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The Aporias of A.S. Byatt's *Morpho Eugenia:* A Neo-Victorian Perusal

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Abstract: Neo-Victorian writers imaginatively revisit Victorian ideas, values, debates and tropes, reinterpreting them through a postmodern lens all the while. A.S. Byatt's *Morpho Eugenia* (1992) is a case in point. Set in the nineteenth century, and located in England, the novella self-reflexively appropriates the Victorian to reinterpret pressing contemporary issues, ranging from gender to imperialism, religion and science. Firmly grounded in the uncertainties of narratives, and the maneuvers of discourse, the text abounds in aporetic moments that deconstruct totalizing, homogenous received notions of the Victorian. It is in this context that the difference between historical fiction set in Victorian times, and Neo-Victorian fiction emerges. Whereas the former presents conventional readings of the Victorian, Neo-Victorian fiction distinguishes itself by being actively engaged in deconstructing Victorian paradigms and reproducing contemporary arguments and debates in a Victorian context, hence negotiating new meanings through exchanges with that culture and its dichotomous values. It is in this light that the paper examines how Byatt's text revisits the complexities and contradictions of that age in order to engage with them anew and demonstrates how, through subscribing to the poetics of postmodernism, *Morpho Eugenia* exposes old constructs that have previously shaped the world to give way to emergent discourses and structures.

Keywords: Neo-Victorianism, aporia, faith, doubt, savagery, civilization, imperialism

Neo-Victorianism Outlined

Neo-Victorianism, a movement which emerged towards the end of the twentieth century, clearly demonstrates a renewed interest in the Victorian age (1837-1901), and an engagement with its spirit through a postmodern perspective. Through adaptation, exchange, or appropriation, Neo-Victorian writers revisit Victorian values, political and social topics, debates and tropes, reinterpreting them through a contemporary lens all the while. Set in the nineteenth century, or in both the nineteenth century and contemporary times, and located in England or its colonies, Neo-Victorian works delve into the social, political and cultural dynamics of that age with an eye on contemporary concerns. Thus, it is the self-conscious, rather than the conscious, relationship with the Victorian era that is "at the heart of what neo-Victorianism in its more defined, theorized, conceptualized, and aesthetically developed form" (Heilmann & Llewellyn 5) is about. It is how writers self-reflexively appropriate the Victorian to resolve, reinterpret, and understand pressing contemporary issues, ranging from identity to gender, imperialism, religion, and science so much so that "the present is negotiated through a range of (re)interpretations of the nineteenth century" (Heilmann & Llewellyn 3).

It is in this context that the difference between historical fiction set in Victorian times and Neo-Victorian fiction emerges. Whereas the former "lack[s] imaginative re-engagement with the period, and instead recycle[s] and deliver[s] a stereotypical and unnuanced reading of the Victorians and their literature and culture" (Heilmann & Llewellyn 6), Neo-Victorian fiction distinguishes itself by being actively engaged in reproducing current arguments in a Victorian context, and negotiating new meanings through exchanges with that culture and its values. One such topic is imperialism as the Victorian era represented the zenith of imperialism. In fact, revisiting the Victorian period becomes a new context for "confronting empire again and anew" (Ho 5) through reassessing the way colonial history and discourse were written. From a postcolonial perspective, Neo-Victorian fiction becomes a site for re-exploring the colonial narrative and deconstructing it. Another topic that is often revisited by Neo-Victorian fiction is religion as it is regarded "as a marker of the past antithetical to more flexible, liberal, and (post) modern modes of understanding" (Burstein 178). The clash between religion and secularism is often foregrounded and becomes of central importance to the dynamics of Neo-Victorian works. As such, "neo-Victorian narratives may be construed as both retrospective and future-orientated" (Zhang 3), since they delve into the tectonics of the past to reread the dialectics of the present and the future.

What makes the Victorian period a rich field for reinvestigation is its distinguished identity which heavily relied on Queen Victoria. Queen Victoria, who presided over that era for sixty-three years from 1837 to 1901, not only gave that age its name, but also delineated its character. Overseeing a family of nine children, and mourning her husband till her death, she came to stand for stability, loyalty, and conservative morality. The long duration of her reign, for she remained the longest reigning Queen until Queen Elizabeth II ousted her in 2015, also ensured that the principles she instilled were to colour her reign, even if superficially. However, underneath this façade of respectability and conservatism, the Victorian age was full of contradictions lurking underneath. It was the age of faith and doubt, religion and science, order and chaos, affluence and poverty, and the list goes on. It is these contradictions that have created a rich tapestry worthy of exploration and reexamination. The reason behind those contradictions was that the Victorian age witnessed rapid changes that consistently perforated its fabric. Colonialism resulted in expansion, foreign power and wealth; advances in science led to Darwinism and the theories of evolution. The industrial revolution with inventions such as the telephone, the electric blub, photography, telegraphy changed the face of the Victorian society. The rise in the number of factories, which were powered by the working classes, led to the growth of this class and simultaneously led to the escalation of problems related to poverty, housing, education, prostitution, addiction and health. The position of women in society and their independence was also rigorously questioned. In the course of a century, territorial expansions and fast technological advances brought forth major changes and caused a great deal of unrest.

