

INTRODUCTION

“Evoking the Victorians and their world has not been an antiquarian activity but a means of getting a fresh perspective on the present.”

- Robin Gilmour

At the turn of the new millennium, the works of nineteenth-century Victorian authors such as Charles Dickens, Wilkie Collins and William Thackeray seem to have inspired a considerable number of contemporary writers to place their characters and fictional storylines within that very century. Among those, Sarah Waters and Michel Faber, in particular, have reached extensive and enthusiastic audiences that seem insatiable. Faber's applauded novel *The Crimson Petal and the White* (2002), left readers yearning for even more and the subsequent publication in 2006 of the short-story collection *The Apple: Crimson Petal Stories* offered its readers additional glimpses into the world of his fictional characters. Shortly after the publication of *The Crimson Petal and the White*, the novel was turned into a film, which seems to have further increased its enormous popularity. Moreover, BBC announced the release of a new adaptation of Faber's novel as a drama series in the spring of 2011. The fact that Sarah Waters' novels have followed a similar trend and that a great many adaptations of nineteenth-century books for film and television have been widely acclaimed also testify to a continuing curiosity concerning the lives of the Victorians.

According to Eckart Voigts-Virchow, the neo-Victorian novel is a “fascinating area of tension between the Victorian and the contemporary, a hybrid space of mimicry, camouflage and assertions of difference” (112). Unlike many early twentieth-century writers, who tended to depreciate their recent historic past, the neo-Victorian authors seem to use the period to give voice to those who were marginalized in the nineteenth century. The Victorian struggle

against the “great social evil” of prostitution, and the twentieth-century efforts to relocate prostitution from the city centres to more obscure locations bear many similarities. Contrary to the high Victorian novel, the neo-Victorian genre finds its protagonists in the criminal netherworlds and subcultures among prostitutes, gay and lesbian people as well as suppressed women in general and frequently dwells on subjects like sex, gender and class in a way that the moral standards of Victorians did not allow.

In this context it may be relevant to assess our present viewpoint; we do not regard the Victorians as they did themselves since we can only interpret history. Reading may work as a means of finding your own place in the contemporary landscape as well as an exploration of the relation between the self and the other. The Victorians may well have turned into “the others.” Yet, simultaneously, “print culture both constructs the present moment and mediates the past” (Palmer 86), which is an interesting aspect in the twenty-first century phase of vicissitude. In Michel Faber’s novel, the “others” are not only temporal; while the protagonist Sugar is the epitome of our contemporary outcast, she is also somewhat of the ideal woman. She is set in a world that we, the readers, have in part created ourselves within our minds, a pseudo-reality. We may believe the Victorian world to have been less complex than our own world, but a non-simplistic approach reveals that it harboured the same complexity as our own society.

Neo-Victorian novelists tend to draw on various Victorian channels of information and include advertisements, diary entries and newspaper articles in their narratives. This approach helps mirror the zeitgeist and the values held by the fictional characters. To maximize the period effect, Faber also makes use of references to literary texts that were topical at the time. It is evident that he has *Yokel’s Preceptor* in mind when he lets William Rackham, the main male character, find the prostitute Sugar in the gentleman’s guide “*More Sprees in London – Hints for Men About Town, with advice for greenhorns*” (Crimson 68). *Yokel’s Preceptor*

mainly addressed male individuals interested in finding gambling houses, saloons and houses of ill repute. To provide an additional period flavour, Faber makes Sugar read Balzac, Collins, Trollope and Tennyson among others and she also “shares his [William’s] own low opinion of Matthew Arnold” (*Crimson* 118). To some extent, the neo-Victorian novel can thus be said to work as a banister leading us into a world in which the reader is aware of both the fictional and the real elements, both the past and the present.

Neo-Victorian texts can also be regarded as “processes of writing that act out the results of reading the Victorians and their literary productions” as Mark Llewellyn points out in “What is Neo-Victorian Studies?” (168). To us, the Victorians thus appear to have embraced stability of values so that the political, financial and social structure of their society seems deceitfully easier to overview than our own sometimes destabilized present-day world. Like the Victorians, who saw urbanization, a shift into industrialism and religious debates sparked by Darwin’s evolutionary theory, we too, have in the past decades faced financial turmoil, growing social problems due to increased unemployment and inequality widening the gaps between the classes. The alienation and anxiety in terms of morality and “family values” voiced in the contemporary public debate might perhaps be a partially contributing factor to our fascination for a past that is so akin to the present.

Consequently, we must ask ourselves whether this fascination does not in fact suggest that we need idealized worlds into which we can flee whenever our own world crashes down upon us. Do we long for a world which is seemingly easier to understand and in which our senses are not constantly under attack from cybernetic or physical sensations? In short, does the nineteenth century offer us a sensory retreat? Is it perhaps the similarities that exist between these two points in history that attract us? Like the Victorians, we live in a society of great change. In “On Not Paying Attention” Stephen Arata discusses the increased demands of attention that arose in the late 1800s. He claims that the Victorians experienced a new

constant pressure on their senses from “too many images, too much noise, way too much information” (198). To be exposed to excessive impressions is a familiar phenomenon to the contemporary reader. In addition, the Victorian transformation of society due to growing urban population raised questions of integrity. What constituted the body and what was the self? Darwinist ideas in the nineteenth century further reinforced the division between body and soul. Likewise, our present-day demands of increased efficiency in working life have generated a growing interest in various meditative techniques to preserve our peace of mind. This essay investigates the possible reasons for the recent growing interest in the Victorian period with particular emphasis on the sensory perceptions of vision and smell. The sense of smell, in particular, played a dominant part in the lives of the Victorians and is frequently used as a signifier of sex, gender and class in the Victorian novel as well as in neo-Victorian fiction. By discussing Michel Faber’s novel *The Crimson Petal and the White*, I will argue that the neo-Victorian novel attracts the twenty-first century reader’s desire for another kind of world by simultaneously portraying a contemporary, familiar and recognizable world.

SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES

The design as well as the bulk of the neo-Victorian volumes shows inspirational features from the literary traditions of the 1800s. In *Reading the Victorian Novel: Detail into Form* Graham Clarke discusses how the Victorian novel uses length and characters to picture society. Citing G. Josipovici, he writes that: “[r]eading an intricately plotted nineteenth-century novel is very much like travelling by train. Once one has paid for one’s ticket and found one’s seat one can settle down in comfort and forget all everyday worries until one reaches one’s destination, secure that one is in good hands” (60). During the journey the Victorians would have plenty of time to “watch the scenery” and perhaps discuss the events that unfolded. It was the journey rather than the destination itself that made it worth the while. Today, despite our alleged lack of time we seem again to be attracted by books that offer us a long journey into a fictional world. *The Crimson Petal and the White* is an excellent example of this kind of novel. Michel Faber’s book is a solid brick of nearly 900 pages and may look slightly daunting to someone who is not a keen reader. In “The Return of Omniscience in Contemporary Fiction” Paul Dawson remarks that fiction has turned from “minimalism to maximalism,” to books that are “big . . . full of information, ideas and stylistic riffs [with] eventful plots that transpire on what’s often called a ‘broad social canvas’” as a means to compete in a society where you have to stand out to have narrative authority at all (156). This new craving for excess is not, however, only noticeable in literature; the widespread use of bonus material for films is another maximalist sign.

The intrusive narrative voice commenting on the lives of the fictional characters and at times also addressing the reader is another feature frequently used in neo-Victorian fiction. Faber practices it recurrently to break the illusion: “Waiting for William to stir, there’s no need for you to gaze unblinking into his lap until he does. Instead, why not look at some of the objects of his desire? They’ve come to St James’s Park to be looked at, after all” (*Crimson*

65). Commenting on the architecture of the Rackham residence, the narrator intrudes again: “Before we go on, though ... Forgive me if I misjudge you, but I get the impression, from the way you’re looking at the Rackham house . . . that you think it’s very old” (154). Dawson discusses in what way the twentieth-century omniscient narrators differ from those of previous centuries (153). He points out that one interesting aspect is that the modern narrator’s omniscience creates a “temporal gap” in a historical story. Here Dawson draws on Georges Letissier’s concept “hyperomniscience,” which signifies a “double temporal perspective, with the twenty-first century looking back on the nineteenth century, with the benefit of hindsight” (153). This approach enables the author as well as the reader to step back and observe the events from a distance in order to find a new perspective on contemporary life. It also provides an opportunity to reflect on many ideas and problems parallel to those in our present-day society such as social and economic inequality, gender and environmental issues, which are precisely those components that neo-Victorian literature favour. However, we are not alone in this inclination to look back in history. The Victorians, too, used times bygone to measure themselves against their predecessors. This is what, for instance, the Pre-Raphaelite painters and poets did when displaying their fascination for mediaeval settings. Mark Llewellyn cites Robin Gilmour, who concludes that “to steady themselves in a rapidly changing present they reached for the cultural self-understanding represented by historical writing, painting [and] architecture” (2008: 180).

Audience and media interest in history has a long history itself. Uncertain times politically or financially seem to stir an interest in times past. In the aftermath of the Great Depression, and after World War II, Hollywood’s golden age gave rise to numerous films based on historical material. In “Are the Victorians Still with Us? Victorian Sensation Fiction and Its Legacies in the Twenty-First Century” Beth Palmer brings up ideas by Nicholas Daly and Patrick Brantlinger, who have pointed out that the nineteenth-century sensation novels

worked as an operational training ground in urban life for their readers at a time when society was rapidly changing into a modernized and more complexly technologized era. Palmer also notes that “Faber and Waters’s self-reflexive interest in the materiality of print culture . . . is an inheritance” (92) from such literature. Palmer adds that both Faber and Waters have approached their readers not only by focusing on the Victorian period in their works, but also by using new media in the form of interviews in magazines and TV-shows, participation in book festivals, communication via blogs, internet sites and other digital arenas. From that vantage point one could perhaps state that the neo-Victorian novel can be regarded as a fusion of form and technology. As for *The Crimson Petal and the White*, it was initially released in serialized form, following a Dickensian mode with the use of twenty-first century technology. The first section of the novel, “The Streets,” was available on *The Guardian* website in eighteen installments in 2002. It worked as an appetizer or perhaps an announcement before the novel was actually published. On the website Michel Faber promised the readers a Victorian feeling of excitement by letting them wait for the next episode.

THE DANGER OF A SIMPLISTIC APPROACH

The interest in Victoriana has, moreover, created an interest in depicting the lives of actual nineteenth-century characters in the media. A good case in point is the BBC drama series *Desperate Romantics* from 2010 about the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. However, Mark Llewellyn warns against the “danger of blurring the distinction between reality and imagination, lives lived and lives created” in the aftermath of growing Victorian attention and the ethical questions that may arise (“Neo-Victorianism: On the Ethics and Aesthetics of Appropriation” 38). Sharon Aronofsky Weltman provides examples from present time film adaptations and theatre plays that endeavor to portray authentic persons (Krueger 82). In the

media, John Ruskin has often been depicted as a sexually crippled, patriarchal tyrant. Many scholars would strongly object to that characterization. Aronofsky Weltman points at the problem of these depictions as being artificial constructs by necessity; “their attractive sense of authoritativeness is illusory.” In other words, we cannot claim to know the truth by interpreting the sources that we use for diverse purposes.

