

VICTORIAN, VICTORIANIST, NEO-VICTORIAN: A CRITICAL OVERVIEW*

Marta Miquel-Baldellou
Universidad de Lleida
mmiquel@dal.udl.cat

This essay presents a historical overview of diverse critical readings and revaluations of Victorian Studies interpreted as reflections of cultural tenets of different periods from Victorian times to the present. Current concerns about the Victorian past inevitably imply a mirroring image imposing our presence onto a period that defies definition by postmodern standards. In this respect, it may be argued that Victorianism has often been envisioned as a cultural construct shaped by changing necessities to go back to the past in an attempt to reify concepts of identity. Deconstructive and interdisciplinary tenets may serve the purpose of providing a more accurate picture of the Victorian past, rejecting any clearly-distinguished set of oppositional dichotomies. It is also through deconstruction that we become aware of the impossibility of attaining any objective knowledge of the past. This essay presents a survey of the way the Victorians have been interpreted through history, outlining different cultural periods, and evolving readings of the past, with a particular view to evaluate and assess contemporary methods and approaches to Victorian Studies through emerging terms such as Neo-Victorian or Post-Victorian Studies.

Keywords: *epistemology, terminology, periodisation, past, post-modernism, imperialism, identity, dialogue, interdisciplinarity, Victorian, Victorianist, Neo-Victorian, Post-Victorian.*

Este artículo presenta una visión histórica de las diferentes interpretaciones críticas y reevaluaciones de los Estudios Victorianos como reflejo de las

características culturales propias de los diferentes periodos desde la época victoriana hasta nuestros días. Intereses actuales acerca del pasado victoriano inevitablemente conllevan la imagen de un espejo que refleja nuestra presencia en un periodo que desafía cualquier intento de definición desde los postulados postmodernistas. En este sentido, puede defenderse que el Victorianismo a menudo ha sido interpretado como un constructo cultural formado a partir de las cambiantes necesidades de trasladarse al pasado con el propósito de dilucidar conceptos acerca de la identidad. Disciplinas propias del deconstructivismo y la interdisciplinariedad aspiran a obtener un retrato más fiel del pasado victoriano, rehuyendo de dicotomías opuestas claramente diferenciadas. Sin embargo, es también a través de los postulados postmodernistas que se advierte la imposibilidad de adquirir un conocimiento objetivo acerca del pasado. Este artículo presenta una visión sucinta de la forma en que los Victorianos han sido interpretados a lo largo de la historia, discuriendo a lo largo de diferentes periodos culturales e interpretaciones evolutivas del pasado, con el propósito final de evaluar y valorar los métodos y aproximaciones contemporáneos a los Estudios Victorianos a través de términos emergentes como Estudios Neo-Victorianos o Post-Victorianos.

Palabras clave: *epistemología, terminología, periodización, pasado, postmodernismo, imperialismo, identidad, diálogo, interdisciplinariedad, victoriano, victorianicista, neo-victoriano, post-victoriano.*

1. IMAGINING VICTORIAN TIMES

As Victorian scholars, we may contemplate the Victorian era through a partially biased vision of admiration and respect for a splendidous time, while seeking to escape, even if momentarily, the uncertainty of contemporary times. Nevertheless, such facile approach to the period seems to be based on no ground, especially when

postmodern theories and deconstructivism have taught us not to trust Manichean and simplistic reconstructions of past ages. It is through deconstruction that we may still approach Victorianism with the same respect and rigorousness but exchanging such view of nostalgia for a more accurate portrait, questioning traditionally clearly-cut dichotomies through a more Foucauldian vision, which, even if paradoxically, may bring us closer to the Victorians than we actually thought we were.

Some twentieth-century scholars were drawn to Victorian England as an especially appealing period to our contemporary concerns, since “in it we see the problems of our own time emerging”, and consequently, we “may trace growing awareness of them and endeavours to find solutions.” (Neff 1962: 4). Nevertheless, we should avoid such mirroring images of projecting our sense of identity in an attempt to recognise ourselves in the Victorians, since any attempt at imposing our vision on past times necessarily entails a form of appropriation. We might then question whether any epistemological understanding of Victorian times is attemptable, and to that effect, we may revise certain recent critical revaluations which argue that any idea of Victorianism, as any form of knowledge, is constantly in the making. It is through this pulse between a constructing and deconstructing process that we may be in the position of asserting whether Victorianism may be termed as apprehensible, or rather escapes any attempt at reification.

As a result of the modernist reaction to the immediately previous age, the Victorians have often been associated with contradictory statements of complacency and doubt, materialism and religion, nostalgia for the past and reliance on the progress of the nation, social convention and stubborn individualism, sentimental humanitarianism and free enterprise, insular prejudice and imperialistic designs, didacticism and aestheticism, education and utilitarianism, and the claims for the emancipation of women as well as the bliss of Victorian domesticity, among many other apparently contradictory dichotomies (Buckley 1969: 4-5). However, this compilation of opposites aimed at reconstructing the immediate past rather contributed to their posterior deconstruction, as these values acquired vague connotations and intrinsic complexities. Even the

often quoted statement that “the main characteristic of the Victorian era was constant change” (Trevelyan 1950: 16) must be questioned if the exploratory focus is brought into the remarkable stability of the Victorian period after the immediately previous revolutionary movements. Moreover, despite the modernist scorn of Victorianism, it was obvious that still “many people enjoyed reading the fiction of the earlier era” at that time (Stevenson 1969: 196). As soon as the era faded, a revival of appreciation for Victorian literature paved the way for a more accurate picture of the Victorian reality. As the tensions of the new age arose, readers turned back to the narratives of an epoch that ‘seemed’ to denote security and confidence. And yet, nowadays, any sentimental approach towards Victorianism seems as outdated as the Edwardian simplistic repudiation of its previous age.