Firmly grounded in the uncertainty of narratives, and the maneuvers of discourse, Neo-Victorianism can be regarded as an off-shoot of postmodernism; "as a genre so preoccupied with subverting temporality and so capable of disrupting the totalizing narratives of historical teleology, neo-Victorianism remains firmly embedded in the poetics and politics of postmodernism" (Ho 7). Far from regarding

the representation of history as factual, Neo-Victorianism exposes how each narrative represents one facet of the truth. History does not represent authentic truths, instead what it offers is manipulated narratives, and it is in this context that "the neo-Victorian is very much a product of postmodernism" (Ayres & Maier 3).

It is worthwhile noting that interest in all things Victorian, which bloomed in the 1960s, was preceded by "an explicit or tactic rejection of the cultural preferences and social mores of the Victorian world" (Kaplan 6) during the modernist period of the first half of the twentieth century. Mitchell finds that "denigrating the Victorians had been a means through which to delineate and praise modernity" (45). Distancing themselves from Victorian respectability, conservatism and repression, Modernist writers were emphasizing their Modernist disposition. However, after the heyday of Modernism faded, the Victorian period came to be seen as a rich tapestry brimming with varied topics and a "cultural matrix" available "for the postmodern exploration of cultural emergence" (Kucich xv).

Interestingly, Neo-Victorianism has not been restricted to literary writings, but has extended to film, furniture, art, clothes and more. In its literary manifestation, many of the traditional Victorian themes can be easily detected in Neo-Victorian texts along with modern reworkings of classical texts with the ultimate aim of engaging in dynamic arguments and negotiations.

Depicting Victorianism in *Morpho Eugenia*

Morpho Eugenia was published in 1992 along with *The Conjugal Angel* under the title *Angels and Insects*. Both novellas are set in the Victorian period, which Byatt frequently revisits in her fiction. As is typical of Neo-Victorian works where the events of the work either unfold in the Victorian era only or oscillate between the Victorian era and the present time, the events of *Morpho Eugenia* unfold in the Victorian era solely and are located at the medieval mansion of Reverend Albaster at Bredely Hall in England. Though the setting is located in England, there are frequent references to the Amazons in South America, where William Adamson has spent the last ten years of his life; Adamson, the naturalist, has just returned from a long expedition at the Amazons, where he has been gathering natural items and conducting entomological and anthropological research. The Amazons, however, feature only as a place that Adamson revisits in his memory, longs to go to, and which he eventually heads to with Matty Crompton at the end of the novella. In an Orientalist vein, it is also a place which he is often asked about by the residents of Bredely Hall. They know they are not likely to ever set foot in it and regard it as a remote and exotic part of the world. Thus, the time and setting clearly set the novel in the Neo-Victorian tradition.

To create a Victorian atmosphere, great attention is given to detail right from the very first page of *Morpho Eugenia*. The accumulation of details helps create a visual image through *ekphrasis* and Byatt does not spare a chance to paint pictures with her words. Regarding the setting as a painting or visual work, she vividly and dramatically depicts the scene through elaborate descriptions. The novella, for example, starts in medias res in a ballroom at Bredely Hall, where the Alabasters are throwing a party. Everybody is dressed up and the dance floor is brimming with

music and dance. In the first encounter with the Alabasters, the reader is made to visualize the three beautiful Alabaster maidens Eugenia, Rowena, and Enid:

> Enid was the youngest, still with a trace of childish plumpness, wearing blush-pink organdie trimmed with white rosebuds, and a wreath of rosebuds and a net of rosy ribbons in her hair. Rowena was the tallest, the one who laughed, with richer colour in her cheeks and lips, with the coil of hair in the nape of her neck studded with pearls and blush-tipped daisies. The eldest, Eugenia, wore white tarlatan over a lilac silk underskirt, and had a cluster of violets at her breast, and more violets at her waist, and violets and ivy woven in and out of her sleek golden head. (4)