The interest in looking back in history can serve many purposes. One effect might be the self-righteousness we may experience by comparing ourselves to the Victorians; for example, our ready acceptance of gender equality and a variety of sexual preferences give us the pleasure of feeling more open-minded than our predecessors in spite of the fact that Victorian attitudes towards sexuality were not as conformist as we may believe. However, Faber’s language and the straightforward depictions of the erotic scenes are indeed very neo-Victorian. The twenty-first century spirit is also evident in the observation that “Sugar’s novel . . . and Agnes Rackham’s diaries are purposefully contrasted as the consequences of the over- and underexposure to sexual knowledge” (Palmer 92) and Sharon Aronofsky Weltman observes that “[w]hen women internalize the dominant culture’s expectations on their body and find they cannot measure up, they believe they are physically defective, inadequate, deformed” (Krueger 83). Agnes evidently has no idea about the basic functions of the female body. No one has told her about menstruation and since she has borne a child, her doctor assumes that she is aware of these matters. But “[t]o Agnes, bleeding from the belly is a terrifying and unnatural thing . . . [W]hen at seventeen, Agnes married William, she’d only bled a few times . . . Everyone knows that ill people bleed: bleeding is a manifestation of serious illness. Her father . . . bled on his deathbed” (*Crimson* 236-37). Regrettably, Agnes does not voice her anxiety. Her physician claims to be an expert on feminine illness and following medical knowledge of the period he focuses on her womb when he diagnoses Agnes with hysteria due to her state of mind. When William worries about her being mad, he

is given the following information: “You should know that mental illness in the male has nothing to do with nature . . . You and I have no womb that can be taken out if things go beyond a joke” (*Crimson* 81).

To foreground Victorian objections against the view that women should be treated equally with men and to include an element of feminism, Faber recurrently includes passages like these below:

No woman can be a serious thinker, without injury to her function as the conceiver and mother of children. Too often, the female ‘intellectual’ is a youthful invalid or virtual hermaphrodite, who might otherwise have been a healthy wife.

Let us close our ears, then, to siren voices offering us a quantity of female intellectual work at the price of a puny, enfeebled and sickly race. Healthy serviceable wombs are of more use to the Future than any amount of feminine scribbling. (Crimson 171)

Since Sugar is allowed to comment on statements like these, the reader is made aware that the book is actually not a Victorian novel. Furthermore, Sugar is writing a novel within the novel, *The Fall and Rise of Sugar*, in which she takes revenge on all the men who have used and abused her. Faber lets the omniscient narrator remark that although she is able to take the lives of those men in fiction, “her story must not have a happy ending . . . [since] the world remains in the hands of men” (*Crimson* 229).

Finally, to break the spell of Victorian feeling completely, Faber cleverly uses one narrative component which readers may not expect. There is actually no clear closure in which the characters are given their just rewards or where morals and ethics triumph, leaving the reader with a sense of catharsis. The abrupt farewell from the novel’s omniscient narrator and an inconclusive ending created both surprise and frustration in the readers. In the ensuing

collection *The Apple: New Crimson Petal Stories* (2006), Faber meets the readers' complaints with "isn't it fun, at the end of a book, to be challenged to do what the Victorians were obliged to do between instalments of serialised novels: construct what happens next in our imaginations?" (*Apple* xvi). As previously pointed out, Faber actually challenged his reader's patience already when he launched the first part of *The Crimson Petal and the White* on *The Guardian* website. In "Neo-Victorianism: On the Ethics and Aesthetics of Appropriation" (33) Mark Llewellyn calls attention to the fact that there seems to exist a misconception regarding endings in neo-Victorian novels. The readers tend to think that everything will be sorted out in the end. He also emphasizes that the opening lines of *The Crimson Petal and the White* very clearly indicate that Faber's novel is in fact a neo-Victorian version:

Watch your step. *Keep your wits about you*; you will need them. 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 these stories flattered you, welcoming you as a friend, treating you as if you belonged. The truth is that *you are an alien from another time and place* altogether.

(*Crimson* 3, my italics)

THE SENSES

Vision

Since we perceive and understand the world through our physical senses, it is of interest to explore how Faber makes use of the senses in his portrayal of the characters and environs in the nineteenth-century setting of his novel. In a narrative, descriptions of environment and characters will inevitably require the use of vision. In *Embodied: Victorian Literature and the Senses* William A. Cohen points at the role of the keyhole in fiction. It is the opening, through which the reader is invited to spy on the fictional characters, but it can also be used as a metaphor for the eye itself. On one hand it is part of the viewer's body, and on the other hand it is also spying on the object (29). In *The Crimson Petal and the White* the reader may experience a somewhat voyeuristic feeling although Michel Faber has denied in interviews that he sought to create such a feeling. We are the outsiders who are let into the various spaces inhabited by the fictional characters, and from this position we may experience ourselves as invisible viewers looking into a doll's house, in which the inhabitants are quite unaware of our spying eyes:

[If] you could lift off its [the house's] roof to peek inside, you would see William in shirt-sleeves at his desk . . . In another compartment . . . you would see a child's body huddled in a cot . . . In another compartment still, you would see Agnes swaddled in white bedding . . . And inside the upended roof held in your hand, the servants would be upside-down in their attic honeycombs, thrown along with their meager belongings against the rafters. (*Crimson* 200-201)

The Visualization of the Female

Let us begin by examining Faber's characterization of the protagonist Sugar. *The Crimson Petal and the White* opens with J. H. Gray's poem, "The Girls that are Wanted," which provides the spirit of the late 1800s and underscores attitudes concerning female virtues of the time: the innocent, lily-like quality, aspirations that reach no further than to be married, possess a home, and raise a family. On the other hand, "*The clever, the witty, the brilliant girl, there are few who can understand,*" and Sugar is endowed with precisely those qualities since she is a neo-Victorian heroine: "A pity, really, that Sugar's brain was not born into a man's head, and instead squirms, constricted and crammed, in the dainty skull of a girl. What a contribution she might have made to the British Empire!" (*Crimson* 36). Contemporary readers find her interesting because of the complexity of her character. She is the prostitute who manages to rise in status from her humble origins. In this respect, she is an embodiment of the resourceful, entrepreneur persona, who seeks her own fortune by the use of her wits and her imagination. The industrialization and transformation of Britain was a result of ambitious, aspiring people. To possess precisely those qualities has been gradually accentuated in the past few decades, in the media as well as in business circles. Regardless of sex, the intended reader will therefore be able to identify with Sugar, who comes close to the contemporary ideal citizen. Thus the similarities between our time and the Victorians function well as a frame.