Taking these different approaches into consideration, this article aims at outlining the main critical responses to Victorian times since Modernism up to the recent advent of contemporary Neo-Victorian criticism. Through revising different critical approaches to the Victorian era, past and contemporary concepts and ideas about that particular period will be analysed and problematised in an attempt to question whether it is possible to gain a real insight into what Victorianism means as an era and a cultural movement. In this respect, particular emphasis will be placed on issues related to terminology and themes generally analysed regarding the period, critical approaches to the period through time, as well as the Victorian conceptualisations of the past and its reinterpretation from a contemporary perspective.

2. PROBLEMATISING TERMINOLOGY AND THEMATIC APPROACHES

The term ‘Victorian’ still remains obscure and its essence inevitably declines any facile definition. As a matter of fact, according to Norman Foerster (1962), Thomas Carlyle, one of the most prolific Victorians, was born in the very same year one of the foremost Romantics, John Keats, was born (59), thus implying the counterfeited nature of historical and cultural periodisation. Moreover, quite surprisingly, despite its explicit reference to politics, it has generally been agreed that the Victorian era ended in 1880, two decades before

the end of Queen Victoria's reign. Actually, G.M. Trevelyan (1950) contended that the period cannot be strictly confined to the reign of Victoria (1837-1901), since the origin of Victorian ideas must be sought as far as 1815, with the end of the Napoleonic wars, and the last age of Romantics such as Percy B. Shelley, Lord Byron and Walter Scott (15). In addition, the acceptance of the term Victorian may neglect prevalent discourses that were hostile to the figure of the queen and the institution of the monarchy (John and Jenkins 2000: 8). In addition to spatial and temporal barriers which can be questioned, as usually happens with most literary and ideological movements, the term Victorian implies vagueness from a literary point of view, since it is rather a political and social term, disregarding any reference to the "civil war between Romanticism and Realism" (60), which Foerster describes as the central feature that characterised the period.

In this respect, Flint (2005) also problematises the term 'Victorian'. In her view, 'Victorian' responds to an academic epithet that poses several problems: first, the period fetishism it can connote; second, it implies significant limitations when it comes to discussing the dynamics of transnational cultures; and third, the length of a reign provides the most tenuous containers for intellectual and social movements that spill beyond it (230). Nevertheless, she also admits that "without such a term we are thrown back to century-ism or broad movements" (231). As a result, Flint argues that, instead of discussing whether the term 'Victorian' has outgrown its usefulness, we should be alert to the implications embedded in the way we use it, its significant limitations as well as the validity of other categories (238). As a pragmatic solution, Flint points to Goodlad's concept of 'androgyny' due to its inner implication of connectedness, which can be defined as follows:

Androgynous reading, as Goodlad proposes, incorporates our own ability to think beyond the categories that the legacy of Victorian liberal thought and representation has left us [...] It may be seen as a means of bringing together the general and the specific, a coupling that lies at the heart of many of the problems connected with period and disciplinary distinctions [...] Androgyny, may be seen, as Goodlad employs it, not as

some idealist absolute but as a pragmatic instrument – a mobile and mobilisable category of thought (237-8)

Coupled with Goodlad's concept of androgyny, new technologies and cybernetics have also exerted their influence on the way of approaching Victorian Studies. In this respect, in his pioneering volume *Charles Dickens in Cyberspace*, Jay Clayton (2003) reflects on what it means to appreciate periodisation in this same way, as a malleable instrument at our disposal. As Flint notices, "periods are neither fictions nor realities but conceptual tools" (238), thus segmenting time into stages arises as a way to gain insight and comprehend a past period which appears as irretrievable.

As well as epistemological issues, its periodisation, and the appropriateness of the term 'Victorian', many volumes on Victorianism have been envisioned as thematically-approached, focusing on ideas and areas which have traditionally been held as 'representative' of the Victorian period. An illustrative example is Grisewood's early volume *Ideas and Beliefs of the Victorians* (1949). Through this volume, Victorianism was explored into five main areas: the theory of progress, Victorian religious belief and controversy, man and nature, the liberal idea, and the "working-out" of Victorian ideas. These disciplines show the transitional period between an emphasis on established spheres of knowledge and, especially through the last section, an increasing awareness of later responses to the period. This tendency has also pervaded twenty-first century volumes, which are multi-disciplinary, and multi-thematic, recapitulating explored issues but also offering strategies to approach a new era within Victorian Studies. It may seem surprising to notice the repetition of specific themes with regard to the Victorian period, despite the fact they are approached differently. In Kucich and Sadoff's *Victorian Afterlives: Mystifications and Engagements* (2000), some areas are outlined in the introduction and discussed by the different contributors to the volume as relevant to our present situation such as economics, the discourse of sexuality, political struggles of race and gender, feminism, modes of cultural reproduction, and historicism. All in all, Kucich and Sadoff argue that these areas privilege "the Victorian period as the site of historical emergence through which postmodernism attempts to think its own cultural identity" (xxv). Likewise, Krueger's volume *Functions of Victorian Culture*

at the Present Time (2002) focuses on areas such as time, consumerism, transatlanticism, law and order, and future reading. Maureen Moran (2006), in the first chapter of her volume *Victorian Literature and Culture* (2006), similarly focuses on areas such as arts and culture, philosophy and religion, politics and economics, and developments in science and technology.

Cora Kaplan's *Victoriana* (2007), one of the most recent volumes on Victorian Studies to date, becomes distinct because it is a one-author volume and does not focus on specific themes as traditionally established in former studies, but it rather arises as a compilation of case studies concerned with present-day perceptions of Victorianism rather than with the period itself, to the point that all the essays entirely focus on current works of fiction that are related with the Victorian period, which is precisely the core of Neo-Victorian Studies. This new area of exploration is related to the Victorian era, but it precisely arises for being rooted in the twenty-first century and its projection onto the past, that is, the reverse project that has traditionally been established in Victorian Studies, where the past as projected on the present used to be a central issue. Likewise, Kaplan's volume discusses issues such as women's writing in the 1840s, Victorian literary biography, and historical novels that thematise the Victorian period through a post-modern approach from first neo-Victorian novels such as John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) to emergent sub-genres such as "Vic Lit" or Neo-Victorian lesbian narratives with Sarah Waters' novels as main representatives, which can be added to other Neo-Victorian sub-genres such as Anne Perry's Neo-Victorian detective and crime novels, and Anne Rice's Neo-Victorian gothic narratives.

