to construct meaning out of his contingent existence rather than a pathological disorder. In what follows, I would like to move to the discussion of Heinz Kohut's conceptualisation of the 'self-object' in order to better understand the importance of writing in a dialogical way for meaning construction.

Self-object, narcissism and empathy

The concept of 'self-object' is probably Kohut's most important and original contribution to the modern application of psychoanalysis, which is, namely, 'self psychology'.²⁸ As Mario Jacoby points out, unlike classical Freudian psychoanalysis, self psychology positions 'the self' – as opposed to biological drives – as what Kohut calls 'the centre of the psychic universe', and highlights the role of desire for interpersonal communication in the construction of a cohesive self.²⁹ With a focus on the dynamic between the infant and the caregiver (i.e., the mother), Kohut argues that narcissistic personality disorder is caused by the mother's 'defective empathy with the child's needs' rather than 'structural conflicts' (as in the Freudian model).³⁰ In order to better illustrate the difference between the Freudian conceptualisation of narcissism and his empathy-focused model, Kohut suggests that unlike the 'Freudian man' who is

²⁸ As Bouson notes, there is an on-going debate among psychoanalysts as to whether self psychology 'complements, encompasses, or supersedes Freudian drive theory'. Bouson, p. 173.

²⁹ Mario Jacoby, 'Ego and Self in Analytical Psychology and Psychoanalysis', in *Individuation and Narcissism: The Psychology of Self in Jung and Kohut*, by Mario Jacoby, trans. by Myron Gubitz and Françoise O'Kane (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), pp. 47-77 (p. 72).

³⁰ Heinz Kohut, *The Analysis of the Self: A Systematic Approach to the Psychoanalytic Treatment of Narcissistic Personality Disorders* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2009), pp. 46, 19.

ridden with guilt (due to the burden of unacceptable and repressed drives and impulses), patients who suffer from narcissistic personality disorder are ‘tragic’, since, as Michael Franz Basch observes, they ‘experience themselves and/or behave as if there is something missing in [their] psychological armamentarium’.³¹

For me, the key difference between these different psychological models of narcissism lies in their different interpretation of the *nature* of the relationship between the infant and the caregiver. The infant-mother relationship Kohut introduces is of particular significance to my discussion of how the reader is positioned to empathise with the textual other in neo-Victorian fiction. According to Kohut, the child does not experience the mother as the autonomous other. Rather, the mother is experienced as a ‘self-object’, an object that is experienced by the child as ‘part of [his/her] self’.³² Her empathetic response is essential for the construction of the child’s healthy narcissistic self. However, as Kohut explains, when this equilibrium of primary narcissism is disrupted by the ‘inevitable shortcoming of maternal care’, the child may replace the previous ‘perfection’ s/he builds with the parent by either ‘establishing a grandiose and exhibitionistic image of the self: *the grandiose self*’, or ‘giving over the previous perfection to an admired, omnipotent (transitional) self-object: *the idealized parent imago*’.³³ Kohut’s work therefore suggests that without sufficient empathetic investment from the parent, the child may not be able to construct a cohesive self and may therefore feel compelled to, as J. Brooks Bouson observes, ‘satisfy these essential needs through external sources’, a process which is considered by Kohut as transference.³⁴

³¹ Michael Franz Basch, ‘The Selfobject Concept: Clinical Implications’, in *Progress in Self-Psychology*, pp. 1-8 (p. 1).

³² *The Analysis of the Self*, p. xiv.

³³ *The Analysis of the Self*, p. 25. Original emphasis.

³⁴ Bouson, p. 16.

During his clinical experience of working with patients who suffer from narcissistic disturbances, Kohut realises that their archaic narcissism is remobilised during psychoanalytic sessions. As an analyst, he is not experienced as an ‘object’ (as in object-relations theory) by his patients. Rather, he serves to promote a ‘self-object experience’ for the analysand, a term used by Kohut to label ‘the particular *function* that the analyst serves for such patients’.³⁵ By extracting control over – and/or merging with – the analyst, the patient manages to ‘maintain their sense of self, their cohesiveness’.³⁶ As Kohut notes from his work with Miss F:

Then I refused to entertain the possibility that I was not an object for the patient, not an amalgam with the patient’s childhood loves and hatreds, but only, as I reluctantly came to see, an impersonal function, without significance except insofar as it related to the kingdom of her own remobilized narcissistic grandeur and exhibitionism.³⁷

Kohut’s observation makes it clear that ‘self-object’ does not refer to any particular person or object, thus differing from object-relations theory. As Basch puts it, it is ‘an intrapsychic event [or] experience’.³⁸ Also, as Kohut explains in his posthumously published work *How Does Analysis Cure?* (1984), this intrapsychic – as opposed to intersychic – experience is ‘that dimension of our experience of another person that relates to this person’s functions in shoring up our self’.³⁹ Following Kohut, although selfobject experience operates in an intersubjective context, it is, nevertheless, a *non-*

³⁵ Basch, ‘The Selfobject Concept’, p. 1. Original emphasis.

³⁶ Basch, ‘The Selfobject Concept’, p. 2.

³⁷ Cited in Crayton E Rowe, ‘Reformulations of the Concept of Selfobject: A Misalliance of Self Psychology with Object Relations Theory’, in *Progress in Self-Psychology*, pp. 9-20 (p. 10).

³⁸ ‘The Selfobject Concept’, p. 2.

³⁹ Cited in Basch, ‘The Selfobject Concept’, p. 11.

relational and seemingly solipsistic experience. To a certain extent, this non-relationality disturbs the analyst, since s/he realises that s/he mainly serves as what Bouson calls ‘a self-extension’ or ‘a need-satisfying object’ whose existence provides the analysand with ‘newfound feelings of self-acceptance and wholeness’.⁴⁰ As illustrated by Kohut’s poignant reflection on his work with Miss F, he is ‘reluctant’ to see that he is constructed as ‘an impersonal function’ ‘without significance’.

This Kohutian thinking of the analyst-analysand relationship suggests a different understanding of narcissism to that propounded by Freud. By positing the archaic narcissistic deficit as a result of ‘the severely disturbed empathic responses of the parents’ as quoted above, Kohutian narcissism is, as Merton M. Gill points out, ‘not necessarily pathological’.⁴¹ Indeed, rather than arguing for a progressive or linear need to replace narcissistic desires with independence and maturity, Kohut understands narcissism as a kind of ‘lifelong’ wish for ‘support and nurturance’.⁴² In this regard, the patient’s narcissistic needs or desires during psychoanalytic sessions are not necessarily reflections of ‘fixation’, ‘defence’, or ‘an intensification of self-love’.⁴³ Rather, as Howard A. Bacal suggests, they may be ‘attempt[s] at repairing a developmental deficit through a relationship with [the analyst]’.⁴⁴

I would now like to propose that Kohut’s model provides a way of reexamining Roquentin’s turbulent reactions to the confrontation with existential concerns and the text-reader relationship in my reading of Sartre’s novel *Nausea*. As I discussed previously, Roquentin’s address to the reader presents his confessional account – in the form of journal entries – to the reader in an overtly dialogic way. In Kohutian terms,

⁴⁰ Bouson, pp. 14, 18.

⁴¹ Kohut cited in Jacoby, p. 63. Merton M. Gill, ‘Heinz Kohut’s Self Psychology’, in *Progress in Self-Psychology*, ed. by Goldberg, pp. 197-211 (p. 207).

⁴² Gill, ‘Heinz Kohut’s Self Psychology’, p. 207.

⁴³ Howard A. Bacal, ‘The Selfobject Relationship in Psychoanalytic Treatment’, in *Progress in Self-Psychology*, pp. 21-30 (p. 24).

⁴⁴ ‘The Selfobject Relationship in Psychoanalytic Treatment’, p. 24.

we could indeed argue that we – as readers – are positioned to facilitate Roquentin’s self-object experience. Here I am aware that there lies a difference between the ‘implied’ reader and the actual one. Nevertheless, the text’s use of the second-person pronoun ‘you’ may be seen as an attempt to build a bridge between the reading experience of the implied reader and that of the actual one. Thus it is arguable that we, as actual readers, are brought within a disturbing narcissistic circuit, although as actual readers we do of course have the right or freedom to resist such a textual positioning by choosing not to read the text or to read it ‘against the grain’. In *Nausea*, when Roquentin starts talking about his plan for the next book, he admits that he ‘do[esn]’t quite know which kind [of book he would write]’ (p. 252). Then, in the same sentence, Roquentin quickly turns to the reader and, in making the reader complicit into his narcissistic agenda, observes: ‘but you would have to guess’ (ibid.). For me, the use of imperative here hints at Roquentin’s desire for the reader’s response, and also perhaps, an expectation that the reader will be complicit in ensuring the importance of his book. This narratorial self-consciousness thematises the creative process, thus relating the act of reading to that of writing. As Hutcheon argues in her study of this kind of ‘narcissistic text’, given the parallel between the act of creating and that of reading, the reader is put in a ‘paradoxical position’:

[W]hile the text demands that he acknowledge the fictive and linguistic artifact that is its universe, it also teaches and indeed compels him to respond ‘vitaly’, to attribute human significance to the process of creating imaginary worlds in words.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ *Narcissistic Narrative*, p. 117.

Following Hutcheon, Sartre's *Nausea* is indeed a good example of how a narcissistic text appropriates the reader's response in a deliberate and paradoxical manner. By thematising the process of creating, the text demands that the reader to acknowledge the fictionality of the world s/he reads. While on the other hand, as Hutcheon points out, the text constantly demands 'intellectual and affective responses comparable in scope and intensity to those of the [reader's] life experience'.⁴⁶ As in *Nausea*, it could be further argued that Roquentin expects the reader to be *empathetic*: to share and get involved in his experience of the existential nausea and hence to feel 'ashamed of [our] existence' (p. 252, my emphasis). The implication here is that the reader should share in Roquentin's shame as we belatedly become aware of the superfluousness of our own existence. Or, alternatively, the reader's interpellation could be read as a sign of Roquentin's defensive sense of superiority or arrogance. In both regards, the reader is no longer the objective and impartial observer of Roquentin's life; whether the reader likes it or not, s/he is positioned as his caring other, his partial self, his deficient alter-ego, and (inasmuch as the reader may fail to meet his needs) his potential enemy.

In Kohutian terms, Sartre's depiction of Roquentin's plan for another book may thus be seen as an illustration of a transformative process that will ultimately enable him to become more capable of 'self empathy', both in his capacity to recall the past self and – even more importantly – his ability to anticipate a future one:

Naturally, at first it would only be a tedious, tiring job, it wouldn't prevent me from existing or from feeling that I exist. But a time would have to come when the book would be written, would be behind me, and I think that a little of its light would fall over my past. Then, through it, I might be able to recall my life

⁴⁶ *Narcissistic Narrative*, p. 5.

without repugnance. Perhaps one day, thinking about this very moment, about this dismal moment at which I am waiting, round-shouldered, for it to be time to get on the train, perhaps I might feel my heart beat faster and say to myself: ‘It was on that day, at that moment it all started.’ And I might succeed – in the past, simply in the past – in accepting myself. (pp. 252-53)

This passage illustrates how writing a kind of life story – as a representation of the narcissistic need for empathetic support and assurance – could transform an ‘absorbed’ or questioned ‘I’ (‘the I pales, pales and finally goes out’ (p. 241)) into an experiential and agentic ‘I’ (‘I might *feel* my heart beat faster’ (p. 253, my emphasis)). By remobilising narcissistic structures through transference/the self-object experience, Roquentin becomes more capable of empathy towards his past and future selves. Narrated from the present, the ‘anticipation of retrospection’ inherent in this passage, a concept taken from Peter Brooks (see Introduction), maps out how a present self anticipates a future where Roquentin’s life has agency and meaning. In this regard, this anticipatory retrospection liberates the subject from the nausea of his contingency and demonstrates the need for both an empathetic interlocutor/self-object and a dynamic approach to the relationship between the past, the present, and the future. Also, by ‘slipping’ back into the past, Roquentin seems to be able to *ground* the past self, as evidenced by his claim that ‘I might succeed – in the past, simply in the past – in accepting myself’ (p. 253). In Kohutian terms, it could therefore be argued that during this intrapsychic self-object experience – when writing (together *with* the reader) – Roquentin manages to create meaning and intentionality for his existence precisely because the past, present and future self begin to exist *for* each other.

In these opening sections, my reading of Sartre's figuration of Roquentin's nausea in his novel of the same name has focused on the dynamic between nausea, contingency and empathy within a philosophical and psychological framework. In the next section, I move on to another exploration of contingency in Michael Cox's neo-Victorian novel *The Meaning of Night*. With a focus on the contingency the protagonist experiences in this text, I examine the way in which Cox's text engages with existential concerns about agency, choice, responsibility and the exercise of free will (or, indeed, the absence of it). In doing so, I shift away from the 'dominant' reading position offered by the text, which, as I will explain in the next section, depends upon a psychological assessment of the central character's personality and a social-cultural explanation for his moral corruption or criminality. As I will demonstrate, this existential focus also prompts the reader to think about their own existential responsibility and freedom, which, as we have seen from the previous discussion of Sartre's *Nausea*, involves a future-orientated temporality.

Contingency and 'fate' in *The Meaning of Night*

Set in Victorian London in the 1850s, Michael Cox's 600-page long novel *The Meaning of Night* is a contemporary pastiche of sensation fiction.⁴⁷ Structured as a Chinese box – a figure used to describe the form of a narrative inside a narrative – Cox's text presents the reader with two simultaneous works: the first is a 'found' manuscript written by Edward Glyver. Written in the form of confession, this account describes Edward's discovery of his true identity (that he is the rightful heir of Lord Tansor, who is the head of one of the most powerful households in England), and his

⁴⁷ Michael Cox, *The Meaning of Night* (London: John Murray, 2006). Further references to this novel are given after quotations in the text.

murder of his rival, the poet-criminal Phoebus Rainsford Daunt, who has mercilessly stolen his identity. Edward's confession is interspersed with the second text; that is, J. J. Antrobus's – a fictionalised professor of 'Post-Authentic Victorian Fiction' at the University of Cambridge (p. 3) – annotated reading of Glyver's narrative. The introductory remark from Professor Antrobus – 'The following work, printed here for the first time, is one of the lost curiosities of nineteenth-century literature' (p. 1) – presents him as our literary guide to the Victorian underworld, thus positioning the extra-diegetic reader alongside him. In this context, the use of Antrobus's 'editorial interpolations and footnotes' (ibid.) throughout the text may be seen as 'mirroring' the contemporary reader's hermeneutic desire to 'demystify' the hidden Victorian past. It also evokes and caters to the reader's voyeuristic consumption of the past, a point that is self-consciously appropriated by Cox's choice of the title: 'The *Meaning* of Night' (my emphasis). Indeed, as argued in Chapter One, neo-Victorian fiction provides the contemporary reader with what Kohlke calls a 'literary voyeuristic excursion' into the past.⁴⁸

In light of Hutcheon's discussion of the ontological status of fiction, I would like to suggest that the use of the Chinese box structure in Cox's *The Meaning of Night* also introduces an existential dimension to the discussion of text-reader relationship in neo-Victorian literature. As Hutcheon points out, the literary text has 'no existence apart from that constituted by the inward act of reading which counterpoints the externalized act of writing'.⁴⁹ Following Hutcheon, it is arguable that the 'existence' of a literary text depends upon the 'collaboration' between the text and the reader, and the latter's involvement is essential in the construction of the textual world. Hutcheon's depiction of the existential condition of fiction is well illustrated by the different levels

⁴⁸ 'The Neo-Victorian Sexsation', p. 345.

⁴⁹ *Narcissistic Narrative*, p. 28. Original emphasis.

of text-reader relationship Cox's text involves. Through the use of the 'found manuscript' plot, the text dramatises the contingency of Professor Antrobus's encounter with Edward's confessional account, thus presenting Antrobus as *the* reader whose participation – in the form of verifying and editing – is essential in helping 'lay [Edward's] soul bare to posterity' (p. 1). This intra-diegetic example may be seen as 'mirroring' the covert requirement the text makes of its extra-diegetic reader. Mark Llewellyn observes that through the invention of the name 'Antrobus', the text presents itself as a literary 'trick'.⁵⁰ According to Llewellyn's research, the name 'Antrobus' is possibly derived from 'the Latin for front (*anterus*) and the Italian for hollow (*buso*)'.⁵¹ The Professor is thus presented as 'a "hollow front" to the fiction', with the implication that everything that follows will be built as a façade.⁵² Following Hutcheon, the covert revelation of the fictive nature of the text demonstrates 'the novelistic mimetic code', which requires and facilitates the reader's participation in the construction of the textual world.⁵³ This reader positioning, as 'mirrored' by the intra-diegetic example about the relationship between Professor Antrobus and Edward, involves an almost existential responsibility, a point that is also considered by Hutcheon as one of the defining features of the text-reader relationship in metafiction.⁵⁴

Cox's *The Meaning of Night* further thematises these issues about existence and responsibility. Although as a contemporary pastiche of sensation fiction, the text does not engage with the philosophical debate about existentialism directly, its thematic use of the idea of 'contingency' – or 'fate' as the protagonist Edward calls it – directs the reader's attention to the existential concerns he confronts. Revolving around the issue

⁵⁰ Mark Llewellyn, 'Neo-Victorianism: On the Ethics and Aesthetics of Appropriation', *Lit: Literature Interpretation Theory*, 20.1-2 (2009), 27-44 (p. 41).