The Victorian feminine ideal is epitomized by William Rackham's wife Agnes: "She graces a thousand paintings, ten thousand old postcards, a hundred thousand tins of soap. She is the paragon of porcelain femininity, five foot two with eyes of blue, her blonde hair smooth and fine, her mouth . . . pink" (*Crimson* 130). In contrast, Sugar is a striking image of the contemporary ideal woman - as visualized in fashion models. In magazines, in commercials and on billboards today we meet an androgynous, thin creature with overly long legs, long and thick eyelashes and lips strangely out of proportion. Faber's neo-Victorian heroine has a

long body “stick-thin, flat-chested and bony like a consumptive young man” (26), with “bones that poke alarmingly through the fabric” (29). She is unusually tall, has a visible Adam’s apple, a husky voice and her hands are big for a woman. Sugar’s appearance is clearly masculine. When her future lover Rackham lays eyes on her, he is momentarily surprised that what appeared to be a boy in women’s clothes, is actually a female. He also ponders Sugar’s sex appeal: “[T]here’s a bosom in that bodice after all. Not enough to nourish a child perhaps, but enough to please a certain kind of man” (26). Rackham’s somewhat homo-erotic feeling is well in pace with the changes in our present-day view of those preferences that were only implicitly mentioned in Victorian fiction. Furthermore, Sugar has a skin disease that nowadays is known as psoriasis: “The skin of her hands, he notes, is dry and cracked, like peeling bark” (115). The fact that her skin and lips are dry and flaking, only adds to the excitement of her customers. According to Victorian ideals of beauty, Sugar would be viewed as somewhat of a freak, whereas in the modern readers’ eyes, she does not stand out. Although her ailment may be unusual for a fictional heroine, we have come to accept dermatologic conditions as something rather natural as long as our skin does not reveal our true age.

Another fascinating feature in Sugar’s appearance is her long, thick, red hair. Eckart Voigts-Virchow makes an interesting connection between Sugar and Elizabeth Siddal in the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. She, too, was a red-haired woman, who first sat as a model for John Everett Millais’s painting *Ophelia*, and later became the wife of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, a fellow Pre-Raphaelite. As previously mentioned, these painters’ lives have recently been dramatized. Voigts-Virchow here points at the metaphors of ownership that partly link the two women: “books (writing, possessing, reading), images (painting/photographing, possessing, gazing), and prostitution (selecting, possessing, intercourse)” (115). He draws additional parallels between Sugar and Elizabeth: “Rackham’s taking possession of Sugar

resembles Rossetti's adoption of the pale red-haired milliner Siddal (who was not to be used as a model by the fellow Pre-Raphaelites)" (115). Furthermore, like in traditional European painting, where the depiction of women is predominantly made by male painters, the portrayal of Sugar is supplied through a twofold male gaze; that of Rackham and Faber. In his book, Faber makes another wink at the Pre-Raphaelites by having Sugar reflect that even if she has read about these painters, she would not recognize them if she met them by chance.

Images and Objects

Instead of commissioning paintings to make an image of oneself, the newly invented camera allowed people to portray themselves easily at a much lower cost than before. This new technology could be used both indoors and outdoors. Moreover, the practice of taking photographs of loved ones soon after their demise, offered the Victorians a new kind of comfort in the midst of sorrow (Parkins 5). A photograph could be viewed and touched and thus it would become the link between the living and the dead in an entirely novel way. However, many people felt a certain anxiety towards this new way of depicting themselves and their environs. Sugar meditates on a series of nude photos that were once taken of her:

Sugar understood the permanence . . . trapped on a square of card to be shown at will to strangers. Whatever violations she routinely submits to . . . they vanish the moment they're over . . . But to be chemically fixed in time and passed hand to hand forever: *that* is a nakedness which can never be clothed again.

(*Crimson* 37-8)

Her friend Caroline voices the same unease. "Imagine . . . [a] picture of you still bein' there, 'undreds of years after you've died. An' if I pulled a face, that's the face I'd 'ave forever . . . It makes me shiver, it does" (38). Today we mostly react in quite the opposite way to the camera. We relish leafing through books that convey pictures of people from this period using

them as decorative objects. The widespread interest in Facebook and in other web communities and our easy access to uploading our own pictures on the internet certainly shows a considerable change in our attitudes. Nowadays we live out our exhibitionist needs without the anxieties of the Victorians. The prospect of *not* being recognized seems much more daunting.

Faber makes clever use of the above-mentioned scene, in which an amateur photographer offers to take a photograph of Sugar and Caroline. Here, Faber instills an almost erotic feeling into that innocuously looking episode: “The photographer’s head moves to and fro beneath his hood, he tenses his entire body, and then there’s a shudder of release. Inside his camera, a chemical image of Sugar and Caroline is born” (37). The picture of the man moving inside the hood and the loosening of the trigger, by which he produces an image of the ladies, has clear erotic overtones. Faber is far more explicit in other scenes, but the one just referred to, echoes the way the Victorian novel sought to express erotic encounters, which shows one of the advantages of neo-Victorian fiction, the combination of the past and the present.

The various new inventions naturally constituted a solid base for the growing interest in consumption. Industrialization and the increase in manufacture and cheap ready-made goods made it possible to decorate houses with an abundance of items. Department stores enabled those who could afford it, to spend both time and money on consumption. When William Rackham visits the “enormous glass-fronted Billington & Joy emporium” the reader is taken on a visual tour of the premises:

Dozens of display windows . . . the sumptuously laid table of silverware, china and wine-filled glasses . . . crystal are everywhere, mirrors hung at every interval, to multiply the galaxy of chandeliered gas-light. Even what is not glass or crystal is polished as if it were; the floor shines, the lacquered counters

shimmer, even the hair of the serving staff is brilliant with Macassar oil, and the sheer profusion of merchandise is a little dazzling too. (*Crimson* 49)

Today the contemporary reader experiences the same flow of inexpensive items, mainly from imports and among these, fake Victorian objects. A side-effect of our need for an idealized world is the considerable market for Victorian paraphernalia, which both emanates from our fascination for the nineteenth century and reinforces that interest. The late twentieth century gave rise to a wealth of magazines and shops enticing us to feel nostalgia. The expansion in interior decoration consultations is another consequence. That is, however, not a modern invention since it was actually possible for Victorian ladies to use the same kind of service. Miriam Bailin observes that the current wave of nostalgia “exists in a space that is neither history nor lived experience but rather a neutral ‘timelessness’ of imputed essences” (Krueger 38). It seems both distant and very familiar to us.