3. PERIODISATION: CRITICAL APPROACHES TO VICTORIAN TIMES

In order to prove the evolving evaluation of the Victorian period through time, it may be helpful to outline how historical periods and critical approaches have developed in relation to Victorian Studies (Klages 2006; Moran 2006). The Edwardian period underlined the last remains of Victorianism, whereby decadence and the *fin-de-siècle*

aestheticism implied the decline of the immediately preceding Victorian period, with isolated authors like Oscar Wilde and George Bernard Shaw as dissonant voices at the end of an era. In this respect, the Edwardian period can be assumed to enclose the last remains of its precedent age. Modernists presented a reaction against Victorianism as the emblem of a retrograde era which sharply contrasted with the new liberalist aspirations of the Bloomsbury Group (Joyce 2004). Modernism thus presented a rejection against the Victorians through canonical volumes such as Lytton Strachey's well-known *Eminent Victorians* (1918).

After two world wars, there was a period of revision and problematisation of the past as a concept, whereby structuralist categories began to be questioned, and historians came to the front of Victorian Studies. This period was mainly characterised through its focus on reception with a view to look back at the past and reevaluate it. Subsequently, the decade of the 1980s was regarded as a period of neo-conservatism and affluence, establishing links between the Victorian era and its contemporary counterpart, thus recreating the mirror of the other Victorians (Caporale 2003). The end of the millennium struck a balance between the 1980s optimistic review of Victorianism and the arising fear which the outcome of the millennium brought about, thus leading to a re-interpretation of Victorian Studies between a romantic and nostalgic view and a more critical and existential revision of the past due to postmodern approaches. Finally, twenty-first century current approaches to Victorian Studies seem to be more self-reflective, theoretical and academic in essence to the extent of re-incorporating a new field of study due to the increasing awareness of debates about the possibility or impossibility of understanding Victorianism, through contemporary projections, adaptations and recreations in contemporary literary and visual texts.

As a result, six different phases with regard to the reception of Victorian times may be identified through a set of doublets: i.- Edwardian remains / Modernist rejection, ii.- Post-War reception / 1980s recreation, and iii.- end-of-millennium reinterpretation and twenty-first century reincorporation. The first dual phase which comprises Edwardian and Modernist periods conceives the immediately preceding era as Victorian. The Post-War period until the

decade of the 1980s can be regarded as Victorianist since an important corpus of criticism became concerned with the period, as both a sign of interest and problematisation of Victorian Studies. Eventually, the last phase up to now sheds light over the arising consciousness and postmodern approach towards the evolutionary nature of Victorian Studies. All of these phases include the clash between idealism and deconstruction of the Victorian past, although each of them includes idiosyncratic features which characterise their own period and critical approach.

Modernists became concerned with structuralism, dual divisions, linguistic emphasis and thematically-approached studies, which rejected the apparently morality and social self-consciousness of the Victorian era. The post-war period became entangled with post-colonial approaches which emphasised historicist readings and problematised traditionally-accepted theses in relation to heritage, memory, history and empire. Finally, in the twenty-first century, through post-modern influences and newly-acquired academic status, Victorian Studies are leaving behind their historicist emphasis to stress theoretical analyses and reflections on the evolution of the academic area to the extent a new theoretical approach to Victorian Studies, Neo-Victorian, has emerged as a result. This last phase also reflects the inner nature of current critical approaches such as postmodernism with a special concern with the return to interdisciplinary approaches and the rejection of established structures, through the advent of cultural studies, popular culture, as well as media and film studies.

- i.- Edwardian to Modernist period – remains and rejection – structuralism - Victorian Studies*
- ii.- Post-War period to Neo-Conservatist 1980s – reception and recreation – historicism- Victorianism*
- iii.- End of the millennium to 21st century – reinterpretation and reincorporation – theorisation - Post-Victorian / Neo-Victorian Studies*

As a result, some sort of connection can be established between the decades after the great wars and our contemporary period. It can be argued that post-Victorian cultural politics emerged in the 1960s

as an alternative stage in which postmodern awareness can be claimed to have emerged (Kucich and Sadoff 2000: xxvii). Thus, it seems possible to delineate an evolution of the interpretations of Victorianism through the Victorian period, a Victorianist phase, and the current Post-Victorian or even Neo-Victorian stage (these two last epithets seem interchangeable depending on the emphasis on the continuity or the emergence of this new area within Victorian Studies). Actually, the 1960s arose as the decade when the first Neo-Victorian novels emerged, with seminal works such as Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) and John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969). The recreation of the Victorian period from a twentieth-century perspective in a post-war period was due to the need to reevaluate the past as well as the way it could be reinterpreted. In this respect, it is useful to remember Anderson's allusion to the 'two modernities'. As Kate Flint (2005) mentions, there is a first modernity understood as a rationalist, philosophical, political post-Enlightenment ethos, and a later concept of modernity as a more self-conscious, autonomous self-authorisation, the shift from one to the other being urged by Foucault's methodological evolution from bourgeois modernity to aesthetic modernity (231).