⁵¹ 'On the Ethics and Aesthetics of Appropriation', p. 41. Original emphasis.

⁵² 'On the Ethics and Aesthetics of Appropriation', p. 41.

⁵³ *Narcissistic Narrative*, p. 41.

⁵⁴ *Narcissistic Narrative*, p. 30.

of Edward's stolen identity, the text presents the reader with an intricate story about Edward's choice, responsibility and his attempt to intervene in the course of indifferent fate and destiny. As I will demonstrate in the following analysis, through the use of a retrospective narrative, the text illustrates how Edward tries to ascribe meaning to contingency through his retreat into fatalism. By playing with the dynamic between the idea of contingency and fate, the text may be seen as – to quote from Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* – 'sail[ing] back and forth' (p. 112) figuratively, thus complicating the reader's desire or ability to empathise with the textual other. On one hand, the foregrounding of contingency in Edward's life experience presents him as a pathetic victim, which helps to elicit empathetic response and affective investment from the reader. On the other hand, the textual characterisation of Edward's solipsistic responses to his existential crisis renders him a self-aggrandising perpetrator, which poses serious questions about the moral and political implication of readerly empathy.

The discovery of Edward's true identity in the text is a good example of how the awareness of contingency raises deep existential concerns. Like the Roquentin character in Sartre's *Nausea*, whose chance encounter with a pebble evokes an existential concern about the meaning of his existence, Edward is made to question his existence by his chance discovery of his birth. As we see from the perspective of Edward, it is through his chance reading of Mrs Edward Glyver's – whom he thought was his birth mother at that time – journal entries that he becomes suspicious of the friendship she holds with Laura Tansor (the wife of Lord Tansor, who turns out to be Edward's birth mother). Here the text dramatises the sense of contingency and chance by presenting Edward's reading of Mrs Glyver's diaries as an event that is consequent upon the following conditions: a) the 'convenient' passing away of his adoptive mother, who happened to have a habit of 'committing her private thoughts to her

journals' (p. 151); b) her insistence on not throwing things away (ibid.); c) Edward's idleness. The fact that Edward is left with no family member after the death of his adoptive mother and his unemployed status make it possible for him to stay 'indoors, alone and undisturbed' for most of the time (ibid.). As we see from the following passage, this chance discovery of his birth overturns Edward's previous self identity and raises serious questions about his existence:

I was not the son of Captain and Mrs Edward Glyver. My blood was not theirs. It connected me instead to other places and times, and to another name – an ancient and distinguished name. I had nothing of the man I had thought was my father in me, nothing of the woman I had called my mother. The eyes that were reflected in my mirror on rising every day were not her eyes, as I had always liked to think. But whose were they? Whom did I resemble – my real father, my real mother, or my dead brother? *Who was I?*

The questions went around and round in my head, day and night. I would wake from fitful sleep in a state of extreme agitation, as if the ground had been cut away from under my feet and I was falling through infinite space. (p. 156, original emphasis)

The focus on hereditary likeness in this extract demonstrates the importance of genealogy in grounding or establishing Edward's existence. The discovery that his 'blood' actually connects him to 'other places and times' (which are unvisited or unknown to him at this stage) overturns Edward's previous self identity and leaves him in an insecure situation. The question 'Who was I?', in this context, involves an

existential concern about how Edward could possibly position himself, as vividly illustrated by the poignant and disorienting sense of groundlessness he experiences.

This gratuitous feeling consumes Edward and, as a psychosomatic experience, arguably 'mirrors' his consumption of opium on another occasion:

And then the floor-boards seemed to fall away beneath me and I was tumbling through the air, spinning round and round, descending ever deeper into a great yawning, roaring void. (p. 345)

This horrific depiction of how Edward is uncontrollably absorbed into a Nietzschean abyss demonstrates the extent to which the issue of Edward's stolen identity challenges his agency:

I was adrift on an ocean of mystery, like the blackbird in my dream – powerless, frozen. What dark creatures inhabited the unseen deeps beneath me? What landfall awaited me? Or was this my fate, to be forever pushed and pulled, now this way, now that, by the winds and currents of circumstance, without respite? (p. 344)

The image of 'be[ing] forever pushed and pulled' illustrates again the desperate sense of being out-of-control that Edward experiences. Here the reference to the ocean also resembles the passage in *Nausea*, where Roquentin describes the feeling evoked by contingency as something nauseous, something akin to seasickness. Although Edward is not presented as a character who is as philosophically sophisticated as Roquentin,

these textual extracts manifest Edward's psychosomatic turmoil, which, as we have seen from the previous discussion, is triggered by his chance discovery of his birth.

Viewing Edward through this existential lens provides us with a different means of evaluating his unsettling behaviours, and in particular, his merciless murder of a stranger as described at the beginning of the text. Admittedly, the striking opening – 'After killing the red-haired man, I took myself to Quinn's for an oyster supper' (p. 9) – may be seen as encouraging a clinical-psychological analysis of Edward in the reader. The stark contrast between the brutal and extraordinary act of killing and the daily activity of eating would appear to characterise Edward as a stereotypical psychopath, a suspicion that is compounded by the subsequent description of Edward's paranoid behaviour (such as his suspicion that he is observed or followed by someone in the darkness (p. 10)). Edward's seemingly pathological action is also linked with the circumstances he is in. Revolving around the issue of Edward's stolen identity and his attempt to take back the family property, the text may be seen as encouraging a very material explanation for Edward's corrupted morality and criminality. Indeed, as I have discussed in relation to Atwood's *Alias Grace* in Chapter One, neo-Victorian literature often steers the reader towards a historical and materialist interpretation of the character's psychological condition. The existential approach this chapter adopts therefore seeks to add a new dimension to the discussion of the reading pleasures afforded by neo-Victorian fiction. This move away from social and historical explanations is dramatised in Cox's text by the fact that, although the act of killing is premeditated, Edward's choice of his victim is contingent:

Now I knew that I could do it; but it gave me no pleasure. The poor fellow had done me no harm. Luck had simply been against him [...]. His way that night,

inauspiciously, coinciding with mine in Threadneedle-street, had made him the unwitting object of my irrevocable intention to kill someone; but had it not been him, it must have been someone else.

Until the very moment in which the blow had been struck, I had not known definitively that I was capable of such a terrible act, and it was absolutely necessary to put the matter beyond all doubt. For the despatching of the red-haired man was in the nature of a trial, or experiment, to prove to myself that I could indeed take another human life, and escape the consequences. (pp. 10-11)

The focus on Edward's ability to kill in this extract makes it clear that for him killing is an exercise of agency and freedom rather than something pleasurable for more complex psychological reasons. Indeed, Edward's imperative to act is linked with very obvious existential concerns, as evidenced by the passing remark that his 'great enterprise' (p. 160) helps him to 'gain ground on [his] feeble self' (p. 61) and ascribes 'purpose and definition' (ibid.) to his gratuitous existence. The following account on Edward's failure to kill his rival, Rainsford Daunt, further demonstrates the centrality of the freedom to act (or not) plays in securing or undermining his existence:

Shocked to the core by my inability to do what I wished to do above all things, I stumbled off, arriving at last at the opium-master's door in Bluegate-fields.

Oh God, what dreams came to me that night – dreams so terrible that I cannot bear to set them down! I ended by raving wildly for an hour or more [...]. Where was I? (p. 545)

The question Edward faces – ‘Where was I?’ – after the consumption of opium illustrates how the inability to conduct his ‘great enterprise’ (p. 160) brings Edward to the brink of a true ‘existential crisis’. Edward’s ‘successful’ murder of a stranger, in this context, may be considered as his attempt to ‘impose [his] will’ (p. 177) on the gratuitousness of human existence, to live existentially.

One of the consequences of this foregrounding of Edward’s existential predicament is that it encourages the reader to suspend their moral judgment. By the same token, it also helps to elicit empathetic response and affective investment from the reader. Through the use of the retrospective narrative, the text directs the reader’s attention to the story of how Edward is *acted on* by ‘fate’ ‘inexorably’ (p. 151) and how he tries to take back control. This reading position is further exemplified by Edward’s call for ‘the ‘Truth of truth’ in one of his darkest moments of despair:

The Truth? It is always the truth we seek, is it not? A conformity with known fact, or with some agreed standard, or with what experience tells us in the inescapable nature of existence. But there is something beyond the merely ‘true’. What we commonly call ‘true’ – that ‘A’ equals ‘B’, or that Death waits quietly for us all – is often but a shadow or replica of something greater. Only when this shadow-truth conjoins with *meaning*, and above all with meaning *experienced*, do we see the substance itself, the Truth of truth. (p. 424, original emphasis)

By highlighting the importance of developing embodied meaning out of pure existence, this passage echoes Sartre’s famous claim that ‘existence precedes essence’, which, as Sartre himself explains, refers to the existential tenet that ‘man first of all exists,

encounters himself, surges up in the world – and defines himself afterwards'.⁵⁵ For Sartre, the essence of the human being is not determined by God or another external source, a point that I discussed earlier in relation to Roquentin's decision to shift the focus of his writing from his 'alter-ego' – the eighteenth-century political figure Monsieur de Rollebon – to himself. As Sartre argues elsewhere, man is 'what he wills', or what he 'makes of himself'.⁵⁶ This understanding of the performative nature of existence – what Emil L. Fackenheim calls 'self-making-in-a-situation' – is also linked, in the above extract, to the use of the plural pronoun 'we', which may be read as a call for the reader's empathy and solidarity: in particular, his or her ability to share in the experience of indifferent and 'inexorable fate' (to paraphrase Edward).⁵⁷

As we have seen from the discussion of *Nausea* in the previous section, the ability to act – or to prove that one *can* act – is essential in helping Roquentin to overcome his nausea and is considered by Sartre, in his later works, to be the mark of existential freedom. A similar existential scenario is explored in Cox's characterisation of Edward's violent actions in *The Meaning of Night*. However, the fact that Edward's attempt to secure his own existence depends upon the act of violence against the innocent bystander also invokes Sartre's concern about actions which reject the autonomy and freedom of others:

Obviously, freedom as the definition of a man does not depend upon others, but as soon as there is a commitment, I am obliged to will the liberty of others at the same time as mine. I cannot make liberty my aim unless I make that of others equally my aim. Consequently, when I recognise, as entirely authentic,

⁵⁵ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*, trans. by Philip Mairet (London: Methuen, 1948), p. 28.

⁵⁶ *Existentialism and Humanism*, p. 28.

⁵⁷ Fackenheim cited in Steven Crowell, 'Existentialism', in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* <<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/existentialism/>> [access 22 July 2017] (para. 17 of 62).

that man is a being whose existence precedes essence, and that he is a free being who cannot, in any circumstances, but will his freedom, at the same time I realise that I cannot will the freedom of others. Thus, in the name of that will to freedom which is implied in freedom itself, I can form judgments upon those who seek to hide from themselves the wholly voluntary nature of their existence and its complete freedom.⁵⁸

According to Sartre, to act in good faith one should ‘will’ the freedom of both the self and the other; not – as in Edward’s case – seek to prove the existence of the self *at the expense of* the other. This Sartrean understanding of freedom, as Kevin L. Stoehr argues, suggests that violence against the innocent other is ‘an implicit extension of the “violence” done to oneself when an individual denies his own radical freedom’.⁵⁹

Viewed in this way, Edward’s ruthless murder of an innocent stranger is arguably an act of self-deception and self-negation. The following way in which Edward presents himself as the victim of a fate beyond his control vividly illustrates the Sartrean notion of self-deception and self-negation:

I was but a man, a good man at heart, if the truth be told, driven to set right the wrong that had been done to me, absolved – even of murder – by the implacable fatalities to which I was then convinced my life had been subject. To me, this power was the Iron master, forever forging the chains that bound me to actions I *must* take. My destiny, I believed, was to take back what was rightfully mine, whatever the consequences. (p. 24, original emphasis)

⁵⁸ *Existentialism and Humanism*, p. 52.

⁵⁹ Kevin L. Stoehr, ‘Michael Haneke and the Consequences of Radical Freedom’, in *Existentialism and Contemporary Cinema: A Sartrean Perspective*, ed. by Jean-Pierre Boulé and Enda McCaffrey (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2011), pp. 33-45 (p. 41).

By ascribing his actions to the ‘power [of] the Iron master’, Edward presents himself as a mere puppet of ‘destiny’ rather than an autonomous human being with free will and agency. This retreat into fatalism demonstrates Edward’s inability to take responsibility for the consequences of his acts. It also negates the very kind of radical freedom brought by the contingency of existence and reality, as a result of which Edward fails to make meaning out of his existence. As we see from the text, even after Edward’s ‘successful’ murder of his rival Phoebus Daunt, he fails to secure his true identity, which traps him further in a despairing spiral of meaninglessness and nothingness, as illustrated by the following monologue:

What do you know? Nothing.

What have you achieved? Nothing.

Who are you? Nobody. (p. 528, original emphasis)

These bleak existential questions demonstrate that acts of violence against the (innocent) other negate not only the autonomy and freedom of the victim, but also that of the perpetrator. In Sartrean terms, Edward is a character who is ‘inauthentic’ and acts with ‘bad faith’.⁶⁰

This portrayal of Edward’s ‘inauthentic life’ raises ethical concerns about his solipsistic and violent ‘self-making’ process, which also challenges the reader’s ability to empathise with him. The fact that Edward’s choice of the victim is contingent pushes the reader to question the stability and intelligibility of their own lives. By revealing the horrifying fact that there is no guarantee for their existence, Cox’s *The Meaning of Night* prompts the reader to confront – with reference to Nietzsche – ‘the

⁶⁰ Sartre refers to self-negation as a form of ‘bad faith’ (*mauvaise foi*). For details, see his discussion of how we judge the actions of others in *Existentialism and Humanism*, pp. 50-54.

horror of the abyss', which brings about – in Sartrean terms – a 'nauseous' *reading* experience. Nevertheless, the constant appeal to the reader also makes clear that Edward requires an interlocutor of some kind in order to be redeemed and to discover the meaning in his existence. Like the Roquentin character in *Nausea*, Edward chooses to write journal entries – for his 'UNKNOWN READER' (p. 6, original emphasis) – in order to help him get rid of the 'dreadful feeling of abandonment' (p. 156), and to record – that is, to 'verify' – his existence:

I had decided, before leaving for Northamptonshire, that I would begin recording, in brief, the daily course of my life, partly in emulation of my foster-mother's habit, but with the additional purpose of providing myself, and perhaps posterity, with an accurate digest of events as I embarked on what I had become convinced would be a critical phase of my great project. (p. 369)

Here Edward's anticipation of retrospection reveals the crucial importance of his 'project' to the validation of his existence. As for Roquentin, it is a project that requires the *illocutory* presence of a reader, even if this implicit or idealised figure is situated way into the future. By repeatedly assuring 'his unknown reader' that he is communicating his existence and his struggles 'in full and complete form' (p. 78), Edward calls for their 'full-hearted sympathy and support' (p. 75) and demands their unconditional trust ('you must take it [his account] on trust' (p. 26)). In this context, the textual characterisation of Edward as both active agent and passive victim in the hands of Fate invites the reader's recognition of – and empathetic engagement with – his existential dilemma, and the way he has 'heroically' survived his encounter with the abyss. In light of my discussion of Kohut's formulation of the 'self-object' in the

previous section, the reader may be seen as Edward's 'self-object', whose existence provides Edward with 'newfound feelings of self-acceptance and wholeness'.⁶¹ Indeed, as we see from Edward's critical reflection on his recourse to fatalism in his final confession, Edward manages to position himself as both subject and object, agent and acted-upon simultaneously: 'I felt impelled by a relentless and misguided sense of fatality, which I interpreted as justifying whatever actions I chose to take' (p. 590). The overt willingness or ability to take ownership of his actions therefore presents Edward's act of writing – together with the presence of the empathetic reader – as his road to the restoration of his agency and existential freedom. In this context, *The Meaning of Night* may be seen as telling a double story: one is about Edward's 'inauthentic life', which involves his violent and selfish acts in the name of fatalism; the other is about how Edward tries to live existentially through the act of 'dialogic' writing. As my reading of Cox's text in this section has demonstrated, this kind of double story chimes with the philosophy of existentialism, and in particular, Sartre's challenging of the notion of pre-determined human nature and his foregrounding of the individual actions and commitments in the construction of human essence, which also pushes the reader to reflect upon their own existential freedom, responsibility and 'seasickness'. Further, this existential awareness disrupts the reader's immersive consumption of the contemporary fantasy of the Victorian underworld, which, following Lauren Berlant, challenges their 'habituated processing of affective responses' and impels them to see the present in a 'historical' context.⁶²

⁶¹ Bouson, p. 18.