Since clothing and furniture were female areas, Ellen Bayuk Rosenman notes that “women were understood as ‘natural’ shopping experts and as addicts consumed by the desire for more things” (Krueger 48). These concepts and values are still valid in our society when we envisage the stereotypic (female) consumer. The Victorian lady used her home and her appearance as signifiers of her husband’s wealth and his worth in bourgeois circles: “The homes of both the upper-middle classes and the aspiring middle-classes were built for display . . . Houses were divided by class hierarchy, by gender, by age” (Krueger 40-1). Flower arrangements and large urns with a display of various flowers was a way of showing material wealth and excess within the bourgeois household. Today, William Morris wallpaper designs are reprinted, gardening and flowers with distinct scents are once again fashionable and like the Victorians, we use our greenhouses not only for plants but as spaces for contemplation or pleasure or as extensions of our living rooms: “In summer, temperate greenhouses could also be used as resting nooks, reading rooms, dining rooms, even ballrooms” (Corbin 189). Excess

both in clothing and interior decoration was the fashion and a lady would spend her time wisely if she adorned her home. The Rackham smoking room provides a good example:

The antimacassars on the chairs were crocheted by her; the tablecloths are adorned by her embroidery; and under every vase, candle-holder and knick-knack is likely to lie some finely wrought doily or place-mat . . . Even the cedar cigar case owes its little embroidered jacket . . . to Agnes. (*Crimson* 140)

The contemporary reader most likely shudders at the mismatch and clutter of objects. In trendy minimalistic homes we shun excess and the mixture of colour and form, which was so predominant to Victorian taste. Yet, we delight in reading about it and spend a substantial amount of time in doing so. Our taste in interior decoration may have changed over the past century, but judging from the popularity of *Victoriana*, we still seem to enjoy owning a few objects that remind us about these “homely” Victorian settings with promises of a time when lack of time was not a collective problem.

Today we are free to choose from a wide range of manufactured clothing, which allows us to express our individuality, our social position (if we wish) and our personal taste. To the Victorians the rules that governed dress were strict since it was important to be able to instantly decode a person’s standing in relation to that of others. One would not wish to be associated with those in a lower position or appearing to try to rise above one’s own level. In one scene Sugar decides to remove her gloves in the street and explains:

men may wear gloves or not wear gloves . . . poor shabby women must not wear them (the thought alone is ridiculous!) . . . respectable women of the lower orders . . . can be forgiven for not wearing them; but ladies must wear them at all times, until safely indoors . . . [a lady] must on no account bare her extremities in public. (*Crimson* 42)

In the matter of appearance, Agnes Rackham experiences the same kind of problem that women today may encounter: the outdated fashion of last year's dress or variations in hair style. Agnes's outfits also reveal the excess in hat designs of the well-to-do: "[her] new chapeau is festooned with humming-birds, sparrows and canaries . . . the grey velvet one . . . features a turtle-dove." In addition she owns a Prussian blue hat with a pigeon, but she contemplates having it removed, since "there's something *common* about pigeons, however expensively they are stuffed" (359).

However, excess of the wrong kind would be a distinct signifier of bad taste and inferior status. When William is waiting for Sugar inside "The Fireside," he is accosted by a trio of ladies of the night: "They're smiling – showing too many teeth. In fact, they have too much of everything: too much hair spilling out from under their too-elaborate bonnets, too much powder on their cheeks, too many bows on their dresses, and overly flaccid Columbine cuffs" (94). Today, we still follow the maxim "less is more" for fear of being taken for people with bad taste and ultimately, as being inferior. Not only ladies felt obliged to engage in overindulgences. Gentlemen, too, had to adjust to the current dress code and despite a financially tight spot; a gentleman had to keep up appearances: "Even now, William keeps up to date with the latest developments in zoology, sculpture, politics, painting archaeology, novel-writing . . . everything, really, that is discussed in the better monthly reviews. (No, he will *not* cancel any of his subscriptions – none, do you hear!)" (57).

Smell

From the traditionally most highly appreciated physical sense, vision, we may now shadow William when he follows the sound of Sugar's voice in a scene where she is leading him to her house for the first time: "He hastens after her, following the words like a scent trail" (*Crimson* 108). As we will see in this section, our image of ourselves and the way we understand the social position of others is closely linked to the olfactory sense. In general, Victorian and neo-Victorian literature makes many references to smell, which strongly points to the importance of that particular sense. Therefore we may ask the question: does neo-Victorianism in fact follow an olfactory track that could playfully be labelled *deo-Victorianism*?

In her review in *Victorian Studies*, Mary Ann O'Farrell quotes a few lines from the film *The Ice Storm* directed by Ang Lee: "[A] smell is not really a smell, it's a part of the object that has come off of it – molecules . . . it's like in a way you're eating it . . . it gets inside of you" (328). This observation coincides well with the Victorian idea about the interrelated physical sensorium. In his examples of Victorian notions of embodiment, William A. Cohen claims that "an object makes an impression in and on the body of the subject through direct contact with the sense organs" (4). Thus the subjective and the objective interoperate to allow permeability between body and soul. Smell, taste and touch let the external world into the internal sphere. In the same way, vision works as an intermediate between subjects and objects, as in the process of reading when "words enter the reader's body through the eyes or ears" (22-3). Furthermore, Cohen draws attention to the various functions of the skin, arguing that "it is at once the organ of touch . . . the porous cover for the body's interior entities . . . and an external signifier, whose appearance, especially color, is freighted with social significance"(14).