According to Cora Kaplan (2007), the Victorian period provokes a contradictory set of feelings which can be also delineated from the post-war period to the neo-conservatist 1980s. In her view, "the Victorian [...] had a strong affective presence in modern Britain in the supposedly libertarian 1960s and 1970s, when the nation was thought to be on its way to becoming a classless and multicultural society" (5), and yet in the 1980s and 1990s due to the Margaret Thatcher's revival of the so-called Victorian Values – mainly thrift, family, enterprise –, the period was brought back to life, while reappropriated by the positive ethic of Conservative government. In this respect, Kaplan argues "it was then that I began seriously to consider the curious appropriation of the Victorian for disparate political and cultural agendas in the present" (Kaplan 5). With a due emphasis on consumerism, the late twentieth-century critical approach to Victorian Studies is characterised by a desire to know and to 'own' the Victorian past through its remains (Kaplan 1). Nonetheless, the transition from the conservatist 1980s to the end of the millennium is described as "Victorian revivalism as a result of the 'loss of historicity' implied

through late-century postmodern consciousness” (Kucich and Sadoff xi). Nowadays, the emphasis is placed on theory rather than history, so that the prevalence of texts, as in modernist times, coupled with the post-modern thoughts of deconstruction, have emphasised the twenty-first century epistemological way to gain knowledge through the projection of present-day concerns onto the past as well as the awareness of the inability to gain insight into a former period of time.

Similarly, Maureen Moran (2006) gives a succinct overview of the evolution of Victorian Studies in the twentieth century. She features Lytton Strachey’s *Eminent Victorians* as responsible for establishing a myth of Victorian dullness and moral duplicity which was to shape the general perception of Victorian culture for decades to come. In the first half of the twentieth-century, Victorian critics such as F.R. Leavis (1948) focused on the Victorians’ moral weight rating “nineteenth-century writers largely for their capacity to refine the sensibility of readers and provide values by which to live” (131). Towards the mid-twentieth century, a more complex view of Victorianism emerged due to the increasing concern about psychoanalytic and historical approaches. The figure of the alienated Victorian substituted the former Victorian perceived as either an hypocrite or a prophet. After the two world wars, Raymond Williams introduced Marxist readings into the domain of Victorian literature and culture, underlining ideological readings. In the last quarter of the twentieth century, critical approaches emerged such as feminism with Elaine Showalter (1977), and Susan Gubar and Sandra Gilbert (1979); new historicism with D. A. Miller (1988) and Mary Poovey (1995), and postcolonial theory with Patrick Brantlinger (1988) and Daniel Bivona (1990), who reinterpreted Victorianism from gendered, cultural and historical perspectives. These critical approaches to Victorian Studies had their counterpart in narratives such as Valerie Martin’s *Mary Reilly* (1990), a feminist reinterpretation of Stevenson’s *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*; A.S. Byatt’s *Possession* (1990), which focused on issues such as intertextuality, authorship and readership, and Graham Swift’s *Waterland* (1983), which blurred the distinction between histories and stories. According to Moran, as twenty-first century scholars, “we can collaborate to produce new interpretations that are culturally inclusive, and deepen our sense of connection with a fascinating age” (134), while engaging in “sustained opportunities for self-scrutiny” (Flint

230), thus contemporary Victorian critics and writers tend to remember, recreate as well as imagine Victorian times.

4. RECOVERING, ENVISIONING, APPROPRIATING THE PAST: SOME NOTES ON EPISTEMOLOGY

In order to approach the way the past and history have evolved in Victorian Studies, issues such as Victorian ethics, humanism, and education should also be tackled. The Victorian period has traditionally been enmeshed with an air of gravity and transcendence. It was precisely during the first half of the twentieth century that the literature of the Victorian era began to be firstly associated with moral and social philistinism, and conversely, it was not until fairly recently that we have assumed Victorianism cannot be equated with mere self-complacency, prudery, pragmatic idealism and utilitarianism (Kumar 1969: ix). Overgeneralisations about the period during modernism often set a clear differentiation between aspects of Victorian life and society that were significantly connected, even if “it is almost impossible to reduce a culture so various to a common denominator” (Buckley 10), since “any actual period suffers distortion from a generalised indictment” (San Juan 17). So as to gain insight into a more accurate approach, it becomes essential to realise the complex role the past played for the Victorians, in clear parallelism to the way the Victorian past may haunt contemporary critics.

Reforms in the way of understanding education in Victorian times brought forward aggressive attacks upon the study of the classics, and yet Victorianism has often been characterised by its idiosyncratic sense of the past and the rise of modern historiography as a science. Despite the concern with the affairs of the world, nationalism was considered a central element in the progressive interest in the historical mind and this was mainly achieved through looking back to past ages. For Burke, the past was envisioned as a reservoir of experience, a bank upon which the living were permitted to draw and a basis for judgement in contemporary affairs (Mulhauser: 158). Thus, the past was envisioned as a way to understand the present situation of the nation so that the Victorians could identify themselves in their past, which inevitably entailed a contemporary

recreation of historical affairs, especially through the revival of historical novels.

Likewise, contemporary approaches to Victorianism often defend the need to read the Victorians on their own terms (Anger ix); an approach which may be achieved through closely analysing what they had to say about epistemology and their idiosyncratic interpretation of knowledge since their deliberations may help us rethink and reevaluate inherited dominant approaches to Victorianism. The intricacies, complexities and difficulties to analyse and decode the Victorian period have been gradually modified through time. In 1918, Strachey argued that the history of the Victorian Age would never be written because one knew too much about it. Conversely, contemporary studies rather seem to proclaim that the impossibility to understand and capture the Victorian reality lies in the fact we can never gain any true insight into a past era. Nevertheless, we must precisely look back at the Victorians as providers of a considerable focus for investigating epistemological issues since they were already exploring them with remarkable sophistication. As a result, the Victorian era was also the period of the richest development of hermeneutics (Anger 2), showing our postmodern views and theoretical questions were not entirely opposed to Victorian speculation.