⁶² 'Thinking About Feeling Historical', p. 5.

Afterword: some further thoughts on existential freedom in neo-Victorian literature

In a 1969 article, John Fowles ascribes his interest in the Victorians to their preoccupation with concerns such as ‘purpose’ and ‘morality’:

[T]he Victorian age, especially from 1850 on, was highly existentialist in many of its personal dilemmas. One can almost invert the reality and say that Camus and Sartre have been trying to lead us, in their fashion, to a Victorian seriousness of purpose and moral sensitivity.⁶³

Speaking from the modern perspective, Fowles suggests that the Victorian ‘personal dilemmas’ about ‘purpose’ and ‘moral sensitivity’ are ‘existentialist’. Although as a cultural movement existentialism flourished in Europe in the 1940s and 1950s, some of its key ideas – such as its challenge to the existence of God and subversion of the conception of ‘ready-made’ human nature – are clearly associated with the development of science and technology in the Victorian period, and in particular, Darwin’s theory of evolution.⁶⁴ As Sally Shuttleworth observes, there was ‘a decisive crisis of faith’ in the Victorian period ‘when the certainties of natural history and theology were shattered by the emergence of evolutionary biology’.⁶⁵ And to her, this crisis of faith is a kind of ‘existential crisis’.⁶⁶ Also, the nineteenth-century philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche is widely considered to be the precursor to twentieth-century existentialism. Fowles’s own existential interest in the Victorians has been made

⁶³ John Fowles, ‘Notes on an Unfinished Novel’, in *The Novel Today: Contemporary Writers on Modern Fiction*, ed. by Malcolm Bradbury (Manchester: Manchester University Press; Totowa: Rowman and Littlefield, 1977), pp. 135-50 (p. 140)

⁶⁴ As Sartre argues, existentialism is ‘atheistic’. *Existentialism and Humanism*, pp. 27-28.

⁶⁵ Sally Shuttleworth, ‘Natural History: The Retro-Victorian Novel’, in *The Third Culture: Literature and Science*, ed. by Elinor S. Shaffer (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1998), pp. 253-68 (pp. 260, 253).

⁶⁶ Shuttleworth, p. 260.

famous by his novel *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. As a novel that self-consciously engages with Victorian literary convention, gender politics and morality, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is a text that – following Hutcheon's reading – 'themati[ses]' and 'structur[es]' the issue of existential freedom.⁶⁷ Its blurring of the boundary between fiction and reality and inclusion of multiple endings may be seen as playing with Sartre's famous claim that 'existence precedes essence', which, as argued before, undermines the power of the God-like narrator and ascribes the meaning of existence to what one does or what one chooses.⁶⁸

As a text that helps to define the neo-Victorian genre, Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* also brings to the fore many of the motifs and devices of neo-Victorian fiction. Indeed, its preoccupation with existentialism can be found in a great number of neo-Victorian texts. As Shuttleworth points out in her reading of what she terms 'retro-Victorian novel', novels such as Graham Swift's *Ever After* (1992) and A. S. Byatt's *Angels and Insects* (1992) feature Victorian characters who 'pose the question of whether future generations would shrug at the vista of meaninglessness which so appalled them'.⁶⁹ Given these texts' shared interest in existential crisis and the importance of existential concerns in the study of metafiction (i.e., the ontological status of textual world and the role and responsibility of the reader), it is a bit surprising to see that very little has been written on neo-Victorian literature – a genre that can be positioned within the parameters of highbrow literature and popular fiction

⁶⁷ *Narcissistic Narrative*, p. 60.

⁶⁸ There is an ongoing debate about whether or to what extent the inclusion of multiple endings in Fowles's text extends the reader's freedom and control. As Louisa Hadley points out, unlike other critics, A. S. Byatt suggests that the reader's freedom is actually undermined by Fowles's choice. As Byatt argues, '[f]or the writer, whilst the plural endings are possibilities in the head, they intensify the reality of the future world. For the reader, now, they reduce it to paperiness again'. For my purpose here, I think it is fair to suggest that the use of different endings engages with the Sartrean concept of existential freedom. Byatt cited in Louisa Hadley, 'Feminine Endings: Neo-Victorian Transformations of the Victorian', in *Victorian Transformations: Genre, Nationalism and Desire in Nineteenth-Century Literature*, ed. by Bianca Tredennick (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), pp. 181-94 (p. 188).

⁶⁹ Shuttleworth, p. 216.

– from an existential perspective. Taking up Fowles’s lead, this chapter has moved away from the well-established critical fascination of detecting the similarities and/or differences between the Victorians and ourselves in the twenty-first century (which, as argued in the Introduction, often involves what Eve Sedgwick calls a ‘paranoid’ impulse), and has chosen to examine the representation of personal dilemmas in neo-Victorian fiction from a philosophical and ahistorical perspective instead. In doing so, it tries to demonstrate that although as a cultural movement, existentialism may belong in the twentieth century, its core ideas – such as personal freedom, agency and responsibility – are still useful for, and relevant to, the discussion of reader-response theory and the issue of empathy. By bringing Sartre’s philosophical discussion of existentialism together with Heinz Kohut’s theory of ‘self-psychology’, this chapter has mapped out a different model of text-reader relationship: one that concerns the importance of the interlocutor in helping subjects negotiate the contingency of their existence. The fact that texts like *Nausea* and *The Meaning of Night* appear to position the reader as of crucial importance in the salvation of intra-diegetic characters experiencing such crises serve to implicate him/her in a very particular way and create what are often extremely uncomfortable reading experiences.

Having said this, it is important to recognise that not all neo-Victorian texts position the reader as an empathetic ear to characters suffering from existential nausea. In the remainder of this conclusion, I turn to a brief discussion of Graeme Macrae Burnet’s second novel *His Bloody Project* (2015), a text that tells an extremely uncomfortable story of meaningless violence and nihilistic horror. Revolving around a brutal triple murder in a remote Scottish crofting community in 1869, *His Bloody Project* is presented as a collection of documents discovered by the author. These documents include a series of police statements taken from the residents of the village

of Culduie, which offer conflicting statements on the personality of the accused – the seventeen-year-old Roderick Macrae – and his own retrospective account of how a certain “‘chain of events’” lead up to his ruthless murder of three people.⁷⁰ These documents are in the form of medical reports, psychological evaluations of Roderick’s state of mind (in particular, whether he is sane and rational at the time of killing), a courtroom transcript from the trial, and other documents which raise questions about Roderick’s motive and (in)sanity. Like Atwood’s *Alias Grace*, Burnet’s multilayered narrative in *His Bloody Project* may be seen as positioning the extra-diegetic reader alongside the jury, inviting judgment on the character Roderick’s behaviours. Also, its detailed description of the harsh realities of crofting life in the Scottish Highlands in the nineteenth century and inclusion of psychiatric evaluations of Roderick’s personality clearly steer the reader towards a social and psychological explanation for Roderick’s seemingly pathological behaviour and criminality. As I have argued in Chapter One, this ‘Foucauldian’ reading position may be considered as the dominant one offered by neo-Victorian fiction. However, in light of this chapter’s discussion of existentialism, I would like to propose that like *The Meaning of Night*, *His Bloody Project* is a novel that thematises the idea of contingency, or the ‘ill fortunate’, as the text puts it (p. 21), raising questions, once again, about the meaning, or meaninglessness, of human existence. The reader is therefore prompted to think about the criminal, Roderick’s, actions from the existential as well as an historical and psychological perspective.

The account of Roderick’s chance discovery of a dying sheep in a boggy hillside at the beginning of his memoir resonates with the depiction of existential ‘nausea’ in Sartre’s and Cox’s novels:

⁷⁰ Graeme Macrae Burnet, *His Bloody Project: Documents Relating to the Case of Roderick Macrae* (Glasgow: Contraband, 2015), p. 25. Further references to this novel are given after quotations in the text.

When I emerged over the bridge, I found a distressed ram, lying on its side, half submerged in the mire. [...] The animal flailed its free limbs uselessly, succeeding only in working itself further into the slough. As I neared the stricken beast, keeping to the heathery outcrops upon which it was safe to stand, I whispered soothing sounds in an attempt to calm it. The sheep turned in my direction, like a sick old woman too weak to raise her head from the pillow. I felt no pity for the beast, only a kind of loathing for its stupidity. (p. 32)

Similar to the way in which Roquentin's chance contact with an inanimate pebble makes him aware of the gratuitousness of his own existence and prompts him to act in a desperate and violent manner, so too is Roderick forced to take action on account of his chance witnessing of how the sheep strays into the bog and is 'devoured by' (p. 32) it. Roderick's interpretation of the 'caw' of the crow nearby as 'the mockery of [his] efforts' (p. 33) reveals his desire to take control and break himself free from the chance circumstance he finds himself in. His eventual decision to kill the sheep, in this context, can be read as a desperate attempt to assert his agency over the horror of the abyss or void that is symbolically invoked by the bog itself. In the memoir, his act is also given a religious inflection by his claim that he is the 'redeemer' (p. 28) who has the 'duty to end the life of the stricken beast' (p. 33).

In many respects, the experience of the dying sheep whose existence appears to be gratuitous 'mirrors' Roderick's own life. Written in the form of a retrospective narrative, Roderick's account tells a story of how his family has been acted upon by different kinds of 'ill fortune' and 'unchancy beings' (p. 21). Born into a family of crofters, Roderick is presented as a vulnerable character who does not have much choice over the course of his life or its misery: circumstances which initially help to

elicit an empathetic response from the reader. Although the schoolmaster Mr Gillies suggests that Roderick has ‘the necessary ability to become a teacher or a minister or anything [he] choose[s]’, he is unable to continue his education since he is ‘required for the croft’ (p. 25). Also, Roderick’s contingent decision to kill the dying sheep links the fate of his family with that of Lachlan Mackenzie, the owner of the sheep that died at Roderick’s hands. From Roderick’s narrative, we see that Lachlan is a vengeful character whose election as the village constable brings a good deal of trouble to Roderick’s family, including Lachlan’s decision to reduce the portion of the croft Roderick’s family is given to work on, which leaves them in a financially desperate situation. Lachlan also exercises his power by the vicious rape of Roderick’s sister, Jetta, on several occasions. In this context, the account of how Roderick and his father try – and then fail – to get any assistance or form of justice from the factor (the estate manager) demonstrates the extent to which Roderick’s family is exploited: narrative details which inevitably steer the reader towards a historical and social-political interpretation of Roderick’s behaviours. However, as my previous discussion of Roderick’s killing of the sheep at the beginning of the text suggests, his actions may also be seen as ‘responsive’ to the situation he finds himself in unexpectedly or ‘by chance’. Indeed, viewing Roderick’s ‘crimes’ through this existential frame arguably makes better sense of them than a reading which tries (like the jury at his trial) to explain them in more straightforward psychological or political terms.

Like Edward in *The Meaning of Night*, Roderick’s violent killing of Lachlan’s family is a combination of pre-meditated revenge – his ‘project’ as he calls it (p. 151) – and a contingent response to what he finds in the house. Although Roderick’s initial plan is to kill Lachlan in order to pay back ‘the tribulations’ Lachlan had caused his family (p. 145), his first two victims are Flora and Donnie (Lachlan’s two children),

who simply happen to be at home when Roderick gets there. The appalling depiction of how Roderick ‘brought the back of the blade firmly down on [Flora’s] skull’ (p. 148) and then ‘hit [Donnie] on the side of the head with [his] flaughter’ (p. 149) provocatively challenges the reader’s ability to empathise with him. It also evokes a kind of nihilistic horror, which may cause readers to confront and question the very gratuitousness that pervades their own existence. Indeed, Roderick’s spontaneous killing of Flora and Donnie is difficult, if not impossible, to rationalise either psychologically or politically no matter how acutely his family has suffered. The very contingency underlying Roderick’s killing of Flora and Donnie may therefore be seen as stemming from an irrationality that is best understood as a denial of the value of life itself. With reference back to Kevin Stoehr’s explication of Sartre’s notion of existential freedom, Roderick’s violent action presents itself as a kind of ‘life-negating freedom’, which – following Stoehr – destroys the possibilities of ‘life-affirming freedom’.⁷¹

Significantly, Roderick’s account is permeated by a sense of indifference that extends to both his intra-diegetic interlocutor (the Advocate, Andrew Sinclair) and any future readers of his journal. In contrast to Sartre’s *Nausea* or Cox’s *The Meaning of Night* – where the protagonist tries to construct a kind of ‘self-object’ experience (in Kohutian terms) with their interlocutor/reader in order to construct meaning out of their contingent existence – the character in Burnet’s *His Bloody Project* displays no interest in building a productive relationship with anyone, present or future, who might read what he writes. In fact, he repeatedly states that he *does not* intend to ‘rouse the pity of the reader’ (p. 26). Nor is he interested in ‘absovl[ing] himself of responsibility for what [he has] done’ (p. 43). Rather, he agrees to write down his experience simply

⁷¹ Stoehr, p. 43.

because his advocate Mr Andrew Sinclair requires him to do so and he wants to ‘repay [his] advocate’s kindness’ (p. 15). As a consequence, Burnet’s *His Bloody Project* provides the reader with an extremely uncomfortable reading experience all round: not only is this a story about how human freedom is exercised at its most radically *negative*, but it is also one that refuses the usual explanations (‘madness’ or social/political injustice and oppression) which induce, or at least *permit*, sympathy and/or empathy. Through its repudiation of the reader’s empathetic understanding (which, as argued previously, is positioned by Cox’s text as the means to help Edward get through his ‘existential’ crisis), Burnet’s text also refuses to provide the reader with a ‘satisfactory’ closure to the unsettling story about Roderick’s brutal behaviours, which may be seen as frustrating the reader’s desire to ‘redeem’ the ‘unpleasurable’ past. In doing so, *His Bloody Project* further demonstrates how extremely ‘uncomfortable’ reading neo-Victorian fiction can be.

In the next chapter, I move from a discussion of how the reader empathises with the textual other to an examination of the reader’s empathetic engagement with a non-human subject; that is, the landscape. By tracing the concept of empathy back to its aesthetic origins, I consider how neo-Victorian literature locates its characters in space and place and how their (dis)orientations sometimes mirror the reader’s own experience.

Chapter Four

Space, Place and Empathy in Global Neo-Victorianism

In 2001, the Shanghai Municipal Planning Bureau launched a project called ‘One City, Nine Towns’. Its core idea was to urbanise and develop the peripheral ten towns of Shanghai – which were known as ‘one city and nine towns’ – into its satellite towns/cities. As the Shanghai Municipality No. 1 Decree of 2001 stated, in order to redevelop these suburbs into places that ‘attract urban residents through an agreeable natural environment, distinctive townscapes, and a modern way of living’, the government decided to ‘copy’ European architectural styles, which, to them, would help to project ‘an image of cosmopolitanism’.¹ The towns were built in the ‘stereotypical’ architecture of Britain, Italy, the Netherlands, Germany, Spain, Scandinavia, and North America respectively.² By recreating the most picturesque elements of Western townscapes, this project epitomises a Baudrillardian postmodern world.³ It also fulfils the Chinese consumer’s experience of the exotic.

Taking the scheme of ‘Thames Town’ as an example, this chapter continues the discussion of the pleasures afforded by neo-Victorian literature and culture, now focusing on the dynamic that exists between space, place and empathy.⁴ As we will see in the following analysis, although the architectural replicas in Thames Town are not exclusively neo-Victorian, the ‘immersive’ tourist experience it affords resembles the nineteenth-century German aesthetic perception of *Einfühlung*, which, as noted in the Introduction, is the etymological origin of the English term ‘empathy’. This kind of

¹ Jie Shen and Fulong Wu, ‘The Development of Master-Planned Communities in Chinese Suburbs: A Case Study of Shanghai’s Thames Town’, *Urban Geography*, 33.2 (2012), 183-203 (p. 190).

² Shen and Wu, p. 190.

³ See Jean Baudrillard, ‘Simulacra and Simulations’, in *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings*, ed. by Mark Poster (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), pp. 166-84.

⁴ As Edward Relph explains, space is ‘amorphous and intangible’, and its entity cannot be ‘directly described and analysed’. Place, instead, refers to ‘the lived-world of our everyday experiences’ and landscape is its ‘physical, visual form’. Edward Relph, *Place and Placelessness* (London: Pion Limited, 1976; repr. 2008), pp. 8, 6, 30.

empathetic engagement is also analogous to the consumer's experience of neo-Victorian fiction and film. As I will explain in more detail below, neo-Victorian cultural practices, such as heritage tourism and film and TV adaptations, invoke and cater to the contemporary – and in particular, international – customer's empathetic engagement with the fully landscaped Victorian world, and also function as a highly evocative *paratext* for them. Neo-Victorian literature, nevertheless, often mobilises space and place for different purposes. As we will see in the following analysis of Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* and Julian Barnes's *Arthur & George*, the representation of space and place or the lack of it in these texts arguably frustrates the reader's desire to enter or empathise with the simulated landscape of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century England. In this context, I propose that many readers – international and otherwise – would overcome this obstacle or frustration by bringing their paratextual imagination (which is often drawn from their experience of film and other media) to bear upon the text and fill in any absence of material landscape in the novel.