Smell has never enjoyed a high status among the physical senses. In fact, it has mostly been placed at the bottom of that hierarchy. By contrast, vision, taste and hearing have been

regarded as instruments of refinement and culture. We appreciate art and colour through our sight, we relish fine cuisine through our taste and we are audiences of musical works. Smell has mainly been a factor that distinguishes the person that does the smelling from the one that does not. The Victorian authors made ample use of the sensory possibilities in their literary works in order to express their concepts of the self, which were incorporated in the body, and yet, concurrently open to external impressions. Our increased sensitivity to odour has become a signifier of gender, class and wealth, and with that, it is also a powerful instrument in our perception of us versus the others. The mechanisms of smell thus generate a boundary between the body and the world surrounding it.

Urban Hygiene

The reference to various smells is a conspicuous element in *The Crimson Petal and the White*, which is only natural since olfactory inconvenience was part of the focus in the urban hygiene efforts of Victorian society. However, Faber does not dwell so much on the foul smells of environment but rather on smells related to people and the confined spaces of interiors. The Victorians experienced substantial environmental problems, due to the unhygienic conditions, notably of city life, which plagued its inhabitants in the 1800s. The streets were filled with litter, carcasses of dead animals, excreta and other waste. In Faber's novel Sugar finds that "[t]he city is a filthy place . . . There's muck on the ground, muck in the water, muck in the air . . . even in the short walk . . . a layer of black grime settles on one's skin" (248). Such unhealthy surroundings naturally spread diseases, and with developed scientific methods and deepened knowledge, state authorities realized that it would have to put extensive measures of regulations, as well as education, into action to keep its population healthy. The need to sanitize the cities did not stop at actions concerned with spatial deodorization; it also included the moral stink constituted by the prostitutes. Those urban hygiene efforts made by the

authorities simultaneously rendered class relations more distinct. In *Common Scents: Comparative Encounters in High-Victorian Fiction* Janice Carlisle points out that in the fiction of the 1860s, smell is the sensory register that responds most clearly to dichotomies like weakness/power or wealth/poverty (25). Faber highlights social distinctions by contrasting the smell of Sugar to the smell of an old woman who collects excreta from the streets in a scene where William Rackham has just left Sugar's house: "[T]he odour of faeces at his feet reminds him that the sweet scent of a woman can be expunged all too soon" and a moment later he is stopped by one of those Great Unwashed: "She smells repulsive. William steps aside . . . With her blackened fingers she picks up a dog turd . . . and transfers it into her bucket, which is quarter-full with ordure . . . destined for the Bermondsey tannery where it will be used to dress morocco and kid leather" (*Crimson* 120-21).

The transformation of society and developments in communication, manufacture and sanitation among other things, paved way for a new life style for the growing middle class. As a consequence, the urge to control the unwanted aspects of urban life grew stronger.

Disinfection – and therefore deodorization – also formed part of a utopian plan to conceal the evidence of organic time, to repress all the irrefutable prophetic markers of death: excrement, the product of menstruation, the corruption of carcasses, and the stench of the corpses. Absence of odor not only stripped miasma of its terrors; it denied the passing of life and the succession of generations. (Corbin 90)

In the early decades of the nineteenth century, heavy odours had hitherto been regarded as a natural component of peoples' everyday lives. City dwellers as well as rural villagers were surrounded by smells. There was no immediate difference between those groups of people. Everyone smelt. The smell of a person in fact told others something about that person's innate character; it was like a "fingerprint." Strong passion as well as depression would change your

individual smell (Corbin 39). To be inodorous would give you a sense of being disembodied, which in turn gave cause for a feeling of anxiety. Heavy smells of musk, civet and other glandular secretion reached a peak in the mid-eighteenth century. Such “animalistic” smells gave out signals of sexuality and virility, which made those smells popular with both sexes. “Musk had the same function as corsets that accentuated the contours of the body” (Corbin 73). With time, the associations connected to sniffing and smelling became signs of a primitive, uncivilized nature and to be refined meant that you had to avoid being the one who smelt.

In this context it should perhaps be pointed out, that the red-haired woman has frequently been made the archetype for a certain kind of woman who is more passionate and irascible than the average female. It was common “knowledge” that red-haired people, together with “alien” ethnic groups emitted strong odours: “[R]edheads were always pungent, both putrid and fascinating, as if their cycle had broken down and put them in a continuous state of menstruation” (Corbin 44-5), which thus also carried the implicit information that the woman was fertile and ready for amorous meetings. In *The Crimson Petal and the White* Faber makes use of this association with Sugar being a red-haired prostitute. William Rackham is always very pleased with the thought that his semen and the smell of it is clinging to Sugar’s body. But the common notion that “[e]xcessive indulgence in coitus provoked a positive overflow of sperm into the woman’s humors, putrefied the liquids, and engendered an intolerable stench” (Corbin 46) does not seem applicable to Rackham’s olfactory sense. His associations from Sugar’s smell are merely positive. The novel provides numerous examples of these feelings. William’s infatuation with Sugar suppresses the possible notions that her red hair and her profession might otherwise have brought into mind. When William is thinking of Sugar, he is reminded of “her upper body smelling of fresh rain and fresh sweat (sic!) . . . she smells divine” (*Crimson* 99) and that “her breath [is] sweet as scented soap” (119). Since

Sugar has been elevated in William's mind, she, therefore, does not match the common imagery of smells. This is an interesting aspect in Victorian fiction; meetings between persons who are regarded as social equals are depicted as inodorous: "The cigars that do smell in these novels are not the ones enjoyed (by the likes) . . . but rather those consumed by their social inferiors" (Carlisle 40). In part, William's attitude towards Sugar's scent may thus be attributed to the Victorian conception that equals are either inodorous or, as in the case of women, they exude an attractive smell. Janet Carlisle also observes that the olfactory sense is different from the other physical senses because it grows accustomed to a stimulus that surrounds the individual for a stretch of time.