In this respect, even though aware of its importance for Victorian endeavours, Carlyle continually refers to the inaccessibility of the past, and his writings on history already reveal profound manifestations that bear significant resemblance with contemporary epistemology. As Anger has noticed, Carlyle is well-aware of the effects of representation, the textuality of historical knowledge and the impossibility of a full account of the past (3). Textual meaning was often called into question, even in debates on biblical exegesis. In this respect, John Henry Newman's *Development of Christian Doctrine* (1845) already pointed at the fact that tradition plays a role in understanding, but inevitably, readings will be subjected to change over time. Postmodern conceptualisations that bring into focus peripheral textualities in front of canonical texts sanctioned by tradition may find its counterpart in the complex notion of authority developed in Victorian times. The question of how authority was established for an interpretation in exegetical debates became increasingly important.

Oscar Wilde propounded interpretative relativism, defending that the best 'modes of art' necessarily assume all interpretations as truths and no interpretation as eminently final. Having observed that the Victorians already engaged questions of epistemology in ways as sophisticated as contemporary theories, Suzy Anger presents two differing poles that account for the possibility of knowledge of the past: objectivism and constructivism. Objectivism implies it is possible to acquire certain knowledge of former times, while constructivism suggests we can only aspire to acknowledge our own subjective constructions of the past (7). Few contemporary literary critics have defended the objective alternative because of the prevalent scepticism to gain any form of actual knowledge of the past. Any attempt at objective knowledge would necessarily entail an intention of appropriation since, in Foucauldian terms, knowledge is inextricably associated with power. Conversely, constructivism defends the view that language, rather than reflecting reality, is self-referential. In this respect, constructive theories have pointed at the problematic differentiation that historiography has often set between history and fiction. Ultimately, it is through narratives that history achieves meaning since we can never pretend to describe the way things really were in any objective form.

The denial of objectivity and the contemporary alliance with constructivism insist on the impossibility of knowledge on the grounds that claiming understanding of others, another culture or the past would inevitably imply a kind of imperialism. Nevertheless, with regard to this relativism, Anger contends that "this extreme scepticism with its rejection of knowledge as a goal must be rethought [...] [propounding that] we can have more knowledge of the past and of others than most recent theory has been willing to allow" (9). Actually, we should become aware of the dangers of any extreme relativism, since any impossibility to gain some entrance into another culture may hamper any chance to revise our own views of the world. In fact, swaying between these two fronts - the ethical need to approach others with respect, and the theoretical assumption that rejects any possibility of knowing the others objectively - implies the paradox of how we may respect the others, if we are simply unable to know them. In this respect, Anger maintains that knowledge is partially a social construction, but an absolute assuredness is unnecessary to identify

those proposals that seem more correct than others. Thus, rather than denying any possibility of understanding, we should envision knowledge from an ethical point of view, as the Victorians did, reconsidering the pursuit of understanding and the achievement of knowledge as itself moral (Anger 13).

The Victorians' concern with an ideal past implies the need to inspect a society which, unlike their own, could presumably be contemplated and contained as a whole. The Victorians' biased examination of the past inevitably echoes any contemporary attempt to idealise the Victorian period as the emblem of a safe and splendid past. Nonetheless, the Victorian approach towards the past was eminently ethical, whereas contemporary attempts at understanding the former times often entail epistemological endeavours. The Victorians usually brought into focus the lives of great men as conditioned by the Carlylean precept that history was mainly biographical, and thus, only the lives of the great men were susceptible of examination. In this respect, our contemporary interests differ quite significantly with our general belief that history is inevitably made up of numerous narratives. Actually, by means of favouring the lives of some great men and disregarding others, the Victorians inevitably fictionalised history as much as they constructed an ideal picture of their own past. Likewise, this reconstructed past served the purpose of confirming and providing reassurance for Victorian contemporary virtues. This need of appropriation can be perceived in the historical novels of the time, which not only portrayed the lives of notable English heroes and looked back at the Elizabethan age with a nostalgic approach, but often went as far as Roman and Greek classical times to establish some connection between the classical splendour and the Victorian empire. Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *The Last Days of Pompeii* is precisely a case in point. Thus, it was through dwelling into the past that the Victorians underlined their permanent awareness of progress and evolution. Nevertheless, as Chapman (1968) points out, later Victorians rejected the need to conceive the past as a source of morality, since "it no longer seemed possible to find release into the past, either as a place of imaginary escape or as a model for correction of the present" (189). Thus, it is towards the last part of the Victorian age that historiography began to arise as a major discipline, rejecting to suit any moral or ethical purposes.

Thus, our present-day problematic attempts at attaining any knowledge of the past were also shared by the Victorians. Differing attitudes to the past were part of the mixed attitudes with which the Victorians approached their own time. Consequently, as Raymond Chapman (1968) contends, “if the tendency was towards a greater general happiness, the men of the past were to be pitied for coming earlier in a sequence of time [...] if things were in decline, envy was the appropriate sentiment towards those who had lived soon enough to avoid the bad years” (1). From our contemporariness, we may also share this changing attitude towards the Victorians themselves as a reflection of our own feelings towards our own present state of affairs. It may be acknowledged, however, that some basic optimism and a vigorous attitude to the world may be taken for granted in the Victorian era and this may differ ostensibly from our sceptical mode of reasoning. This Victorian optimism was inevitably tempered by the anxious realisation that, in a period of permanent change, it is always possible to take the wrong direction. The Victorian self-awareness of progress often found its counterpart in the writings of major authors who remained doubtful and deprecated about the purported progressive spirit which characterised the age. Such deprecation often involved admiration of a past era, clearly exalted by the Oxford movement whose deep commitment for the past betrayed obvious discomfort with present issues. It is precisely the Victorians’ self-awareness, reified through Mill’s spirit of the age, characterised by self-help and progress, which endows the Victorians with a sense of modernity that brings them closer to our own time. The Victorians’ interest in the past as a reflection, or rather, as self-representation of the present state of affairs, inevitably entails a will to excel in order to be remembered in the future. Thus, the Victorians’ concern about the way their own time would appear in years to come underlies a certain degree of self-awareness coupled with a sense of responsibility for future generations. This high sense of duty and awareness of their position in the world led them to find in a remote past an entrance to recreate and reconstruct Victorianism that would reverberate in the years to come.