I begin the discussion which follows with a brief review of the scheme of Thames Town. With a focus on its aesthetic features, I explore how the idea of 'Englishness' and English landscape translates into the Chinese context and the ways in which the 'semi-colonial' history of Shanghai comes to form part of a design vocabulary for cosmopolitanism.⁵ In doing so, I examine the relationship between the

⁵ There is a long-term debate about the difference between 'Englishness' and 'Britishness' in the context of the dissolution of the British Empire. For discussion, see Thomas Nairn, *The Break-up of Britain: Crisis and Neo-Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1981). In this chapter, I use the word 'British' when the focus is on the idea of the nation state. Here it is also important to note that the term 'semi-colonialism' is used by historians to highlight the difference between the history of imperialism in mainland China and the 'standard' model of colonialism elsewhere. As Jürgen Osterhammel points out, during the period of foreign imperialism in China, China was still recognised as 'a sovereign member of the international community'. The term 'semi-colonialism' is therefore used to describe 'a somewhat deficient colonialism, short of overt political domination'. Jürgen Osterhammel, 'Semi-Colonialism and Informal Empire in Twentieth-Century China: Toward a Framework Analysis', in *Imperialism and*

(colonial) past, the present and the future in the global reach and relevance of neo-Victorianism. I then draw upon Harry Francis Mallgrave and Eleftherios Ikonomou's discussion of the German philosopher Robert Vischer's work on *aesthetic empathy* in the examination of the dynamic between space, place and empathy.⁶ As I will argue, although Vischer's model of empathy appears to be an egoistic form of projection at first sight, it involves some fundamental concern about the relationship between human beings and the universe. Also, its preoccupation with the embodied experience of the object anticipates the recent 'corporeal turn' in the field of arts, humanities and science, a term first introduced by Maxine Sheets-Johnstone in 1990.⁷ As Sheets-Johnstone explains, 'the corporeal turn' refers to an inter-disciplinary field of study that attests to 'the importance of exploring the living realities of corporeal life' in 'correcting' the 'Cartesian legacy' which positions the body as 'mere material handmaiden of an all-powerful mind'.⁸ As we will see in the following analysis, published in 1873, Vischer's doctoral thesis *Über das optische Formgefühl* ('On the Optical Sense of Form') explores the bodily perception of the phenomenal world. In light of Vischer's work, I examine the intra-diegetic examples of the relationship between character and landscape in Atwood's *Alias Grace* and Barnes's *Arthur & George* and its 2015 TV adaptation in order to discuss the different ways in which neo-Victorian literature and culture facilitate or frustrate the contemporary reader's/viewer's desire to empathise with the simulated landscape of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century England.

After: Continuities and Discontinuities, ed. by Wolfgang J. Mommsen and Jürgen Osterhammel (London and Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1986), pp. 290-314 (pp. 290, 296).

⁶ Harry Francis Mallgrave and Eleftherios Ikonomou, 'Introduction', in *Empathy, Form, and Space: Problems in German Aesthetics, 1873-1893*, ed. and trans. by Harry Francis Mallgrave and Eleftherios Ikonomou (Santa Monica: Getty Center for the History of Art and Humanities, 1994), pp. 1-85.

⁷ Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, *The Roots of Thinking* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990).

⁸ Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, 'Introduction', in *The Corporeal Turn: An Interdisciplinary Reader*, by Maxine Sheets-Johnstone (Exeter and Charlottesville: Imprint Academic, 2009), pp. 1-16 (pp. 3, 2).

Thames Town in Shanghai

Situated in the Songjiang District of Shanghai, Thames Town is the English name for a new town in the western quadrant of Songjiang District, and clearly named after the River Thames in London. The construction of Thames Town, as Jonathan Watts from *The Guardian* remarks, is an ‘ambitiou[s]’ plan since it ‘[s]queez[es] 500 years of British architectural development into a five-year [...] project’.⁹ As a mash-up of Tudor, Georgian and Victorian architectural styles, Thames Town is advertised as a recreation of the ‘authentic’ British townscape (see Figure 2 and 3).¹⁰ Also, it has mobilised particular signs and symbols of British culture, including a faked turreted castle; a faked church (which is modelled on Anglican Christ Church, Clifton Down in Bristol); a pub and a fish and chip shop as copied from buildings in Lyme Regis Dorset; a covered market reminiscent of Covent Garden; and the red telephone boxes which used to be found throughout Britain until quite recently. Furthermore, there are bronze statues of British public figures around the town, featuring historical personages such as William Shakespeare, Florence Nightingale, Winston Churchill, and Princess Diana.

⁹ Jonathan Watts, ‘Shanghai Surprise... A New Town in Ye Olde English Style’, *The Guardian*, 02 June 2004 <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2004/jun/02/arts.china1>> [accessed on 5 November 2016] (para. 2 of 15).

¹⁰ Shen and Wu, p. 195.



Figure 2: Traditional timber-framed houses with international chain coffee house on High Street in Thames Town.¹¹

¹¹ Shen and Wu, p. 197.



Figure 3: The skyline of Thames Town includes a replica of Christ Church in Bristol and the Millennium Bridge in Norwich.¹²

As a palimpsest of British architectural styles of different historical eras, Thames Town evokes, caters to and facilitates the Chinese visitor's desire to consume and get immersed in what they consider an 'authentic' British townscape. Constructed by and for the Chinese, Thames Town – like Victoriana – immerses the visitor in lush English exotica. It is an interesting example of how British history and heritage are symbolised and wrapped into the exotic other for the consumption of the East. The fact that it is designed as 'a major tourist attraction' and 'high-quality living environment' in Shanghai reveals how British landscape and culture are associated with ideas of class, taste, moral order and identity.¹³ To a certain extent, the scheme of Thames

¹² Matthew Niederhauser, Thames Town as a Quaint Corner of Shanghai <<http://matthewniederhauser.com/research/2011/10/07/thames-town-a-quaint-corner-of-shanghai/>> [accessed on 5 November 2016].

¹³ Shen and Wu, p. 191.

Town could be considered an example of a reversed version of Orientalism, whereby the ‘Other’ role is taken by the British – or the West by extension – rather than the East. This kind of ‘reverse orientalism’ can also be seen in places such as Hong Kong. As Kohlke and Gutleben argue in their reading of Elizabeth Ho’s analysis of the urban politics and aesthetics in Hong Kong, ‘the notion of Otherness is transferred from the one-time colonised to the former coloniser’s past’ and ‘the ex-colonised becomes both [the] ideal consumer’ and the ‘ideal tourist in the ex-imperial cityscape’.¹⁴ Here it should be noted that although both projects – Thames Town and *1881: Heritage* (as in Ho’s example) – exemplify the exotic pleasures afforded by the British landscape, the way they engage with imperial memory and legacy is quite different, a point I will elaborate in the next section.

The fact that Thames Town is planned and designed by the British architectural firm, Atkins, also presents the project as an example of the global reach of – to paraphrase Julian Barnes – ‘invent[ed]’ English traditions.¹⁵ Here Barnes is talking about the issue of English culture and history in the context of his 1998 novel *England, England*. As an interrogation of English identity, the text centres on the replication of England in a theme park on the Isle of Wight: a fictional enterprise which resembles the project of Thames Town. Notably, Barnes’s fictional list of ‘the Fifty Quintessences of Englishness’ in the text includes several of the elements we see in Thames Town, such as ‘the Royal Family’, ‘pubs’, ‘Shakespeare’ and ‘shopping’.¹⁶ This kind of overlap exemplifies how certain symbols and character traits are selected and used in the construction of a continuous and historical English identity. Also, like

¹⁴ Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben, ‘Troping the Neo-Victorian City: Strategies of Reconsidering the Metropolis’, in *Neo-Victorian Cities: Reassessing Urban Politics and Poetics*, ed. by Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben (Leiden and Boston: Brill Rodopi, 2015), pp. 1-42 (p. 32).

¹⁵ Cited in Penelope Denning, ‘Inventing England’, *The Irish Times*, 8.9 (1998) <<http://www.irishtimes.com/culture/inventing-england-1.190953>> [accessed on 13 February 2017] (para. 10 of 14).

¹⁶ Julian Barnes, *England, England* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1998), pp. 83-85.

the fictional theme park in Barnes's *England, England*, Thames Town provides its visitors with – borrowing the phrase from Nick Bentley – a ‘psycho-semiotic model’ of England, or ‘a fantasy space’ into which individuals can project their desires and feelings.¹⁷ However, unlike Barnes's text which explores, parodies and deconstructs the process of identity construction, Thames Town celebrates a particular version of Englishness and facilitates the Chinese visitor's exotic consumption (as mentioned before).

The exotic pleasure derived from this quaint and hyperbolic simulacrum of the British borough is well illustrated by the fact that Thames Town has become an iconic place for wedding photography for some Chinese young people. It also provides people with a chance to experience the British townscape economically. As Ruth Morris, from the BBC, quotes from her interview with a Chinese office administrator who chooses to have a family day out in Thames Town, ‘I really hope I can visit the real Thames River one day, sit along the banks, drink a cup of coffee and enjoy the British sunshine’.¹⁸ But she can't afford to travel to England now. From a critical standpoint, this kind of pastiche and adaptation may be seen as an example of the Disneyfication of public and private spaces. As Andrew Law expresses it, Thames Town resembles an ‘accurate theme par[k]’.¹⁹ By modelling the town on the stereotypical British townscape, the scheme of Thames Town – following Morris – involves its residents and visitors in something like ‘The Truman Show’, a reference to the 1998 movie chronicling a man who unwittingly lives his life in a fake town.²⁰ In the words of Tony Mackey, the

¹⁷ Nick Bentley, ‘Re-writing Englishness: Imagining the Nation in Julian Barnes's *England, England* and Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*’, *Textual Practice*, 21.3 (2007), 483-504 (p. 486).

¹⁸ Ruth Morris, ‘Why China Loves to Build Copycat Towns’, *BBC*, 1 July 2013 <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-23067082>> [accessed on 5 November 2016].

¹⁹ Andrew Law, ‘Postcolonial Shanghai: An Urban Discourse of Prosperity and Futurity’, in *Colonial Frames, Nationalist Histories: Imperial Legacies, Architecture, and Modernity*, ed. by Mrinalini Rajagopalan and Madhuri Desai (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), pp. 285-304 (p. 296).

²⁰ Morris.

master planner of the Thames Town housing scheme, the whole place looks like ‘a film set’.²¹

This perception of Thames Town as a ‘film set’ introduces an uncanny relationship between place and the human subjects who inhabit it. Across several disciplines, scholars have observed that human activities – and, in particular, movements – are what animate the constructed environment. As Arnold Berleant argues in his study of theme parks, the character of a theme park is ‘decided largely by [its] prominent aesthetic features’, which refer to ‘the perceptual dimensions through which we experience an environment directly – what we hear, see, and feel with our bodies as we move through it’, and ‘how these sensory qualities combine with our knowledge and beliefs to create a unified experiential situation’.²² Berleant’s argument links the aesthetics of theme park with the embodied experience, knowledge and expectation of the visitors. By highlighting the link between the corporeal, kinesthetic and sensual experience of the space and the visitor’s previous knowledge and expectation, Berleant suggests a dynamic and productive engagement between designed landscapes such as theme parks and human subjects. Following Berleant, it is clear that Thames Town facilitates the Chinese’s visitor’s desire to consume and experience British exotica in an embodied and participatory manner. The human-landscape dynamic Berleant maps out also echoes Robert Vischer’s understanding of empathy, a point I will elaborate in the next section.

However, given the fact that the history of Western imperialism in China began with the First Opium War (1839-1842) and Shanghai was one of the five cities that were forced to allow the British to reside and carry on ‘their mercantile pursuits [...] without molestation or restraint’, the idea of recreating an ‘authentic’ British town in

²¹ Cited in Morris.

²² Berleant, p. 42.

Shanghai has generated some unsettling questions about the city's engagement with its semi-colonial history and British Imperial legacy.²³ As Thomas Campanella remarks in *The Concrete Dragon: China's Urban Revolution and What it Means for the World* (2008):

[I]t is somewhat ironic that a city once subjugated by Western imperialism should choose to build simulacra of Western cities as part of a regional growth strategy, especially since many of the towns selected for redevelopment are many times older than Shanghai itself.²⁴

Campanella's argument highlights the role of the colonial in the discourse of the city's future prosperity and its related ethical concerns. The fact that Thames Town – as a highly Disneyfied place – encourages its visitors to consume the British landscape in an ahistorical manner further complicates the discussion of the relationship between the past, the present and the future. In his work on the cultural industry of 'Shanghai Nostalgia', Tianshu Pan suggests that the idealisation and adaptation of the colonial past helps to re-imagine a 'pre-Communist colonial' Shanghai, which serves 'the social and political agenda for Shanghai's transition towards a global city'.²⁵ Following both Campanella and Pan, it is arguable that as a mash-up of architectural styles of different historical periods, Thames Town demonstrates the self-identity of Shanghai as a

²³ 'The Treaty of Nanjing', in *Treaties between the Empire of China and Foreign Powers*, by William Federick Mayers (Shanghai: North-China Herald, 1906), pp. 1-4 (p. 1). China signed 'The Treaty of Nanjing' with Britain after its defeat in the First Opium War. According to this treaty, China had to reduce its authority on unilateral tariffs on the articles of trade in the cities of Shanghai, Canton (now Shantou), Amoy (now Xiamen), Fuchau-fu (now Fuzhou) and Ningbo, and cede the territory of Hong Kong to the British.

²⁴ Cited in Law, p. 296. In terms of administrative planning, Shanghai used to be a regional area of Songjiang until the early twentieth century. In 1958 Songjiang became a city district of Shanghai County.

²⁵ Cited in Law, p. 295.

cosmopolitan city which is willing to embrace global capital and celebrate its mercantile background.

A similar, but also fundamentally different, practice may be found in the project, *1881: Heritage*, in Hong Kong. Unlike Thames Town, which is a self-consciously constructed replica, *1881: Heritage*, as Elizabeth Ho suggests, is an example of the ‘adaptive re-use’ of colonial architecture in Hong Kong.²⁶ As Ho argues, through ‘the transformation of the former Marine Police Headquarters into a heritage hotel, museum and luxury shopping centre’, *1881: Heritage* exemplifies the way in which Victorian space is appropriated ‘in and for the present’.²⁷ This model of adaptive re-use presents the past and the present in a ‘parallel dimension’, a concept I take up from Julian Wolfreys.²⁸ As Wolfreys explains, neo-Victorian spatial practice often ‘overlay[s] the present-day territory with the traces of its earlier selves’.²⁹ In a similar vein, Kohlke and Gutleben suggest that neo-Victorian space is ‘*quintessentially gothic*’, since it provides a prism through which ‘[t]oday’s cities’ and ‘their reimagined nineteenth-century referents’ haunt each other.³⁰ As a postmodern artefact and historical replica, the project of Thames Town, nevertheless, seems to be more concerned with the boundary between authenticity and artificiality rather than the dynamic between the past and the present (although, as my discussion in the previous section has demonstrated, it is important to examine the project in the context of Shanghai’s semi-colonial history). Also, as argued before, by evoking a particular sense of timelessness, Thames Town facilitates the Chinese visitor’s immersive and ahistorical consumption of the simulated British landscape.

²⁶ Elizabeth Ho, ‘Adaptive Re-Use: Producing Neo-Victorian Space in Hong Kong’, in *Neo-Victorian Cities*, pp. 331-54 (p. 331).

²⁷ ‘Producing Neo-Victorian Space in Hong Kong’, p. 336.

²⁸ Julian Wolfreys, ‘“Part Barrier, Part Entrance to a Parallel Dimension”: London and the Modernity of Urban Perception’, in *Neo-Victorian Cities*, pp. 127-50 (p. 134).

²⁹ Wolfreys, p. 134.

³⁰ ‘Troping the Neo-Victorian City’, p. 8. Original emphasis.

By drawing upon Mallgrave and Ikonomou's reading of Robert Vischer's work on aesthetic perception, I propose that the human-landscape dynamic afforded by Thames Town resembles the model of aesthetic empathy, or *Einfühlung*, the German word used by nineteenth-century German aestheticians to describe the affective engagement between human subjects and artwork. As I will be arguing, the concept of *Einfühlung* suggests a more complicated model of aesthetic perception than the modern sense of projection, and anticipates the later phenomenological argumentation of the embodied encounter with the landscape. Thus, it serves as a useful model for this chapter's examination of the relationship between human mobility, empathy, space and place in neo-Victorian literature and culture.

***Einfühlung* and embodied simulation**

Literally translated as 'feeling oneself into' or 'in-feeling', the idea of *Einfühlung* is introduced and widely explored in Vischer's 1873 doctoral thesis *On the Optical Sense of Form*.³¹ As the title suggests, Vischer's research placed great emphasis on the physiological side of art perception. Also, as we will see, through the idea of *Einfühlung*, Vischer suggested that physiology 'condition[ed] sensory and emotive responses' in aesthetic contemplation.³² By taking the viewer's perspective into consideration, Vischer argued that for the appreciation of visual arts, the key issue is not of the content or form but of 'the power of the image, of its phenomenality' (cited in Mallgrave and Ikonomou, p. 27).