The heightened awareness of hygiene and the slowly developing city sanitation made the bourgeois stand out from rural inhabitants and workers in general, who began to be looked upon as repulsive and foul-smelling. In Faber's novel, William Rackham's father, the head of Rackham Perfumeries, is a conventional country man who wants his son to take over the business. While William is pouring over a bunch of documents "tolerating his father's crude provincial spelling and crude provincial mind" (*Crimson* 138), he suddenly feels fed up by the unglamorous nature of the business: "This tabulation of mucky stratagems, this intimacy with manure – he cannot bear it – he must be free of it" (82). Smell had become a sign of physical work and by standing out in a crowd of smelly people, the deodorized man signalled wealth, respectability and culture. This sense of supremacy towards other groups became more distinct over time.

The growth of population in the cities, which narrowed the spaces of the individuals, and the sense of insecurity that the urban Victorian streetwalker would feel when meeting perfect strangers, made it more important than ever to be able to determine the status of those persons. As smelling others was a way of knowing others, it was an instrument to judge oneself in relation to others. To be a perceiver of odour but not emitting any yourself was a

ground-breaking change in values. The problem of overcrowded cities and with that, the relatively anonymous urban life that we experience today, has made the olfactory sense just as important for us as it was for the Victorians. In narrow spaces like communal transportation, lifts, or crowds we feel an instinctive urge to be, if not inodorous, at least deodorized. A person smelling of perspiration on a hot summer's day will soon see wrinkled noses and accusing glances from those next to her. More than ever we tend to consider smell in people as signifying lack in hygiene, and with that follows inferiority. At the same time, we are also aware of the trespass upon our bodies that unwanted smells cause. Today, when we put a great deal of effort into focusing on our well-being, such trespasses may feel like violations of the body as well as of the mind. What is more, since "[s]mells also mark the transitions from one state to another . . . [they] are virtually impossible to control" (Carlisle 43). In our society where personal control is celebrated, the nature of smells thus takes on a threatening nature.

The Attractive and Strange Nature of Smell

The increased awareness of hygiene and cleanliness in general paved a new way for the perfume industry. Along with roses, lavender became the fashionable fragrance in the mid-1800s. William explains the mechanisms of perfume to his brother Henry:

Scents, like sounds . . . stroke our olfactory nerve in exquisite and exact degrees. There's an octave of odours like an octave in music. The top note is what we notice when the headiest element dies off the handkerchief; the middle note, or modifier, provides full, solid character to the fragrance; then, once the more volatile substances have flown, the base, or end, note is left resonating: and what is that end note, brother? Lavender, if you please! (*Crimson* 189)

This development is reflected in the array of products displayed in Sugar's bathroom: "Every horizontal surface, she notes, is crowded with Rackham produce: soaps of all sizes and

colours, bath salts, bottles of unguent, pots of cream, canisters of powder” (*Crimson* 271). Young maidens were commonly associated with the smell of roses, violets and fruit-bearing plants. Carlisle cites Grant Allen, who claims that since women are the vessels of fertilization in Victorian fiction they bear a resemblance to the fragrance of flowers that promote pollination (45), but on the other hand “[w]omen at either extreme of the social scale who are not suitable partners are marked by no such delicate floral scents” (Carlisle 85). Excess in perfumes signified bad taste in the past, which it does today, too. When William Rackham smells prostitutes in a tavern, he immediately feels dislike because of their all too heavy scent: “they smell like a barrowful of cut flowers on a humid day; William wonders if it’s a Rackham perfume that’s responsible” (*Crimson* 95). Still, what is a fragrance to one nose might be a foul odour to another. The day he installs Sugar in her own flat, she immediately feels that the vase of roses stinks and opens the French windows onto the garden to be rid of the overbearing smell of the bouquet. This scene provides a clear contrast between the two worlds in which Sugar moves and reminds the reader of the protagonist’s background as she notices the absence of the smells of fish, dung and putrefying waste she had grown accustomed to (*Crimson* 271). Corbin notes that “[t]here is something indefinable in perfumes that powerfully awakens memory of the past” (82) and I would say that may well be transferred to all smells, good or bad. Although smells are ephemeral, and difficult to compare to other more recently inhaled smells, the olfactory sense has a powerful ability to stir your memory.

However, Faber also shows the attraction of foul odours. William Rackham goes to see a show in a Music Hall where the Great Flatelli entertains the spectators with his one-man-wind ensemble. Here the audience enjoys a master of ill smelling emissions (*Crimson* 217). For once, workers and gentlemen enjoy the same spectacle. Dress and accessories reveal their standing in society and prevent them from making the mistake of a trespass on the otherwise

rigid social barriers. Despite our sensitivity to smells, olfactory entertainment seems to have held a firm grip over time. The film industry has made several attempts to introduce “odorama” and publishers print children’s books with scratch zones so they will experience a certain smell. Janice Carlisle also notes that the London dinosaur exhibition in 2001 promised its visitors a sensory treat by creating the supposed stench of those prehistoric animals and their surroundings (18).

Returning to the initial suggestion of *deo*-Victorianism in this section, I dare propose that so many of our contemporary habits and concepts about hygiene concerned with both personal and urban deodorization emanate from the Victorians, that it is impossible for authors and readers of neo-Victorian literature to ignore the huge importance of that particular physical sense that lingers in every nook and corner of any Victorian or neo-Victorian narrative.

CONCLUSION

By comparing our contemporary outlook on sensory stimuli with those in the Victorian society, we can perhaps begin to understand why the Victorians appear so familiar to us and what might look different in their society, but, at the same time, also familiar and transparent. That may help unfold the initial question - the fascination that the contemporary reader finds when treading in the footsteps of her forbears. In this essay, I have discussed the various fictional elements that link the Victorian novelists to the contemporary neo-Victorian authors. Michel Faber's neo-Victorian novel *The Crimson Petal and the White* has been a grateful primary source for those comparisons together with a wealth of material provided by researchers of literature, society as well as of the physical senses.