Twentieth-century critics have revealed differing arguments as far as any possibility of gaining real insight into Victorianism. Included in Chapman’s seminal volume *The Sense of Past in Victorian Literature*

(1986), Arthur Danto's philosophy of history contends that, in approaching the Victorian period, we use post facto conceptions that could not have been available in the past, thus necessarily, any meanings we ascribe to past events will differ from actual past meanings. In this respect, Mary Poovey (1995) brings into focus the use of abstract representations developed after the Victorians, and reads them as a reflection of multiple anxieties. Poovey's interpretation infers that the representations of the Victorian period are reflections of present-day unease. Thus, like any source of anxiety, a past event can only manifest itself as meaningful to the present reader through the interpretative response it demands.

It is at this stage that we may argue whether our understanding of the Victorians has reached a degree of maturity, as our main concern is not to judge them or defend them, but rather understand them. Contemporary interdisciplinary cooperation of the various arts and social sciences may help us gather a more accurate picture of the Victorian complexity. Concepts such as intertextuality and cultural interchange seem to provide the necessary validation for interdisciplinary studies (Roston 1996: 1) as applied within the domain of Victorianism. As readers of a Victorian past, we may approach the Victorian complexity through the awareness that our perspective is also to be seen as a plurality of different texts confronted with the multiplicity of a past reality as complex as our own. In this respect, contemporary cultural theory has taught us to cast a suspicious glance on any clearly determined construct, as it is only through an ever-permanent questioning dialogue with the other that we may be in the position to attain any knowledge.

As Chapman (1968) contended in his own time, Victorianism still seems to remain a meeting place of shared experience and historical imagination, which brings the Victorian period and our own time closer. Concerns about class, gender, race, and culture may find fruitful ground in the Victorian period, when such concepts began to be subverted once they had already been assumed and socially-sanctioned. Actually, it was precisely in the Victorian times that the idea of culture as a category began to take shape, and conversely, set the mechanisms for its own deconstruction. Thus, it is through our subjective contemporary perspective that we may choose to consider

the Victorian culture as susceptible of deconstruction, or of reconstruction through nostalgic aims.

As Vernon (2005) claims, G.M.Young's *Victorian England* (1936) is credited to have interpreted the Victorians in a more positive way than Lytton Strachey's *Eminent Victorians* (1918), when the Great War had brought down the final curtain to the Victorian age (272-3). While Strachey focused on biographies, Young became especially interested in history. According to Vernon, after the Second World War, historians became enchanted by what they saw as the Victorian achievement (273). This historiographical moment admired the Victorian era for its peaceful transition to an industrialised market economy, the formation of a democratic civil society and the voluntary origins of the welfare state (Vernon 273). As George Kitson Clark emphasised, in *The Making of Victorian England* (1962), one could not understand the Victorians' historical achievement without examining the culture that had generated it (Vernon 274). This started an interdisciplinary approach in Victorian Studies with both historians and literary scholars examining both social and cultural responses (Wolff 1964; Harrison 1965). Subsequently, issues related to the past were recovered in subsequent decades but with an emphasis on interpretative analyses and theoretical readings (Lowenthal 1985; Chapman 1986; Bowler 1989). It was the turn to theory, and to Michel Foucault in particular, that alienated historians from the interdisciplinary project of Victorian Studies. Nowadays, as Vernon suggests, there is an emphasis on the instability and blurring of categories and boundaries in a remarkably ahistorical way, stressing theoretical and textual models (275-6), which calls into question any past attempts to reify the Victorian past.

5. THE VICTORIAN PERIOD IN OUR CONTEMPORARINESS

At this stage of this critical overview of Victorian Studies, it becomes mandatory to analyse the current situation with regard to twenty-first century strategies for the future of Neo-Victorian Studies. In this respect, Kaplan claims that the proliferation of Victoriana is more than nostalgia and more than a symptom of the now familiar view that the passage from modernity to postmodernity has been marked by the profound loss of a sense of history (3). In her view, Victoriana might

be regarded as one sign of a sense of historical imagination on the move, that is, an indication that what we thought we knew as ‘history’ has become a conceptual nomad, not so much lost as permanently restless and unsettled (3). Similarly, Christine L. Krueger (2002) argues that “fascination with Victorian culture could certainly have been noted as a sign of our times. In our very efforts at ‘revival’ and ‘restoration’, we extend the Victorians’ own practices and manifest a markedly Victorian self-consciousness” (xi). In this sense, like Arnold, we also look back in order to articulate hopes for the future (Krueger xii). At the present time, then, Victorian culture is a key site at which academics and non-academics can enter into dialogue (Krueger xiii).

In this respect, Kucich and Sadoff (2000) identify two main positions in current trends of Victorian Studies: on the one hand, it is argued that “post-Victorianism is, in various ways, a collective misrepresentation not simply of ‘history itself’, but of the very nature of historical knowledge” (xxv), and on the other hand, it is contended that the post-Victorian era can re-read history in socially and politically progressive ways since, through contemporary epistemological convictions, a dialogic vision of history as text can be enabled. In other words, some argue that the past is lost and thus cannot be retrieved; others that a terrain of intertextual exploration can be engaged. As a result of these two alternatives, or rather, complementary positions – which recall Anderson’s concept of the two modernities - Kucich and Sadoff classified the different articles in their volume under the headings “mystifications” and “engagements”, thus pointing at nostalgia and critical approaches to the period.