³¹ Robert Vischer, 'On the Optical Sense of Form: A Contribution to Aesthetics', in *Empathy, Form and Space*, pp. 89-124. Further references to this thesis are given after quotations in the text unless otherwise stated.

³² Cited in Mallgrave and Ikonomou, 'Introduction', p. 22. Further references to this introduction are given after quotations in the text unless otherwise stated.

In order to understand Vischer's concept of *Einfühlung*, it is important to review the distinction he made between sensation and feeling. As Mallgrave and Ikonomou explain, for Vischer sensation is 'simply the body's physical response to the outside stimuli'; while feeling 'presumes mental or emotional activity' (p. 22). This distinction builds a hierarchy between sensation and feeling in the perceptual process. Following Mallgrave and Ikonomou, sensation composes 'the first and lower stage in the process of perception' and is physiological in Vischer's model (p. 23). It then becomes 'enhanced and deepened by the mind', which helps to create "'ideas" or images of every sensory event' (ibid.). When the sensory event gets 'combined with the image of our "self"', the viewers would respond with 'feeling (*Fühlung*)' (ibid.). Then there comes the advanced level of feeling; that is, our empathy for the 'form of the object' (ibid.). For Vischer, this kind of empathy is specified as the embodied simulation of the 'form' of the phenomenal object; or, as Mallgrave and Ikonomou term it, the 'harmonious correlation' between 'the object's form' and 'the bodily or sensory structure of the perceiving subject' (p. 22).

Vischer's conceptualisation of *Einfühlung* is inspired by his reading of Karl Albert Scherner's 1861 book on dream interpretation – *Das Leben des Traums (The Life of the Dream)* – which predates Sigmund Freud's seminal *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899). In a reference to Scherner's chapter on 'Basic Symbolic Formations for Bodily Stimuli', Vischer remarked:

Here it was shown how the body, in responding to certain stimuli in dreams, objectifies itself in spatial forms. Thus it unconsciously projects its own bodily form – and with this also the soul – into the form of the object. From this I derived the notion that I call 'empathy' [*Einfühlung*]. (p. 92)

From this account, it is arguable that Vischer's interpretation of dreams chimes with Freud's theorisation of the unconscious. Indeed, as Mallgrave and Ikonomou note, Freud developed certain examples of Scherner's – such as 'wish fulfilment' and 'erotic longing' – in his own work (p. 24). Also, as Mallgrave and Ikonomou explain, Vischer took up Scherner's discussion of the way 'the mind [translates] ideas into visual impressions or symbols [in dreams]' in his explanation of the dynamic that exists between the external stimuli and the sensory response of the body (ibid.). As we will see in the following analysis of Atwood's *Alias Grace*, Vischer's model of empathy provides the reader with a different approach to the examination of Grace's mentality, one that seems to position her 'empathetic tendency' – which is specified as her 'over-identification' with her physical surroundings – as part of her pathological disorder.

For Vischer, this 'unconscious need for a surrogate for our body-ego' also carries over into everyday experience:

As in a dream, I stimulate, on the basis of simple nerve sensations, a fixed form that symbolizes my body or an organ of it. Conversely, an objective but accidentally experienced phenomenon always provokes a related idea of the self in sensory or motor form. (p. 101)

As Mallgrave and Ikonomou point out, Vischer's conceptualisation of *Einfühlung* suggests 'a more radical and thoroughgoing transference of our personal ego, one in which our whole personality (consciously or unconsciously) merges with the object' (p. 25). It involves a form of transference that is more complicated than the projection of emotions into the object. As Vischer himself observed, when we empathise with an image, we 'penetrat[e] into the phenomenon' (p. 101, original emphasis). This

conceptualisation of aesthetic empathy is vividly illustrated by Vischer's remark that in viewing the specific object 'I wrap myself with its contours as in a garment' (ibid.).

Vischer's example clearly demonstrates that his model of *Einfühlung* involves a more dynamic and embodied experience of the object, which anticipates the recent 'corporeal turn' in the arts, humanities and sciences.

It is important to note that during the empathetic engagement with the phenomenal object, imagination plays an essential role. As we see from Vischer, imagination helps to crystallise or embody the physical or bodily sensation:

A kinesthetic stimulus does not always and necessarily lead to actual movement but always to the idea of it. Imagination is an act by which we mentally simulate something that previously existed as a vague content of our sensation as sensuous, concrete form. (p. 99)

Vischer's discussion makes it clear that sensation may remain external, which means that the aforementioned three stages (sensation, feeling and empathy) in the perceptual process do not always lead to each other. As Vischer underlined, it is with the help of imagination that sensation may 'insinuate itself into the forms as a kinetic, volitional, empathetic sensation' (p. 102). In demonstrating the significance of imagination in the mechanism of empathy, Vischer gave the following example:

I might imagine myself moving along the line of a range of hills guided by kinesthetic imagination (be it direct or mediated by the reflex stimuli of sensitized nerves). In the same way, fleeting clouds might carry me far away. (p. 101)

Here it is striking that Vischer focused on the way in which the body experiences itself kinesthetically; *mobility* is the crucial link between what we see and what we feel. The embodied simulation of the form and movement of hills and clouds provokes a kinesthetic awareness and imitation in the body. As we will see in the next section, this focus on kinesthesia and embodied simulation is shared by Henri Bergson in his discussion of aesthetic perception, and is also considered by Bergson as essential in transmitting the emotions of the artist to the viewers.³³

Equally significant, Vischer's discussion of the imagination involves the human subject's fundamental desire to unite with – and position oneself in – the universe. As Vischer stated, imagination is 'a fluid medium in which contradictions of the world – repose and motion, self and nonself – merge into a mysterious whole' (p. 102). Vischer's understanding of imagination is also shared by another nineteenth-century German philosopher Hermann Lotze, who in his writing remarked in a confident manner that:

The world becomes alive to us through this power to see in forms the joy and sorrow of the existence that they hide, [...] no form is so unyielding that our imagination cannot project its life into it. (cited in Mallgrave and Ikonomou, p. 20)

Following Lotze, imagination, or imaginative empathy, helps to animate the world. In the words of Vischer, empathy involves a 'pantheistic urge for union with the world',

³³ As Susan Leigh Foster points out, the term 'kinesthesia' was coined in 1880 to help establish 'the existence of nerve sensors in the muscles and joints that provide awareness of the body's motions and movements'. In other words, the notion of kinesthesia highlights the importance of sensory awareness. Susan Leigh Foster, 'Introducing Choreographing Empathy', in *Choreographing Empathy: Kinesthesia in Performance*, by Susan Leigh Foster (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), pp. 1-14 (p. 7). I treat the term 'kinesthesia' and 'movement' as near synonyms.

which ‘must, consciously or unconsciously, be directed toward the universe’ (p. 109). For Mallgrave and Ikonomou, this impulse to project can also be read as the human subject’s ‘psychological attempt to bridge the essential “otherness” of nature’, as is illustrated by the metaphor Vischer used, that ‘[h]e can tolerate no obstacle; he wants to roam the whole world and feel himself as one with it’ (cited in Mallgrave and Ikonomou, p. 26). Mallgrave and Ikonomou’s discussion demonstrates how the world ‘exerts a pull or attraction against human subjectivity’ that the human wants to ‘merge with the universe’ (ibid.). By shifting the focus from the perspective of the spectator to that of the spectacle, Mallgrave and Ikonomou’s reading brings out a reciprocal relationship between the observing subject and the phenomenal object, which complicates Vischer’s model of projection. Their formulation also echoes Gaston Bachelard’s recognition of the autonomy of nature and the attraction it exerts against the human subject in his discussion.³⁴ As Bachelard observes, ‘[n]ature forces us to contemplation. [...] Everything that makes us look looks’.³⁵ Indeed, Bachelard’s philosophy of imagination is akin to Vischer’s foregrounding of imagination as a key ingredient in the mechanism of *Einfühlung*.³⁶ For Bachelard, as for Vischer, imagination helps to humanise the ‘objective’ world. It is ‘nothing but the subject conveyed into things’, or ‘an attempt at inscribing human love in the heart of things’.³⁷

Vischer’s discussion of aesthetic empathy also implies a power dynamic between the observing subject and the phenomenal object. For any investigation, such as my own, concerned with ethics of empathy as well as its mechanisms (see Chapter One and in particular the discussion of Amy Coplan), this necessarily raises some

³⁴ Edward K. Kaplan, ‘Gaston Bachelard’s Philosophy of Imagination: an Introduction’, *International Phenomenological Society*, 33.1 (1972), 1-24.

³⁵ Cited in Kaplan, p. 9.

³⁶ As Lynne Pearce points out, Bachelard works at ‘the interface of Freudian psychology and philosophy/phenomenology’, which, to a certain extent, echoes Vischer’s interests in the phenomenal world and the human mind. Lynne Pearce, *Drivetime: Literary Excursions in Automotive Consciousness* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), p. 159.

³⁷ Bachelard cited in Kaplan, p. 8.

questions. First, is the desire to assimilate or comprehend the other ethical or legitimate? Second, to what extent is the spectator's subjectivity liable to the 'gaze' of the 'other' since – following Bachelard – '[e]verything that makes us look *looks*'?³⁸ As we will see in the following analysis, these two questions are essential for my discussion of Atwood's *Alias Grace*.

Notably, in the context of aesthetic perception, the phenomenal object is specified as the 'art work' or 'artefact' rather than the natural landscape or universe. In order to demonstrate the way in which literary and filmic representation(s) of the landscape involves the reader/audience affectively, I draw upon Amelia Jones's discussion of Henri Bergson's work on art appreciation.³⁹ Like Vischer, Bergson is more concerned with the 'phenomenality' (in Vischer's word) of artwork, as evidenced by his claim that 'art aims at impressing feelings on us (the viewers) rather than expressing them'.⁴⁰ In addressing what Jones calls the epistemological issue about 'how and what art means', Bergson examines, first of all, the process of how artwork is encoded with feelings and thoughts of its creator(s).⁴¹ According to Bergson, in order to share his or her personal emotion with the viewers, the artist needs to 'bring about by choosing, among the outward signs of his emotions, those which our body is likely to imitate mechanically, though slightly, as soon as it perceives them'.⁴² Bergson's focus on corporeal imitation resembles Vischer's model of *Einfühlung*, one that is underpinned by the kinesthetic experience of the body. It also highlights the role kinesthesia plays in involving the viewers in the affective landscape of the artwork.

³⁸ Cited in Kaplan, p. 9. My emphasis.

³⁹ Amelia Jones, 'Foreword', in *Kinesthetic Empathy in Creative and Cultural Practices*, ed. by Dee Reynolds and Matthew Reason (Bristol and Chicago: Intellect, 2012), pp. 11-15 (p. 11).

⁴⁰ Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*, trans. by F. L. Pogson (London: George Allen and Co., 1913), p. 16.

⁴¹ Jones, p. 11.

⁴² Bergson, p. 18.

As by now it has become obvious, Bergson's work on aesthetic perception has particular implications for my discussion of neo-Victorianism. Following Bergson, it is clear that the kind of place and space that I will look at in the neo-Victorian literary and filmic texts in the next section is not place or space *per se*. Rather, the focus is on the literary or artistic representation of place and space and its associated affective impact upon the reader/audience. My discussion of Thames Town – as an example of the self-consciously constructed and mediated landscape – at the beginning of this chapter reveals how a certain kind of space is designed to facilitate a fairly straightforward empathetic engagement between the landscape and its visitors. By contrast, the two neo-Victorian novels that I have selected for this chapter – Atwood's *Alias Grace* and Barnes's *Arthur & George* – mobilise landscape for different purposes, such as character development, critical reflection on the Victorian literary tradition and the construction of English identity. In the following section, I move to the discussion of the intra-diegetic examples about the human-landscape dynamic in these two neo-Victorian novels which, as I will argue, 'mirror' the extra-diegetic reader's relationship with the simulated late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century landscape.

'Abnormal' empathy in *Alias Grace*

Since *Alias Grace* has already been examined in detail in Chapter One, in this chapter I focus only on the textual representation of the relationship between the two main characters, Grace and Doctor Simon Jordan, and different kinds of places they encounter. In light of Scherner's work on dream interpretation and Vischer's formulation of *Einfühlung*, I approach the human-landscape dynamic in the text from the following two perspectives: one is about how the mind embodies itself in spatial

terms; the other involves a discussion of the significance of kinesthesia in involving the reader affectively in the textual landscape.

As noted before, Vischer derived the notion of empathy from Scherner's work on dreams. For Vischer, Scherner's discussion of dreams illustrates the process of how the human body projects its bodily form and psyche into spatial objects in an unconscious manner. In talking about sexual dreams, for example, Scherner gave a scenario of the dreamer who stands talking with women in a narrow court.⁴³ As Irving Massey explains, for Scherner, the image of a narrow court represents 'the narrow space between the thighs'.⁴⁴ This example illustrates how dream images reflect the subtle somatic events that are ignored by the daytime consciousness. In this context, I propose that my readings of Scherner and Vischer provide a useful way of understanding Grace's intimate relationship with her (illusory) surroundings.

Set in mid-nineteenth-century Canada, Atwood's *Alias Grace* provides the reader with an interesting account of pre-Freudian understandings of the human mind. The fact that the doctors and public figures who attend to Grace do not have a working knowledge of the 'unconscious' means that they struggle to make sense of her complex psychological profile, including the significance of her 'hallucinations'. Atwood extends this nineteenth-century viewpoint to her description of Grace's hallucinations which are marked by what is seen to be her idiosyncratic sensitivity to her physical surroundings. As we will see, the nature of these hallucinations – and in particular, Grace's affective engagement with certain landscapes – may be seen as key to her distinctive psychological problems, including her disorientation and difficulty in remembering her actions. Following both Scherner and Vischer, it is arguable that Grace is presented as a character who is *too* empathetic towards her surroundings.

⁴³ Irving Massey, 'Freud Before Freud: K. A. Scherner (1825-1889)', *The Centennial Review*, 34.4 (1990), 567-76 (p. 572).

⁴⁴ Massey, p. 572.

In the scene near the beginning of the novel where Grace walks around the yard of the Governor's house, the representation of Grace's projected thoughts – communicated here by free indirect discourse – is a good example of the kind of empathy associated with the work of Scherner and Vischer:

Out of the gravel there are peonies growing. They come up through the loose grey pebbles, their buds testing the air like snails' eyes, then swelling and opening, huge dark-red flowers all shining and glossy like satin. Then they burst and fall to the ground. (p. 5)

In light of Vischer's conceptualisation of *Einfühlung*, we may suggest that the use of a number of performative verbs (i.e., 'testing', 'opening') in this passage reveals Grace's unconscious attempt to project human subjectivity into these peonies, which are presented as animated creatures who have the autonomy and ability to act. As argued in the previous discussion of Vischer, this process of projection involves what Mallgrave and Ikonomou call an urge to 'bridge the essential "otherness" of nature' (p. 26).

Indeed, these peonies are presented as symbols of temptation. As Kym Brindle observes, their peculiar stain-like texture is 'slippery and seductive'.⁴⁵ Grace's attempt to 'reach out [her] hand to touch one' of the peonies (p. 6) and her animated description of them therefore demonstrates the way she tries to merge with – and exert control over – her surroundings.

However, as we quickly learn from the text, these flowers are not 'real'. Grace's subsequent reflection that 'its April, and peonies don't bloom in April' (p. 6) reveals her troubled psychological condition in which she seems to oscillate between

⁴⁵ *Epistolary Encounters*, p. 107.

hallucination and rationality. In this context, her empathetic engagement with the material world seems to undermine the integrity of her subjectivity, and – as noted in my previous reading of Vischer – directs the reader’s attention to the power dynamic between the self and the other in the mechanism of empathy. Here the account of how Grace imagines red peonies growing slowly on the empty prison wall while she is out of the prison yard further dramatises the tension between the conscious and the unconscious, the desire to escape and the sense of imprisonment. The movement of these peonies – that they ‘burst and fall to the ground’ (p. 5) – may be read as the embodiment of Grace’s bodily sensation. As Hilde Staels argues, the ‘condensed’ and ‘synaesthetic’ metaphor of the peonies demonstrates ‘the sensations of sorrow and of physical pain’, which, following Scherner and Vischer, also reflect the process of how Grace’s psyche objectifies itself in spatial forms in response to the external stimulus.⁴⁶ By linking the idea of captivity – as exemplified by institutions such as the prison – with the nature imaginary of dark-red peonies vibrantly bursting in the air and petals falling to the ground, the text may be seen as illustrating Grace’s bodily desire for freedom and escape, as a response to the imprisoning actions of others.