Neo-Victorian fiction purposefully mimics the high-Victorian novel by using characteristic fictional components of the period. The neo-Victorians write sizable works demanding patience and time from their readers. They paint a picture that takes the readers to a time and place which does not seem too different from their own, but which lets them feel that there has indeed been some progress in the long period of more than one hundred years that have passed in between. We can recognize the changes made, as well as the similarities with a society in the midst of great change.

However, the voice of those marginalized in the nineteenth century is a feature that differentiates the neo-Victorian novel from its predecessor. The prostitutes, the lawbreakers and the poverty-stricken individuals from the lower rungs of society often take the places of the virtuous role models in Victorian fiction. They are frequently accompanied by an omniscient intrusive commentator, but unlike the Victorian one, the contemporary narrator makes remarks on social inequalities topical in the public debate of our time such as child labour, women's rights or working environment problems. Those components satisfy a contemporary reader's want of justice while it also highlights the social discriminations in the

past and the present time. Furthermore, the element of a feminist twist is unmistakable as is the direct language and the many explicit sex scenes that the modern reader does not find overly shocking. However, they would have been quite alien to the Victorians, other than in the pornographic genre.

I have also pointed out the new forms of marketing literature. For example, in Faber's marketing strategy of *The Crimson Petal and the White*, the readers of *The Guardian* website were given the same roles as the Victorian subscribers of Dickens's serialized stories. The huge interest in the media for various screen and broadcasting adaptations of nineteenth-century literature has contributed to familiarizing audiences with the lives of the Victorians. As a result, the contemporary readers/viewers regard the Victorian as a copy of us and yet as "the other." The past and the present become intertwined. Nevertheless, there are dangers involved in the familiarization of the two epochs. In the case of depicting real Victorian individuals, we cannot assume that every source we use when we portray those past characters is actually reliable. Diaries and letters, which are often used as evidence, can merely be interpreted by us.

Furthermore, in my comparisons of the aspects of the physical senses, I have mainly focused on vision and smell. They are interesting because they are considered to be placed on either end of the sensory scale with touch, hearing and taste in the middle. By giving examples of Victorian concepts of vision and olfaction and by contrasting them to those in our contemporary society, I have demonstrated that the past has had a considerable impact on our ways of life, which underscores the similarities between the Victorians and us.

I have discussed the emergence of materialism with the advent of industrialization and how that manifested itself visually in the Victorian society and in the patterns of consumption. The renewed interest in interior decoration spurred by glossy magazines and weekly television programmes shows the same eagerness to exhibit our financial status together with

a wish to project to others the image of ourselves that we wish them to have. For example, greenhouses have regained popularity, especially those which mimic the Victorian greenhouse with details reminiscent of the time. To our predecessors, as well as to us, “[i]t extended the dwelling and bore witness to the expansion of the private sphere” (Corbin 189).

Moreover, in my examples of Victorian and contemporary modes of visualization, I have discussed painting versus photography and the anxieties felt in connection with new technology. Our present day enthusiasm for sharing our photographs digitally is quite a contrast to the concepts of the past. We are clearly willing to take calculated risks linked to our uses of new digital arenas. When Faber’s heroine Sugar explains the development process of film, she envisages the future of photography: “They come out of a bath”, she says, “and I’ll tell you what: they *stink*. Anything that stinks so much can’t last forever; I’m sure” (*Crimson* 37). Obviously, she was wrong.

The sense of smell as a signifier of gender, class and wealth has been a powerful instrument to both the Victorians and us. Smell as a potential risk for wide-spread diseases, and environmental problems connected to pollution were the initial reasons for the urban hygiene efforts of the 1800s and we are still fighting to reduce the ecologic footprint we have been making in the last century. The conspicuous class distinctions in the nineteenth century have been replaced by more elusive mechanisms. In a time when there is no formal dress code and the majority can use clothing in accordance with their own choices, the olfactory sense has remained an instrument to sniff out whether you are an equal or an inferior.

The Victorian bourgeois houses were built to emphasize the distance from the smelling environments: “The withdrawal to the conjugal hearth, the rise of narcissism, and the phobia about importunate contacts and indiscreet odors, [were] all aspects of a new way of life” (Corbin 216). In their private sphere, the Victorians could indulge in the luxury of their own

fragrances and the potpourris that were fashionable without trespassing on other people's delicate noses. The clean fresh scent of a clean fresh body was the mark of good taste. Today, our homes are again our castles but today we use the expression cocooning. We construct luxurious bath-rooms and adjoining spaces and indulge in scents that will benefit our sense of reclusion, peace and quiet like the Victorian bourgeois. The contemporary habit of cleansing oneself at least once a day by showering and deodorizing one's body is a constant reminder of the transformation in values that took place within the Victorian society. The neo-Victorian novel refreshes that historic moment and in doing so, it also makes transparent the similarities that still exist between these two points in time. Thus the *neo*-Victorian novel mirrors a *de*o-Victorian concept.

In conclusion, *The Crimson Petal and the White* together with other neo-Victorian works of fiction, thus functions as a means of knowing both your heritage and finding your own place in the present day. It is "a world of strict class rules, of sexual prudery and hypocrisy, of empire and orphanages, of opulent wealth and oppressed labourers - a world we constantly refer to as we seek to define who we are" (Ravenhill). In addition, the neo-Victorian novel provides a familiar setting, alongside with the historic context. Our interpretation of Victorian sources and print may sometimes have led us onto a path which is not entirely accurate, but nevertheless, the Victorians left a legacy that has had a great impact and they continue to inspire authors and readers alike. At any rate, the positive reviews of the current television adaptation of *The Crimson Petal and the White*, Michel Faber's panoramic narrative of the prostitute Sugar and her bourgeois benefactor William Rackham, give cause to believe that the days of the Victorians are not yet over. We do indeed seem to need a world that links the past to the present and the neo-Victorian novel promises us precisely that.

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