Similarly, Simon Joyce (2002) bases his ideas about the way to interpret the Victorians on two main assumptions: firstly, we never really encounter the Victorians themselves, but a mediated image like the one we get when we glance into our rear-view mirrors while driving, and secondly, such elaborations of the essence of the Victorians sometimes make it difficult for critics to have a definite and clear idea about what Victorianism really entails. Thus, Joyce focuses on the processes of simplification and the prevailing popular consensus about the defining features of the period (3-4). In order to redirect the situation, Joyce outlines several strategies such as: the laborious work of opposition, focus on those aspects which do not fit with our received

notions of the Victorians, stress those elements of nineteenth-century society or culture that most closely resemble our own, and gain awareness into the fact that we are not at the end of social evolution and thus we may approach the nineteenth-century through the repository of past alternatives (5-6). As a consequence of the emphasis over theorisation of the present time and our prevailing identification with the period, Joyce contends that “to recognise our own investments in the period is also, then, to see the continuing residual force of the Victorians, as a concept that has been repeatedly transcended, negated, parodied, and resurrected ever since its apparent demise” (15). Moreover, Miriam Bailin (2002) also refers to the reincorporation, or rather, appropriation of the past as a commodity in our present times, when she argues that “in our disposable culture, the ability to transform the discarded objects of another century into the ‘found’ treasures of our own may offer some reassurance that here, at least, in the perdurable world of things, all is not lost” (45). Conversely, Kucich and Sadoff (2000) argue that modernists appropriated the Victorian past to criticise cultural commodification (xiii).

Victorian Studies as an academic area is emphasised through Sue Lonoff’s article (2002), also included in Krueger’s compilation, whereby doubts are cast with regard to the term ‘Victorian’ and its problematic periodisation. As far as terminology is concerned, Kucich and Sadoff argue that aspects of late-century postmodernism could be more appropriately be called ‘post-Victorian’; an epithet that conveys the paradoxes of historical continuity and disruption (xiii). Nowadays, currents tendencies of Victorianism involve the reincorporation and re-appropriation of the past (Kaplan 2007), a particular emphasis placed on the re-workings and re-adaptations of Victorian works through other media (Stewart 1995; Roston 1996), as well as the interdisciplinary nature of Victorian Studies (Gallagher 2005). Likewise, the term ‘Neo-Victorian Studies’, due to its novel component and its consequent appropriateness at the beginning of a new millennium, has arisen as a term which has recently gained general acclaim and popularity. The dawn of the twenty-first century Victorian Studies re-incorporates the evolution of different critical and cultural readings of the Victorians, placing emphasis on the ultimate aim to gain insight into a period, evolving from Victorian to Victorianist so as to gain insight the newly-founded Neo-Victorian theories.

6. CONCLUSIONS

This essay has analysed the multilayered nature of approaches to Victorian times from its early reception during the Edwardian and modernist period to our postmodern contemporariness. Even if the same authors, ideas and conceptualisations as regards the Victorian era have been frequently examined up to our times, each period has envisioned Victorianism from its own perspective, thus placing emphasis on particular issues which have reflected the concerns of each period, projecting their own shadow on their particular interpretation of the Victorian past. Through an overview of the way Victorianism has been differently approached from the Victorian era to our contemporariness, it is possible to perceive how conceptualisations of the past transform through history and often suit any interests prevailing in each different period.

Through comparison and contrast, issues about Victorian identities become more relevant, even if aware they are often inapprehensible and escape any attempt at objectification. The presumably Victorian concern about the empire assumes a new perspective when analysed through contemporary American scholars. Likewise, the Victorian concern about their historical splendour is deconstructed by postcolonial readings of imperialist invasions. Consequently, any contemporary approach should be necessarily conceived as an intertextual dialogue between the object and the subject which will produce a contemporary point of view of the Victorians as a result of the dialogue between our present-day beliefs and the assumed ideas and lives of the past, which inevitably reach us filtered through different subjective and distorted textualities (Sweet 2002). From a contemporary perspective, we should perceive the Victorian age as a period suffused with a myriad multiplicity of points of view, conflicting ideological tenets and permanent self-questioning so that its relevance for contemporary interest and re-examination seems undeniable (Rowlinson 2005).

All in all, identities are shaped through relation, comparison and contrast, thus defying any attempt at clearly-cut descriptions and conceptualisations. Our contemporary views about the Victorian period amalgamate discourses about identity and the past which have been

projected all through these two past centuries. Currently, both a nostalgic and disruptive discourse seems to pave the ground for Neo-Victorian fiction, giving voice to realities which remained silent during Victorian times, while deconstructing a presumably safe and sound past era which seems both appealing and inapprehensible by contemporary standards.

WORKS CITED

- Anderson, A. 2005. "Victorian Studies and the Two Modernities." *Victorian Studies* 47.2 (Winter): 195-203.
- Anger, Suzy, ed. 2001. *Knowing the Past: Victorian Literature and Culture*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.
2001. "Introduction." *Knowing the Past: Victorian Literature and Culture*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press. 1-21.
- Bailin, M. 2002. "The New Victorians." *Functions of Victorian Culture at the Present Time*. Ed. Christine L. Krueger. Athens: Ohio University Press. 37-46.
- Bivona, D. 1990. *Desire and Contradiction: Imperial Visions and Domestic Debates in Victorian Literature*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Bowler, P.J. 1989. *The Invention of Progress: The Victorians and the Past*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Brantlinger, P. 1988. *Rule of Darkness: British Literature and Imperialism, 1830-1914*. Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press.
- Buckley, J.H. 1969. "Victorianism." *British Victorian Literature: Recent Revaluations*. Ed. by Shiv V. Kumar. New York and London: New York UP and London P. 4-14.
- Bulwer-Lytton, Edward. *The Last Days of Pompeii*. Holicong: Wildside Press, 2003.
- Byatt, A.S. 2002. *Possession: A Romance*. 1990. London: Vintage.
- Caporale Bizzini, S., ed. 2003. *We, the Other Victorians: Considering the Heritage of 19th Century Thought*. Alicante: Universidad de Alicante.
- Chapman, R. 1968. *The Victorian Debate: English Literature and Society 1832-1901*. London: Weidenfield and Nicolson.
1986. *The Sense of the Past in Victorian Literature*. London and Sydney: Croom Helm.