From a metacritical perspective, this dynamic between freedom and captivity also adds an ethical and gendered dimension to the discussion of readerly empathy. As we see from the following account of the Parkinson residence (where Grace used to work with her friend Mary, who died from a scandalous abortion), the text plays with the reader’s desire to ‘penetrate into’ (in Vischer’s words) or empathise with the place that is associated with Grace’s tragic life experience by, first of all, evoking the reader’s kinesthetic experience of it:

⁴⁶ Hilde Staels, ‘Intertexts of Margaret Atwood’s *Alias Grace*’, *Modern Fiction Studies*, 46.2 (2000), 427-50 (p. 437).

At the very top of the house was a large attic, divided up; and if you climbed the stairs, and then went along past the room where we slept, and down some other stairs, you were in the drying room. It was strung with lines, and had several small windows that opened out under the eaves. And the chimney from the kitchen ran up through this room. (p. 159)

Through the use of the second-person pronoun ‘you’, the text may be seen as inviting the reader to identify with the reading position as Grace’s interlocutor. The textual focus on the structure of the house facilitates the reader’s kinesthetic experience of it, which, as we have seen from the previous discussion of Vischer’s and Bergson’s work on aesthetic perception, involves the reader affectively in the textual landscape and fulfils their desire to empathise with the interior space. The fact that the places presented here, such as the attic and drying room, are representative of feminine, domestic and private space may be seen as fostering a gendered critique of the reader’s empathy; a reading position that is arguably ‘mirrored’ by the intra-diegetic example of the character Simon’s erotic consumption of the laundry room of his childhood (which is another example of feminine space):

The sheets and linens move in the wind, as if worn by invisible swelling hips; as if alive. As he watches – he must be a boy, he’s short enough to be looking upwards – a scarf or veil of white muslin is blown from the line and undulates gracefully through the air like a long bandage unrolling, or like paint in water. He runs to catch it, out of the yard, down the road – he’s in the country, then – and into a field. (p. 194)

The link the text makes between the movements of the sheets and linens and ‘swelling hips’ demonstrates the way Simon animates and projects his erotic fantasy into the laundry room. Following Scherner and Vischer, we may suggest that the moving sheets and linens are the embodiment of the female body Simon desires. This passage therefore becomes a good example of how Simon projects his bodily sensation and subtle desire into the feminine space. The subsequent description of his physical sensation in the text further illustrates how an empathetic engagement with this feminine space greatly satisfies Simon’s erotic desire, that when he ‘tugs [the cloth] down’ in the dream he ‘struggles; he is being closely embraced; he can scarcely breathe’ and for him the sensation is ‘painful and almost unbearably erotic’ (p. 195). Focusing on the power and erotic dynamic between the observing subject and the object, the text may also be seen as prompting the reader to reflect critically upon the act of empathy, and in particular, the ‘perversity’ of it (as in Simon’s case).

In this section, I have used the work of Scherner, Vischer and Bergson to complicate the discussion of Grace’s psychology and the text-reader relationship in *Alias Grace*. As I have argued, Grace’s ‘empathetic’ engagement with the phenomenal world is presented as a pathological tendency in which the human subject loses all sense of themselves and their ego-boundaries through an over-identification with a non-human ‘other’. The fact that this ‘other’ is experienced in terms of spatial and kinaesthetic terms in the descriptions of Grace in the yard and Simon in the laundry is illuminated by Vischer’s theory. Simon’s erotic consumption of feminine space here and throughout the text nevertheless also raises ethical concerns about this sort of bodily projection and – by implication – the reader’s own immersive involvement in the spaces and places of the texts they read. As we will now see in my analysis of *Arthur & George*, Barnes’s novel is marked by the *lack* of textual description of

material spaces and places. Whereas Grace is ‘too close’ to what she sees, the character George in Barnes’s text is ‘too distant’. Further, this kind of textual gap in *Arthur & George* may also be seen as challenging the reader’s desire to occupy the textual landscape(s) of their texts. By drawing upon the concept of *paratext* as a way of conceptualising the reader-landscape dynamic in neo-Victorian fiction, I propose that the reader, instead, has to rely on their own paratextual knowledge to satisfy their desire to enter the world of the Victorians. I take my cue from Christian Lee’s work on tourism and fan culture in arguing about how paratexts – specified as the invented traditions about the English, and the contemporary filmic or TV characterisation of the Victorians and the Victorian landscape – have helped to inform the reader’s ‘reading strategies and expectations’.⁴⁷

Placelessness and paratextuality in *Arthur & George* and its TV adaptation

This section begins with a story about my own mis-recollection. I started thinking about the human-landscape dynamic in Barnes’s *Arthur & George* when I recalled that one of the protagonists, George, is presented as a habitual walker and regular train commuter. After a detailed re-reading of the text, I was surprised that I had failed to find any textual examples of the kind of human-landscape interaction I had expected. However, I had also noticed that the text seemed to draw the reader’s attention to the fact that, although George is a habitual walker, he is not interested in the landscape, as evidenced by George’s claim that although he walks everyday, he ‘never really pay[s] attention’ to where he walks and the omniscient narrator’s remark that George is a

⁴⁷ Christian Lee, “‘Welcome to London’: Spectral Spaces in Sherlock Holmes’s Metropolis”, *Cultural Studies Review*, 20.2 (2014), 172-95 (pp. 117-18).

character who ‘ignores the landscape, which does not interest him’.⁴⁸ Indeed, the textual foregrounding of George’s *indifference* to the landscape may be seen as, in a seemingly paradoxical manner, an example of the writer Julian Barnes’s *interest* in the significance of landscape. My personal reading experience of *Arthur & George* therefore suggests that the issue of landscape is played out in the text through its engagement with the reader’s reading expectations or generic knowledge. In this regard, my own experience prompted me to reflect upon the process of my mis-recollection, and the ways in which my reading expectation and strategy are informed.

In this section I therefore wish to propose that the filmic or TV representations of the Victorians and the Victorian landscape serve a crucial role in the reader’s experience of neo-Victorian novels. Such paratexts ‘fill in’ gaps and absences in the texts themselves and, through the process of the readers’ imaginary projections, vicariously satisfy their desire to enter the fully-landscaped ‘worlds’ of Victorian fiction regardless of whether the text provides this sort of detail or not. Through a close examination of the 2015 TV adaptation of *Arthur & George*, we see that unlike the novel – where there is a marked lack of description of the landscape – the adaptation pro-actively involves the audience in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century landscape through processes involving the characters’ corporeal movements and the spectator’s ‘virtual mobility’, the latter a concept I take from Sarah Gibson.⁴⁹ As Gibson argues in her engagement with the cinema and media critic Anne Friedberg, although the spectator is ‘fixed in his/her immobility within the cinema (seat)’, their

⁴⁸ Julian Barnes, *Arthur & George* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2005), pp. 102, 66. Further references to this novel are given after quotations in the text.

⁴⁹ *Arthur & George*, written by Ed Whitmore (ITV, 2015). Sarah Gibson, ‘English Journeys: The Tourist, the Guidebook, and the Motorcar in *The Remains of the Day*’, *Journeys*, 5.2 (2004), 43-71 (p. 44).

cinematic gaze is ‘virtually mobile’.⁵⁰ In the words of Friedberg, this model of ‘the mobile, virtual gaze’ is defined as:

[A] gaze that travels in an imaginary *flanerie* through an imaginary elsewhere and an imaginary elsewhere. This mobilized gaze has a history, which begins well before the cinema and is rooted in other cultural activities that involve walking and travel. The virtual gaze has a history rooted in all forms of visual representation [...] The cinema developed an apparatus that combined the ‘mobile’ with the ‘virtual’.⁵¹

Arguably, Friedberg’s theorisation of the cinematic gaze resembles Vischer’s model of aesthetic empathy, since both highlight the importance of movement or kinesthesia in the perception process. Also, Vischer’s focus on the spectator’s affective investment helps to add another layer to Friedberg’s model. Following Vischer, the analogy between the filmic character’s corporeal movement and the spectator’s virtual mobility may be seen as facilitating an empathetic engagement between the film and the spectator. As I shall attempt to demonstrate, the TV adaptation of *Arthur & George* immerses the viewer in the material landscape affectively by adapting the character/actor’s journey to the audience’s (virtual) journey. By doing so, it celebrates the perceived notion of the English landscape and its role in the construction of English identity and simultaneously erases Barnes’s critical interrogation of the myth of Englishness as it features in the novel.

Based on the famous Great Wyrley Outrages of the year 1903, the story of *Arthur & George* revolves around how Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, the creator of the

⁵⁰ Gibson, p. 63

⁵¹ Cited in Gibson, pp. 62-63. Original emphasis.

famous literary character Sherlock Holmes, slips into the role of detective by trying to exonerate George Edalji, a half-Indian solicitor from Staffordshire, of the crime of horse mutilation. The fundamental difference between the novel and the TV adaptation lies in the mode of narration and narrative structure. The TV adaptation focuses on the process of detection and presents the audience with a fairly typical Holmesian drama. Like most Holmes stories in this genre, the drama proceeds from effect to cause; that is, it begins with the case of horse mutilations, and then moves to George's wrongful conviction and Doyle's intervention. This linear narrative structure encourages the audience to identify with the character Doyle, since their watching experience parallels Doyle's detective adventure. Following the character Doyle's movements in the drama, the contemporary audience is 'transported' back to the past. By following how Doyle travels around misty London and rural England by an iconic hansom cab and train respectively, the filming fulfils the spectator's desire to occupy or, indeed, penetrate into the landscape of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century England. In addition, the drama reinforces the established link between the landscape and English identity by choosing to focus on the movement of Doyle himself, who, of course, performs the role of the quintessential English gentleman. The intertextual references to other Sherlock Holmes adventures include the Sherlock-type costume of Doyle – the actor Martin Clunes is seen either in a black coat or a lumpy tweed suit – and the relationship between Doyle and his secretary, Woodie, which resembles the Sherlock/Watson double-act in the original novels. The deliberate parallels to the Sherlock Holmes franchise may be seen as an example of how the TV adaptation celebrates the role of the Holmes stories in the construction of a particular version of cultural myth about the English. As Yi-Fu Tuan points out in his reading of the landscapes of the Sherlock Holmes tales, the private detective is presented as the guardian of London – 'the heart

of the imperial capital’ – against ‘seething unassimilated elements that might erupt in violence’.⁵² Also, Holmes’s operations and movements take place across the world, which helps to highlight the international scope of the British Empire and the Victorians’ confidence in – and also subtle anxiety about – the management and comprehension of the increasingly large, turbulent and complex world.⁵³ By structuring the whole story around Doyle’s adventurous investigation of George’s case, the TV adaptation may thus be seen as celebrating this deliberate intertwining of the fictional detective and the landscape of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century England. In this regard, it is not surprising to see that this adaptation has been viewed as another quasi-Sherlock Holmes drama.⁵⁴

By contrast, the narrative structure of Barnes’s original novel plays with the reader’s generic expectation for the Holmes stories, and prompts them to reflect upon the *constructed* nature of English identity and the formation of their reading expectations. The story is told in the form of intertwining third-person biographies of the title characters, ranging from their first memories to the death of Sir Arthur in the year of 1930. As we will see, Barnes’s own representation of the Great Wyrley Outrages challenges the mystery formula, which, as Ellen Burton Harrington explains, is about the procedure of ‘using clues to expose secrets and solve the crime with a “rational solution”’.⁵⁵ It also frustrates the reader’s desire to identify with the heroic detective. Although the wrongful conviction of George is what links his life with

⁵² Yi-Fu Tuan, ‘The Landscapes of Sherlock Holmes!’, *Journal of Geography*, 84.2 (1985), 56-60 (p. 56).

⁵³ Tuan, pp. 56-57.

⁵⁴ See Sam Wollaston, ‘Arthur & George Review – The Mysterious Case of the Shadow of Sherlock Holmes’, *The Guardian*, 3 March 2015 <<https://www.theguardian.com/tv-andradio/2015/mar/03/arthur-george-review-sherlock-holmes-julian-barnes>> [accessed 15 February 2017]; Terry Ramsey, ‘Arthur & George, ITV, Review: Hard to Care About’, *Telegraph*, 02 March 2015 <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/tvandradio/tv-and-radio-reviews/11445646/ArthurandGeorgeITV-episode-1-review.html>> [accessed 15 February 2017].

⁵⁵ Ellen Burton Harrington, ‘Nation, Identity and the Fascination with Forensic Science in *Sherlock Holmes* and *CSI*’, *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 10.3 (2007), 365-82 (p. 367).

Arthur's, Barnes spends two-thirds of the text chronicling the life events of Arthur and George in a parallel manner without making any direct connection between them, which arguably disorients the reader. As Marjorie Kehe remarks in her review of the novel, Barnes seems to be 'indulging in a leisurely stroll through his characters' lives'.⁵⁶ This sense of disorientation is reinforced by the fact that the parallel unfolding of Arthur's and George's lives only exists in Barnes's fictional universe. As Olivia Frey points out, Arthur was born eighteen years before George in 1859, and the narration actually shifts back and forwards between two historical periods.⁵⁷ The historical gap that exists between the lives of Arthur and George is also emphasised by the use of tense in the first section of the text: the use of the past tense for Arthur, and the present for George. Also, the typical Sherlock Holmes moment – which is usually in the form of the fictional detective being approached by some visitor with a mystery for investigation – only takes place in the third and final section of the text. By then, George has been paroled after serving three years of the seven-year sentence he received. He is now hoping that Arthur may be able to help to clear his name, in order to enable him to continue his practice as an attorney. Further, the fact that the text offers no solution to the mystery of the Edalji case makes it clear that Barnes's *Arthur & George* is hardly a classical 'whodunit' intended for mystery fans.⁵⁸ The way the text plays with the reader's generic reading expectation thus helps to demonstrate the dynamic between order and uncertainty, which necessarily impacts upon the reader affectively as well as cognitively.

⁵⁶ Marjorie Kehe, 'How Would Sherlock Holmes Fare in Real Life?', *Christian Science Monitor*, 17 January 2006 <<http://www.csmonitor.com/2006/0117/p13s01-bogn.html>> [accessed on 5 January 2016] (para. 7).

⁵⁷ Olivia Frey, 'Narrative Technique in Julian Barnes's *Arthur & George*', *Negotiating Truth and Fiction*, 2009 <<http://www.grin.com/en/e-book/121837/narrative-technique-in-julian-barnes-arthur-georgepara>> [access on 17 December 2016] (para. 6).

⁵⁸ Kehe, para. 12.

This seemingly disorientating reading experience may thus be seen as undermining the identificatory reading pleasure afforded by the whodunit or mystery genre. It also introduces a different kind of text-reader relationship, one that is marked by an embodied communication between the human mind and the form of the text. Here I take my cue from the writings of Ann Daghistany and J. J. Johnson. In their study of narrative, Daghistany and Johnson point out that certain texts encourage the reader to identify ‘not as a particular human being with particular characters but as a human mind experiencing a form, such as a square or labyrinth, created by the interaction of fictional beings with one another and with their environment’.⁵⁹ Although Daghistany and Johnson limit their discussion to modernist texts such as James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922), their presentation of the text-reader relationship speaks to my discussion of certain neo-Victorian metafictional texts such as Barnes’s *Arthur & George*. As outlined before, the narrative structure of *Arthur & George* discourages any easy or superficial readerly empathy. By moving between different perspectives, the text prompts the reader to reflect upon their position in the textual world as a whole rather than a narrow focus on this or that character. In spatial terms, the act of reading may therefore be seen as an example of how the reader’s immersive ‘virtual movements’ help to map out and materialise the textual landscape.

By positioning the reader as the active participant in the construction of the textual world, Barnes’s text thus creates a compelling immersive experience. This form of readerly participation is reinforced by the link the text makes between the past, the present and the future. The chapter titles *Arthur & George* adopts – ‘Beginnings’ (pp. 3-46), ‘Beginning with an Ending’ (pp. 49-206), ‘Ending with a Beginning’ (pp. 209-322) and ‘Endings’ (pp. 325-57) – clearly suggest a circular loop, one that resembles

⁵⁹ Ann Daghistany and J. J. Johnson, ‘Romantic Irony, Spatial Form, and Joyce’s *Ulysses*’, in *Spatial Form in Narrative*, ed. by Jeffrey R. Smitten and Ann Daghistany (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1981), pp. 48-60 (p. 53).

Coleridge's use of the symbolic image of a serpent in describing the poetic process of 'uniting and fusing opposites' in a letter to Joseph Cottle in March 1815.⁶⁰ By evoking a cyclical notion of time, Barnes makes it explicit that his dramatisation of the Great Wyrley Outrages has important contemporary resonance and that the view of the past presented in the text is more or less informed or mediated by contemporary needs. In this regard, readers are no longer positioned as the distant and passive consumer of the past; rather, they are urged by the text to take responsibility for their desire to possess or occupy that past.

The way the text re-imagines the crime scene – the mutilation of animals in the field – is a good example in this respect. This section, entitled 'Arthur & George', establishes the link between the two characters for the first time to the reader. By granting them this additional information and the following graphic account of the potential crime site, the text may be seen as privileging the reader:

It was a cold, clear February night, with half a moon and a heavenful of stars. In the distance the head gear of Wyrley Colliery stood out faintly against the sky. Close by was the farm belonging to Joseph Holmes: house, barn, outbuildings, with not a light showing in any of them. Humans were sleeping and the birds had not yet woken. (p. 72)

Through the use of this 'camera-eye technique', Barnes presents the reader with a panorama of the field, which arguably places them in an omniscient position.⁶¹ This illusion of omniscience is, however, disrupted by the subsequent intrusion of an

⁶⁰ Kiran Toor, 'Dream Weaver: Samuel Taylor Coleridge and the Prefiguring of Jungian Dream Theory', *The Coleridge Bulletin*, 24 (2004), 83-90 (p. 84). As Toor notes, Coleridge uses this serpent image again in his description of the imaginative process in Shakespeare (p. 84).

⁶¹ Frey, para. 11.

omniscient narrator, which, as Christine Berberich observes, prevents the reader from getting involved in the scene in an affective way.⁶² Berberich draws this conclusion from her discussion of the use of illustrations in the text, noting the significance of the three images, one a reproduction of the title page of George Edalji's 1901 publication *Railway Law for the "Man in the Train"* (p. 67), the other of George's invitation to Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's wedding with Miss Jean Leckie (p. 317), together with a sketch of the potential mutilation instrument (p. 290).⁶³ For Berberich, the inclusion of these images is marked by 'the *exclusion* of others', by which she means 'the setting and characters involved'.⁶⁴ As Berberich remarks, Barnes could have chosen to use some visual aids to help his readers 'visualise' the story and get better involved but chooses not to.⁶⁵ By contrast, this readerly expectation and desire is fully acknowledged by and reflected in the 2015 TV adaptation. Through the use of chilling music and atmospheric lighting, the first episode of ITV's *Arthur & George* presents the scenario of horse mutilation in a violent yet compelling manner. In this regard, we may argue that the absence of such cues in the original novel is indicative of how self-consciously Barnes's text frustrates the reader's generic reading expectations. However, the reader's paratextual knowledge, such as his or her familiarity with period drama (i.e., the Merchant and Ivory films in the 1980s and 1990s, which are also well received in the international market) may help them 'fill-in' what is lacking in the text itself, hence satisfying their desire to 'empathise with' or 'penetrate' (in Vischer's sense) the world of neo-Victorian fiction.⁶⁶

⁶² Christine Berberich, "'All Letters Quoted Are Authentic': The Past After Postmodern Fabulation in Julian Barnes's *Arthur & George*", in *Julian Barnes: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, ed. by Sebastian Groes and Peter Childs (London and New York: Continuum, 2011), pp. 117-28 (p. 122).

⁶³ Berberich, pp. 121-22.

⁶⁴ Berberich, p. 121. Original emphasis.

⁶⁵ Berberich, p. 121.

⁶⁶ Although most Merchant and Ivory films are set in Edwardian England, it is arguable that their characterisation of a particular version of Englishness influences the viewer's – international and otherwise – expectations of period drama. Indeed, as Simon Joyce argues in his engagement with

Barnes's text further challenges the readerly desire to possess the past by highlighting its unknowability and inaccessibility. In the case of horse mutilation, Barnes's fictive re-writing makes it clear that, although this clearly happened, the truth about who did it may never be resolved. As we see from the following account:

He continued his gabble of nonsense, however, and continued looking straight towards the horse. Beneath his feet the ground was solid after nights of frost, and his boots left no print on the soil. (p. 73)

Under the guidance of the omniscient narrator, the reader's attention is directed to the movements and behaviours of a suspicious and unidentified man in the field. However, the fact that the potential suspect does not leave any footprint on the soil frustrates the reader's attempt to retrace his movements in a Holmesian manner. This is mirrored in the way in which Inspector Campbell interrogates George about his movements on one night of the horse and cattle maiming:

‘Where did you walk?’

‘Around. Around the lanes. I walk every day. I never really pay attention.’

‘So you walked over towards the Colliery?’

‘No, I don't think so.’

‘Come on, George, you can do better than this. You said you walked in every direction but you didn't remember which. One of the directions from Wyrley is towards the Colliery. Why wouldn't you walk in that direction?’

Spencer Golub, these films ‘reawake[n] a ghost-limb Englishness not only in England but in the world’. Joyce, p. 74. Also, Barnes's *Arthur & George* straddles the Victorian and Edwardian periods.

‘If you will give me a moment’, George pressed his fingers to his forehead. ‘I remember now. I walked along the road to Churchbridge. Then I turned right towards Watling Street Road, then to Walk Mill, then along the road as far as Green’s farm.’

Campbell thought this very impressive for someone who didn’t remember where he walked. (p. 102)

As well as contributing to his character profile and the mystery at the heart of the plot, this dialogue also underlines the *disengagement* between George and the physical landscape, since he claims that he never pays any attention to his locations or surroundings when he walks around. From the perspective of Campbell, George’s later recollection of his movements that night therefore sounds contrived. Indeed, the text deliberately calls for the reader’s attention to the peculiarity of George’s relationship with the landscape by remarking more than once that although George is a habitual walker, he ‘ignores the landscape, which does not interest him’ (p. 66). The text also reminds us repeatedly of George’s indifference to the landscape by providing us with several examples of George’s travelling experience. George is presented as someone who does not see ‘what his fellow passages would see – a few intertwined bushes blown by the wind, home to some nesting birds –’ when he looks out of the window at a hedgerow during his train journey between Bloxwich and Birchills (p. 64). The textual emphasis on the difference between George and his fellow passengers clearly emphasises George’s position as an outsider of the text’s ‘ideal’ community, one that is presented as celebrating and championing the idyllic landscape – and by extension, one that is essentially English. As Sarah Gibson observes, ‘[t]he landscape has been central

to definitions of Englishness for centuries'.⁶⁷ In this regard, it is possible to propose that there is a politics to George's mobility, and in particular, the relationship between mobility, legitimacy and identity in George's case. Rather than the investigative question, 'Who did what to whom, where, when, how and why?', the readers are positioned to ask questions about George's 'queer' way of travelling about the English countryside through which he passes. In this way, the text draws critical attention to the dynamic interrelationship between the activity of walking, the idea of English countryside and the issue of English identity.

Here I move from a discussion about how Barnes's text challenges or frustrates the reader's desire to occupy the textual landscape to one that focuses on George's queer relationship with the landscape. As I will be arguing, the textual foregrounding of George's indifference to his surroundings prompts the reader to reflect upon how the notion of the English landscape is ideologically and politically charged.⁶⁸

Having a Scottish mother and a Parsee father who moved to Wyrley, England from Bombay in the 1860s, George experiences a particular kind of identity crisis in the context of the British Empire, which, as Ian Baucom observes, dramatises the tension between 'the localist ideology' and the 'racial' one in the construction of collective identity.⁶⁹ As Baucom explains, 'localist discourse' identifies 'English place' as 'the one thing that could [...] secure England's continuous national identity' (p. 16). This localist discourse is challenged by England's imperialist expansion, since its 'vast imperial abroad' is the place 'onto which the island kingdom displaces itself' and

⁶⁷ Gibson, p. 57.

⁶⁸ A similar argument may be seen in Andrew Tate's discussion of *Arthur & George*. Focusing on the issue of religion, Tate argues that 'Barnes's engagement with a vanished England represents a ... searching engagement with the slippery, dangerous nature of national identity'. Andrew Tate, "'An Ordinary Piece of Magic": Religion in the Work of Julian Barnes', in *Julian Barnes: Contemporary Perspectives*, pp. 51-68 (p. 63).

⁶⁹ Ian Baucom, 'Introduction: Locating English Identity', in *Out of Place: Englishness, Empire and the Locations of Identity*, by Ian Baucom (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), pp. 3-44 (p. 17). Further references to this chapter are given after quotations in the text unless otherwise stated.

cultivates confusion about its narrative of identity (p. 3). In response to the confusion attendant on the localist narrative of what it means to be English, Baucom suggests that these ‘spatial and territorial ideologies’ have been replaced by ‘a racial “discourse of loyalty” and coidentity’ which privileges ‘England’s bloodlines’ (pp. 12, 17). In this context, the issue of collective identity becomes ‘an affective condition’, in the sense that legal pronouncements may never confer English identity (p. 12). This is indeed the case in George’s story. Although he is born and educated in England, George’s status as an ‘Englishman’ has been constantly challenged. The dialogue between George and his two fellow clerks Greenway and Stenson is a good example in illustrating the tension between the localist discourse and the racial one in understanding identity:

‘George, where do you come from?’

‘Great Wyrley.’

‘No, where do you *really* come from?’

George ponders this. ‘The Vicarage,’ he replies, and the dogs laugh. (p. 56, original emphasis)

George’s inability to capture the racialist connotation of his colleagues’ question makes it clear that for him, being born and educated in England makes him English.

Nevertheless, as Katherine Weese observes, his insistence on his Englishness ‘counters the dominant ideology of the Victorian and Edwardian periods, questioning what cultural theorist Stuart Hall terms “that great unspoken British value – ‘whiteness’”.⁷⁰

Indeed, the implicit emphasis George’s colleagues place on his visual ethnic difference reveals the role race plays in their understanding of Englishness. This racial

⁷⁰ Katherine Weese, ‘Detection, Colonialism, Postcolonialism: The Sense of an Ending in Julian Barnes’s *Arthur & George*’, *Journal of Narrative Theory*, 45.2 (2015), 301-29 (p. 319).

understanding of Englishness is also shared by the ‘authorities’ in the text, as evidenced by Inspector Campbell’s remark that ‘if you shut your eyes, you’d think [George] an Englishman’ (p. 90). Reading between the lines, it is clear that Greenway and Stentson’s question is not really about where George came from. Rather, it is about who his parents were and where they came from. Following Baucom, the idea of Englishness as a racial category challenges the aforementioned localist ideology which positions ‘English “places”’ as what ‘preserv[es]’, ‘enchant[s]’ and ‘transform[s]’ English identity (p. 19). It also implies what Baucom calls a ‘repudiation of the aura of the English place’ (p. 21), since George’s contact with the ‘locations’ of Englishness through birth, education, religion and profession does not make him sufficiently English.

The sense of racial prejudice is further illustrated by the similar – but also fundamentally different – life story of Arthur. Although Arthur is ‘Irish by ancestry, Scottish by birth’, he ‘became English’ through his education (p. 23). As we see from the text, ‘instructed in the faith of Rome by Dutch Jesuits, Arthur became English. English history inspired him; English freedoms made him proud; English cricket made him patriotic’ (ibid.). Unlike George, Arthur’s ‘learnt’ Englishness is recognised and acknowledged by Englishmen, such as Captain Anson – the Chief Constable of Staffordshire – in the text. The following internal monologue of Anson makes it clear that he positions Arthur as someone equal or similar to him:

It could so easily have been a pleasant evening: two men of the world, each approaching fifty, one the son of an earl and the other a knight of the realm, both of them, as it happened, Deputy Lieutenants of their respective counties. They had far more in common than was setting them apart (pp. 271-72)

In comparison to George's 'Parsee origin', Arthur's 'Scottish and Irish blood' does not render him 'evil' to Anson (p. 275), as exemplified by his rhetorical question 'What Englishman – what Scotsman – what half Scotsman – would take a blade to a horse, a cow, a sheep?' (ibid.). The different kind of recognition and treatment George and Arthur receive from their fellow countrymen reveals the hierarchy that exists between the citizens of the United Kingdom (i.e., people born in England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland) and those descended from (former) colonial subjects in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Britain (in the era before Irish Independence). This hierarchy, following Baucom, indicates that 'the territory of the United Kingdom' and that of 'the United Kingdom's overseas territories' are not 'interchangeable' *vis-à-vis* the issue of collective identity (p. 13). It also, as argued before, brings to the fore the racial essence of Englishness.

As a habitual walker and a regular train commuter, George's mobilities, meanwhile, are indicative of how he is trapped in the irreconcilable clash between the markers of place and race in the discourse of English identity. The fact that George's train journeys are, themselves, characterised by the tension between mobility and immobility demonstrates George's desire for a sense of purpose and belonging:

George finds something both serious and comforting in his daily transit into the city. There is a journey, there is a destination: this is how he has been taught to understand life. [...] The railway suggests how it ought to be, how it could be: a smooth ride to a terminus on evenly spaced rails and according to an agreed timetable, with passengers divided among first-, second- and third-class carriages. (p. 50)

The description conjures up values such as order, class, reason, and the sense of immobility and confinement, which arguably challenges the reader's typical perception of the railway. As a means of transit, the railway is often presented as expressive of mobility and freedom in Victorian novels, such as Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton* (1848) and Charles Dickens's *Dombey and Son* (1846-48).⁷¹ For George, however, the railway seems to represent what Michel de Certeau calls 'the rational utopia', since its operation is underlined by ideas of regulation, order and stability.⁷² As de Certeau explains:

Only a rationalised cell travels. A bubble of panoptic and classifying power, a module of imprisonment that makes possible the production of an order, a closed and autonomous insularity – that is what can traverse space and make itself independent of local roots.⁷³

Following de Certeau, it is possible to identify a set of paradoxes in the railway system. Although the railway represents mobility and the act of moving away, its operation is facilitated by 'the immobility of order'.⁷⁴ Also, the railway could be seen as a means of connecting with different places, although the train itself comprises an enclosed space. de Certeau's incisive analysis of how the railway functions as a rational utopia helps the reader to see into George's subtle and latent sense of identity anxiety. His desire for what de Certeau calls 'the immobility of order' may be seen as expressive of his

⁷¹ For discussion of railway journeys in Victorian literature, see Charlotte Mathieson, "'Flying From the Grasp": Embodying the Railway Journey', in *Mobility in the Victorian Novel: Placing the Nation*, by Charlotte Mathieson (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 57-87.

⁷² Michel de Certeau, 'Railway Navigation and Incarceration', in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, by Michel de Certeau, trans. by Steven F. Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), pp. 111-14 (p. 111).

⁷³ de Certeau, p. 111.

⁷⁴ de Certeau, p. 111.

oppressed fear and frustration about not being able to position himself in a way that is acceptable to others. In this regard, George is arguably the psychological opposite of Grace (as in *Alias Grace*) who is ‘too close’ to the people and places she encounters, whose extreme ‘empathy’ has become a mark of her pathology. By contrast, George’s relationship to the places through which he passes is profoundly disconnected and ‘queer’ (in Barnes’s word). If Grace struggles to disentangle her self, and her ‘feeling’ from the phenomenal world, George suffers from an extreme inability to relate to it – even to ‘see’ it. As the example of George’s travelling experience helps to demonstrate, Barnes’s text does not present George’s identity crisis through any actual descriptions of what he sees on his travels. Unlike other neo-Victorian fictions that I have examined in previous chapters, *Arthur & George* is marked by what Elsa Cavalié calls ‘a more subdued approach of story-telling’.⁷⁵ As argued before, this kind of storytelling is predicated upon the reader’s ability to make connections between various textual details and read between the lines.

Yet it is arguable this sense of placelessness is potentially liberating for both the character George and the reader. As the following account illustrates, George’s walking experience may be seen as indicative of ‘the freedom of renunciation’ – a term I borrow from Frédéric Gros and go on to discuss below:

He still retains the habit, which has now grown into a necessity, of walking the lanes for an hour or so after he gets back from the office. It is one detail of his life in which he will not be ruled. He keeps a pair of old boots by the back door, and rain or shine, hail or snow, George takes his walk. He ignores the landscape, which does not interest him; nor do the bulky, bellowing animals it

⁷⁵ Cited in Berberich, p. 191.

contains. As for the humans, he will occasionally think he recognizes someone from the village school in Mr Bostock's day, but he is never quite sure. [...] Some days George gives a kind of half-greeting, a sideways raising of the head, to everyone he meets; at other times he greets no one, even if he remembers having acknowledged them the day before. (p. 66)

The point that walking is one detail of George's life 'in which he will not be ruled' is telling. For George, walking is perceived as something that takes one outside the rules. Although Barnes does not elaborate what he means by 'rules' in a straightforward manner, his description of George's untypical walking is suggestive. As we see from the passage above, George is presented as a walker who is *not* interested in clothes, weather, landscape or animals, all of which are associated with the idyllic English lifestyle. Although he does 'occasionally' recognise people he would meet on his way, he is not bothered with the established social protocols. The use of negative words and phrases such as 'ignore' and 'not interested in' demonstrates the separation between George and the community; he is the 'queer' one who does not comply with the rules, conventions and expectations of country living.