- Clayton, J. 2003. *Charles Dickens in Cyberspace: The Afterlife of the Nineteenth-Century in Postmodern Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Flint, K. 2005. "Why 'Victorian'? Response." *Victorian Studies* 47.2 (Winter): 230-239.
- Fowles, J. 1984. *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. 1969. London: Triad/Panther.
- Gallagher, C. 2005. "Theoretical Answers to Interdisciplinary Questions or Interdisciplinary Answers to Theoretical Quest." *Victorian Studies* 47.2 (Winter): 253-259.
- Gilbert, S. M. and S. Gubar. 1979. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press.
- Goodlad, L.M.E. 2005. "Toward a Victorianist's Theory of Androgynous Experiment." *Victorian Studies* 47.2 (Winter): 215-229.
- Grisewood, H, ed. 1950. *Ideas and Beliefs of the Victorians: An Historic Reevaluation of the Victorian Age*. London: Sylvan Press.
- Harrison, J.F.C. 1965. "Recent Writing on the History of Victorian England." *Victorian Studies* 8.3 (March): 263-270.
- John, Juliet and Alice Jenkins, eds. *Rethinking Victorian Culture*. London: Macmillan, 2000.
- Jones, H. M. 1962. "The Comic Spirit and Victorian Sanity." *The Reinterpretation of Victorian Literature*. Ed. by Joseph E. Baker. New York: Russell and Russell. 20-32.
- Joyce, S. 2002. "The Victorians in the Rearview Mirror." *Functions of Victorian Culture at the Present Time*. Ed. Christine L. Krueger. Athens: Ohio University Press. 3-17.
2004. "On or About 1901: the Bloomsbury Group Looks Back at the Victorians." *Victorian Studies* 46.4 (Summer): 631-654.
- Kaplan, C. 2007. *Victoriana: Histories, Fictions, Criticism*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Klages, M. 2006. *Literary Theory: A Guide for the Perplexed*. London: Continuum, 2006.
- Knickerbocker, W.S. 1962. "Victorian Education and the Idea of Culture." *The Reinterpretation of Victorian Literature*. Ed. by Joseph E. Baker. New York: Russell and Russell. 97-129.
- Krueger, Christine L., ed. 2002. *Functions of Victorian Culture at the Present Time*. Athens: Ohio University Press.

- Kucich, J. and D. F. Sadoff. 2000. *Victorian Afterlife: Postmodern Culture Rewrites the Nineteenth-Century*. London: University of Minnesota Press.
- Kumar, Shiv V, ed. 1969. *British Victorian Literature: Recent Revaluations*. New York and London: New York UP and London P.
- Leavis, F.R. 1948. *The Great Tradition*. London: Chatto and Windus.
- Levine, Richard A., ed. 1967. *Backgrounds to Victorian Literature*. San Francisco: Chandler.
- Lonoff, S. 2002. "Disseminating Victorian Culture in the Postmillennial Classroom." *Functions of Victorian Culture at the Present Time*. Ed. Christine L. Krueger. Athens: Ohio University Press. 171-182.
- Lowenthal, D. 1985. *The Past is a Foreign Country*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Maurice, R. B. 1958. "When Did 'Victorianism' End?" *Victorian Studies* 1.3 (March): 268-271.
- Martin, V. 2004. *Mary Reilly*. 1990. London: Abacus.
- Miller, D.A. 1988. *The Novel and the Police*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Moran, M. 2006. *Victorian Literature and Culture*. London: Continuum, 2006.
- Neff, E. 1962. "Social background and social thought." *The Reinterpretation of Victorian Literature*. Ed. by Joseph E. Baker. New York: Russell and Russell, 3-17.
- Poovey, M. 1995. *Making a Social Body: British Cultural Formation, 1830-1864*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Rhys, J. 1999. *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Ed. by Judith K. Raiskin. 1966. London: Norton.
- Roston, M. 1996. *Victorian Contexts: Literature and the Visual Arts*. London: Macmillan.
- Rowlinson, M. 2005. "Theory of Victorian Studies: Anachronism and Self-Reflexivity." *Victorian Studies* 47.2 (Winter): 241-252.
- San Juan, E., Jr. 1969. "Toward a Definition of Victorian Activism." *British Victorian Literature: Recent Revaluations*. Ed. by Shiv V. Kumar. New York and London: New York UP and London P. 17-34.
- Showalter, E. 1977. *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Stevenson, L. 1969. "The Modern Values of Victorian Fiction." *British*

- Victorian Literature: Recent Revaluations*. Ed. by Shiv V. Kumar. New York and London: New York UP and London P. 195- 201.
- Stewart, G. 1995. "Film's Victorian Retrofit." *Victorian Studies* 38.2 (Winter): 153- 198.
- Strachey, L. 2003. *Eminent Victorians*. 1918. Ed. John Sutherland. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sweet, M. 2002. *Inventing the Victorians*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Swift, G. 2008. *Waterland*. 1983. London: Picador.
- Trevelyan, G.M. 1950. "Introducing the Ideas and Beliefs of the Victorians." *Ideas and Beliefs of the Victorians: An Historic Reevaluation of the Victorian Age*. Ed. by Harman Grisewood. London: Sylvan Press. 15-19.
- Vernon, J. 2005. "Historians and the Victorian Studies Question: Response." *Victorian Studies* 47.2 (Winter): 272-279.
- Wolff, M. 1964. "Victorian Study: An Interdisciplinary Essay." *Victorian Studies* 8.1 (September): 59-70.