In this regard, walking may be seen as an act of liberation and political resistance for George. The fact that George finds himself 'not [being] ruled' when walking arguably links the activity of walking with the idea of cognitive as well as embodied freedom. This sense of liberty, as my previous discussion of Barnes's choice of vocabulary makes clear, is marked by what Gros calls 'renunciation'. As Gros explains:

You can hardly remember where you are going or why; that is as meaningless as your history, or what the time is. And you feel free, because whenever you remember the former signs of your commitments in hell – name, age, profession, CV – it all seems absolutely derisory, minuscule, insubstantial.⁷⁶

Gros's philosophical reflection on the activity of walking helps to demonstrate that it is while walking that George feels like he can disconnect himself from the unsettling issues about the tension between the perceived notion of Englishness and his Parsee origin. Questions about what England is, what values and behaviours it sets upon its citizens, are irrelevant. It is liberating precisely because it represents a time and space in which he no longer has to think 'who' or 'what' he is; as Gros observes, he is temporarily free from 'the very idea of identity, the temptation to be someone, to have a name and a history'.⁷⁷

However, as we see from other episodes in the text, this sense of freedom is both temporary and illusory. In the context of traditional nationalist ideology, George's mobility is perceived as a threat to the core of Englishness. His right as 'a freeborn Englishman' to move freely in his homeland is violated when he is constantly 'spied upon' by the local police after the incident of the horse mutilations (p. 91). Based on circumstantial evidence, virulent rumour and racial prejudice, the Chief Constable Anson quickly identifies George as the suspect responsible for the maiming of the animals. According to Anson's hypothesis, the motivation behind George's malicious behaviours involves some 'sacrificial principle', and the mysterious instrument they are looking for is 'a ritual knife of Indian origin' since the Parsee 'worship fire' (p. 90). His decision to order more police force to follow George clearly reveals the tension

⁷⁶ Frédéric Gros, *A Philosophy of Walking*, trans. by John Howe (London and New York: Verso, 2014), p. 9.

⁷⁷ Gros, pp. 6-7.

between Englishness, race and ethnic identities. During the confrontation between George and the constable who is assigned to follow him that day, George is questioned about why he is ‘walking the lanes of Great Wyrley at this time of day’ (p. 91). For the police, it is clear that given his Parsee origin, George’s activity of walking must have some suspicious purpose. Or, put differently, George’s identity does not fit with the image of the English countryside walker, whose activities could be marked by narratives about what John Wylie calls ‘the sublime and romantic figurations of self, travel, landscape and nature’.⁷⁸ Although George is born and has grown up in England, his Parsee origin renders him the abstract, symbolic and threatening Other in the discourse of English identity, which also reminds us of the conflicted relationship between England and the British Empire at this time. As Ian Baucom nicely puts it, the question is about whether the Empire was ‘the domain of England’s mastery of the globe’ or ‘the territory of the loss of Englishness’ (p. 6). This is certainly one of the questions that is raised – but remains unanswered – by Barnes’s *Arthur & George*.

Returning to the personal anecdote I began this section with, it seems that my mis-recollection of the text was largely the consequence of the construction of a particular cultural myth about the English countryside and the practice of walking in it. Further, Barnes’s ‘queer’ presentation of George as a habitual but ‘unseeing’ walker and a regular train commuter may be seen as challenging my paratextual expectations. As argued previously, George’s discomfiting relationship with his surroundings demonstrates how the notion of English landscape is politically and ideologically charged. In the context of Brexit, the story of George has particular contemporary resonance. The question I quoted from Baucom about the tension between the English and the globe still matters in many respects. The resurgence of English nationalism – as

⁷⁸ John Wylie, ‘A Single Day’s Walking: Narrating Self and Landscape on the South West Coast Path’, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 30.2 (2005), 234–47 (p. 235).

illustrated by the slogan used by the Leave Campaign ‘I want my country back’ in the EU 2016 referendum – and Theresa May’s political interpretation of the referendum result – ‘Embracing the World’ – seem to be indicative of how a post-imperial Britain still struggles with the concept of English identity and who acts as the ‘other’ against which the notion of Englishness is constructed. And this is arguably where a ‘paranoid’ reading (see Introduction) continues to be needed in the sense that we, as readers, need to remain vigilant about the mystification and commodification of English identity.

Conclusion

With a focus on the dynamic that exists between space, place and empathy, this chapter has moved from a philosophical and psychological examination of how human subjects develop empathetic relationships with their surroundings to a consideration of how this is represented in literary texts and how this, in turn, impacts upon readers. By tracing the idea of empathy back to its aesthetic origins in the writings of the nineteenth-century German aesthete Robert Vischer, this chapter has addressed the issues about the ways in which the representation of space and place in neo-Victorian literature and culture involves the reader/audience affectively, and the ways it plays with – and depends upon – their paratextual knowledge and expectations. In doing so, it has, I hope, further enriched the discussion of reading pleasure afforded by neo-Victorian literature and the study of empathy.

My discussion of the project of Thames Town in Shanghai, China at the beginning of the chapter has illustrated how a historical replica or constructed landscape facilitates a fairly straightforward empathetic engagement with its visitors. I then moved to the work of Karl Scherner, Robert Vischer and Henri Bergson to develop a theoretical framework for the study of the dynamic that exists between space,

place and empathy. In light of their shared focus on ideas such as embodied simulation and kinesthesia, I have further examined the way in which the concept of *Einfühlung* provides us with a different approach to the discussion of the characters' psychological condition in two neo-Victorian novels – Atwood's *Alias Grace* and Barnes's *Arthur & George*. Through an interrogation of the relationship between characters and the landscape in both novels, I have argued that neo-Victorian fiction complicates the discussion of the human-landscape dynamic and contributes to the study of aesthetic empathy. As we have seen, Atwood's text links the issue of empathy with Grace's pathology. The portrayal of Grace's troubled psychological condition arguably presents her idiosyncratic sensitivity to external stimulus as a pathological symptom, which raises concerns about the power dynamic between the empathiser/observing subject and the empathised/phenomenal world. In contrast, Barnes's text is marked by the character George's indifference to the landscape. By linking the issue of identity and race with the activity of walking and the idea of English landscape, Barnes's text challenges the established notion of Englishness and presents the lack of engagement with the landscape as a form of liberation and political resistance. Further, through a comparative reading between Barnes's text and its 2015 TV adaptation, I have examined the different ways in which neo-Victorian literature and cultural practice frustrate or facilitate the reader's/viewer's desire to empathise with the simulated late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century English landscape.

This chapter has also demonstrated the double temporality of neo-Victorian literature in that it focuses on texts in which – in matters of space and place as well as character – it is necessary to look backwards in order to move forwards. My discussion of Barnes's *Arthur & George* has made it clear that the issue of English nationalism and the difficulty of constructing a homogeneous and sustainable notion of English

identity are nothing new. By playing with/against the reader's paratextual knowledge and expectations, Barnes's text demonstrates the constructed and contested nature of the notion of Englishness. The text may therefore be seen as prompting the reader to critically reflect upon issues such as the imperial legacy and the tension that exists between race, ethnicity and national identity, all of which are essential for the present and future socio-political landscape of Britain.

Conclusion

In her 2007 book *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*, Heather Love points out ‘a central paradox’ of what she calls ‘transformative criticism’; that is, ‘its dreams for the future are founded on a history of suffering, stigma, and violence’.¹ In this reflection on the way in which future hope is often inextricably tied up with the past, Love’s observation neatly summarises what this thesis has attempted to do. Through an engagement with numerous theories concerned with empathy, I have investigated how neo-Victorian literature affectively positions the reader within its textual landscape, which is often characterised by a painful and unsettling version of the past. As I have suggested in the preceding chapters, this thesis has grouped together a number of neo-Victorian texts that tell different kinds of ‘disturbing’ stories about the past: child prostitution and sexual harassment in Jane Harris’s *The Observations* and Margaret Atwood’s *Alias Grace* respectively (Chapter One); ‘shameless’ same-sex desire in Sarah Waters’s *Tipping the Velvet* and *Affinity* (Chapter Two); existential crisis and violence against innocent others in Michael Cox’s *The Meaning of Night* and Graeme Macrae Burnet’s *His Bloody Project* (Chapter Three); lack of emotional connection with the surroundings in Julian Barnes’s *Arthur & George* (Chapter Four). In every case, an unsettling empathetic engagement with the textual other pushes readers to critically reflect upon their reading expectations and strategies, as well as their wider ethical responsibilities. This kind of text-reader relationship, I would suggest, ultimately encourages readers to envisage a potentially different future for both the text’s characters and human behaviour in general.

As I have argued, all these texts engage deeply with the past in order to help us better prepare for the future; and this sense of ‘double temporality’ is played out at two

¹ Heather Love, ‘Introduction’, in *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*, by Heather Love (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2007), pp. 1-30 (p. 1).

levels: narratological and ethical. From the perspective of narratology, my engagement with Mark Currie's work on narrative temporality has made it clear that future-orientation is a feature of even the most backward-looking literary text. This future-orientated model of thinking provides us with a different approach to the neo-Victorian genre and its preoccupation with retrospective accounts of the past (e.g., collections of volumes found in historical archives, journal entries, *Bildungsroman*, biographies). Following Currie, it is clear that through an engagement with the dynamic between narrated time and the time of narration, these retrospective accounts demonstrate that the 'present present' is 'actually structured in relation to the future present from which it is narrated'.² This narratological awareness of anticipation is further enriched by my discussion of the ethical imperative of neo-Victorian literature. With a focus on the use of literary devices such as the first-person narrator, diary entries and direct address to the intra-diegetic narratees (all of these characterise what I term the 'dialogic' nature of the neo-Victorian genre), I examined the ways in which neo-Victorian fiction facilitates the contemporary reader's desire to empathise with the textual other, who is portrayed as either the 'victim' of difficult socio-political circumstances or the 'troubled soul' of some psychological or existential crisis. As we have seen, this kind of empathetic engagement between the text and the reader arguably entails an ethical responsibility, which takes the form of what Eve Sedgwick calls 'a guilty, empathetic view of the other as at once good, damaged, integral, and requiring and eliciting love and care'.³ Also, this ethical responsibility involves a concern about the future, and in particular, a concern about what the readers can do in both the textual and the material world in order to avoid repeating the same traumatic stories (as those featured in the text) and to move towards a different – even if not necessarily better – future. In doing so, I have

² *About Time*, p. 39.

³ *Touching Feeling*, p. 193.

shifted the study of neo-Victorian literature from a ‘self-confirming’ discussion of the similarities and/or differences between the Victorians and the contemporary period, to a more profound exploration of the dynamic that exists between the past, the present and the future.

This thesis has also taken up and developed J. Brooks Bouson’s formulation of reading as ‘an empathic event’ by bringing together the different models of empathy in its examination of the reading (un)pleasures afforded by neo-Victorian literature and culture.⁴ These models include: the eighteenth-century Scottish moral philosophy on sentimental value and the conceptualisation of sympathy in the writings of David Hume and Adam Smith (Introduction); the cognitive model of empathy as perspective-taking (Chapter One); the phenomenological conception of empathy (Chapter Two); the existential and psychological approaches to empathy (Chapter Three); and the nineteenth-century aesthetic formulation of *Einfühlung* – (the German etymological origin of the term) (Chapter Four). With a focus on the way in which the reader’s desire to empathise with the textual other is facilitated, and then challenged, by neo-Victorian fiction, I have identified several ways in which disruption is key to our understanding of how neo-Victorian literature plays with the reader’s expectations and desires. As my engagement with Lauren Berlant in the Introduction suggested, such disruptions challenge the reader’s habitual cognitive and affective processes and, in particular, their sense of temporality. By better understanding the complex (often non-chronological ways) in which present, past and future interact with one another we can, following Sedgwick, learn to read and live our lives reparatively and to imagine alternative endings for ourselves and others. I now offer a short summary of how these ideas have developed in the individual chapters.

⁴ Bouson, p. 27.

Chapter One examines the way in which the neo-Victorian text ‘teaches’ the reader the importance of ethical reading through its ‘mirroring’ of different reading positions at an intra-diegetic level. With a focus on the use of ‘hermeneutic uncertainty’ in Margaret Atwood’s *Alias Grace*, I show how the readers’ empathetic engagement with the vulnerable other facilitates or frustrates their expository reading desire *vis-à-vis* the text. By linking Sedgwick’s discussion of ‘paranoid’ and ‘reparative’ reading positions with the contemporary philosopher Amy Coplan’s formulation of empathy as a cognitive model of ‘perspective-taking’, I demonstrate how Atwood’s text – like a good deal of neo-Victorian fiction in general – involves contemporary readers in an unsettling empathetic engagement with the past which, in turn, encourages them to project, and ultimately work towards, different futures both in terms of textual outcomes and how they relate to ‘unknowable’ situations in the material world. By the same token, I reveal how certain characters in the text – most notably Dr Jordan and James Walsh – may be seen to represent an exploitative, prurient and altogether unethical use of empathy.

Chapter Two, meanwhile, turns to the discussion of how the reader’s empathetic tendency is often strained and tested in neo-Victorian fiction through the discomforting experience of shame. With a focus on the ‘intersubjective’ nature of shame (in the sense that shame operates as a circuit of affect between two or more people), and a similar ‘self-other’ dynamic in Edmund Husserl’s and Dan Zahavi’s phenomenological approach to empathy, I suggest that this formulation of empathy helps us better understand the mechanism by which we come to inhabit one another’s affects and emotions. I then explore how the characters in Sarah Waters’s first two neo-Victorian novels – *Tipping the Velvet* and *Affinity* – may be seen to experience shame and how this uncomfortable feeling is transmitted to the extra-diegetic readers. This

kind of empathetic engagement, I argue, prompts readers to critically reflect upon how the things we do and feel as readers relate closely to our emotional and affective practices in the material world and how – following Eve Sedgwick and Silvan Tomkins – shame can be transformational in a positive way.

In Chapter Three I continue the discussion of how the reader's desire to empathise with the textual other is tested in neo-Victorian fiction, this time focusing on the dynamic that exists between empathy and what is popularly referred to as an 'existential crisis'. With a focus on the textual characterisation of Edward Glyver – the central protagonist of Michael Cox's neo-Victorian novel *The Meaning of Night* – as a tragic victim of 'Fate', I demonstrate the way in which the text solicits affective investment and empathetic response from the reader. I suggest that through the inclusion of an 'interlocutory' other, the text demonstrates how its reprehensible character requires empathy for his salvation; a dialogic 'need' that is also extended to the reader. This reading position is then complicated further by my interrogation of Edward's ruthless murder of an 'innocent other' in the text, which (following my earlier reading of Jean Paul Sartre's *Nausea*), challenges the readers' ability to empathise with him and prompts them to critically reflect upon the stability and intelligibility of their own lives. Unlike Chapter One where the focus was on the ethical 'lessons' Atwood's text 'teaches' its readers, this chapter examines how the reader's ability to empathise or sympathise with the textual other is seriously challenged by the characters' 'bad faith' (i.e., their exercise of violence at the expense of innocent others).

My final chapter traces the concept of empathy back to its aesthetic origins. It also moves from a discussion of how the reader empathises with the textual other to an examination of the reader's empathetic engagement with a non-human object: in this

case, the landscape. Here I use the German aesthetician Robert Vischer's formulation of empathy as a way of illustrating the 'immersive' pleasure afforded by neo-Victorian literature and culture. With reference to Atwood's *Alias Grace* and Julian Barnes's *Arthur & George*, this chapter also demonstrates the ways in which neo-Victorian literature frustrates or disrupts the contemporary reader's desire to 'enter' or 'empathise with' (in Vischer's sense) the simulated landscape of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century England. In the case of *Alias Grace*, I interrogate how the central protagonist, Grace's, 'over-identification' with her surroundings challenges her autonomy as a subject by blurring her sense of self-other boundaries. This reading is then contrasted with my discussion of the character George's experience of the material world. Unlike Grace who is 'too close' to what she sees, George is 'too distant'. With a focus on the cultural myth about the activity of walking and the role English landscape plays in the construction of a particular version of Englishness, I suggest that George's tendency to 'unsee' the landscape is indicative of the identity crisis he experiences as a mixed-race (Scottish/Indian) British subject. Also, through a comparative reading of Barnes's original text and its 2015 TV adaptation, I demonstrate that whereas the novel interrogates the construction of English identity, the TV adaptation celebrates an established and traditional version of Englishness and thus feeds the international consumer's stereotypical perception of English identity and the English landscape.

When I began work on this PhD, I had little idea that readers could get so much more than they expected from neo-Victorian fiction, or that their uncomfortable reading experiences could ultimately become more meaningful and valuable than their pleasurable ones. Indeed, through an exploration of what these neo-Victorian texts are doing in terms of positioning their readers, this project has developed from an early interest in issues of gender politics and Englishness to a focus on empathy and 'reader

discomfort'. In doing so, it has challenged the widely received understanding of the success of the neo-Victorian genre; that is, the assumption that its reading pleasures come from textual immersion and/or transgressive and voyeuristic identifications. The fact that, in Chapter Two, I have focused on one affect in particular, shame, clearly leaves room for further research in this vein. My discussion of Sedgwick's work on 'productive' and 'transformative shame' has, I hope, provided a framework for further examination of empathy and the ethics of reading *vis-a-vis* other kinds of affects which, like shame, may not seem politically active at first sight, such as melancholia, disgust and fear.⁵ Following Sedgwick, a more profound examination of the way these 'negative' affects operate – and in particular, the role they play in subjectivity and intersubjectivity – may contribute to the future study of the politics of affect and the transformative politics of empathy.

⁵ Sianne Ngai describes 'disgust' – along with other feeling such as 'irritation', 'anxiety', 'stuplimity' and 'paranoia' – as 'ugly feelings' in *Ugly Feelings* (2015). Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2005).

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