Great attention is given to the physical description of the girls, and the fabrics, ornaments, accessories, and colours of their Victorian costumes. The novella abounds in examples of this sort. Later when Adamson is summoned to Lady Alabaster's room, the reader is again allowed to vividly visualize her room which "had dark pomegranate-red wallpaper, sprinkled with sprigs of honeysuckle in pink and cream. It had thick red velvet curtains, often partially drawn against the sun […]. The room was a nest of cushions, all embroidered with flowers and fruit and blue butterflies and scarlet birds, in cross-stitch on wool, in silk thread on satin" (26). Lady Alabaster spent her days consuming "tea, lemonade, ratafia, chocolate milk, barley water, herbal infusions, which were endlessly moving along the corridors, borne by parlourmaids, on silver trays. She also consumed large quantities of sweet biscuits, macaroons, butterfly cakes, little jellies and dariole moulds" (26). The vivid and detailed description of her room creates a highly visual Victorian atmosphere. The delicacies she consumes and the way they are served to her add up and help enrich the image. The different characters who inhabit the house and play ordained roles complement this image. The household is managed by a housekeeper, a butler, a gardener, a governess, a nursery nurse, scullery maids, boot and bottle boys, and stable men. The house also teems with a number of "dependent spinsters of various ages" (22) who are relatives of the Alabasters. Thus, Byatt manages to create a vivid and lush Victorian ambience by ekphrastically describing the setting and the characters who inhabit it. Reproducing Victorian costumes, décor, music, habits, and traditions in the work entails a great deal of investigation and research on the writer's part. In some Neo-Victorian novels, extensive footnotes and endnotes testify to the amount of research undertaken by the authors. The footnotes and endnotes include explanations and historical information to help the average reader understand the intricacies of the Victorian age. Byatt, however, does not resort to footnotes or endnotes in this work.

Neo-Victorian writings consciously present the details of the Victorian age as one of its aims is to stylistically revive that age and breathe air into its characteristic features. However, engaging with the trappings and paraphernalia of that age remains a secondary aim of Neo-Victorian writings. As Kate Mitchell argues, history is not equated "in fiction, with superficial detail; an accumulation of references to clothing, furniture, décor and the like, that produces the past in terms of its objects, as a series of clichés" (3). The ultimate aim is to revisit the complexities and contradictions of that age in order to engage with "a unique historical moment that is now produced in a particular relationship to the present" (Mitchell 3). What Neo-Victorian writings do is that they culturally and historically reconstruct Victorian times to link the past with contemporary issues.

Aporia

Etymologically, the origin of the word aporia is the Greek word *ἀπορία* which means an impasse or roadblock. In philosophical thought, aporia is a state where reasoning and reflection lead to confusion, contradiction, uncertainty and doubt. According to Derrida, aporia means "the difficult or the impracticable, […] the impossible passage, the refused, denied, or prohibited passage, indeed the non-passage" (8). In Classical philosophy, Socrates initiated dialogues with his students through a rigorous system of questions and answers to encourage them to engage in critical inquiry and never accept views previously formulated by others. The ultimate result was that his students started doubting their views and beliefs since it became impossible to reach a final answer or an absolute truth. Through a dialectical mode of inquiry, the Socratic Method uncovered inconsistencies and fissures in human thought and established traditions. Engaging in conceptual questioning became the route to freeing traditions from their restrictive structures:

> [A] tradition can free itself for its own movement only by turning on itself, in a kind of betrayal. The authority of a doctrinal lineage, precisely as it descends from the names of the wise, finds itself recoiling upon its own assertions, and thereby opening up the truth that must appear as *paradox* and *aporia*. (Warneck 24)

In ***Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust,*** **Paul de Man argues that** aporia "designates the irrevocable occurrence of at least two mutually exclusive readings and asserts the impossibility of a true understanding, on the level of the figuration as well as of the themes" (72). According to de Man, the intrinsic contradictions and complexities of the text force it into moments of crisis. Textual paralysis happens when the text comes to a head thematically or through figuration. De Man's beliefs clearly underscore the deconstructive scheme to which he subscribes.

Deconstructionists, like Derrida, find that texts contradict themselves and can be read against their grain because the linguistic medium is slippery and elusive. They examine literary texts to reveal doubtful moments and contradictory points by looking at fault lines which dismantle the seeming unity of the text. As a result, the text is shown to be a disunited entity owing to its internal discord. With intrinsic ambiguities and contradictions, the text can never yield a single interpretation or a unified meaning.

The characters in *Morpho Eugenia* engage in long and thorough philosophical arguments about various topics among which are religion, science and imperialism. The interlocutors hold different views and their arguments usually reach an impasse. They encounter an aporia that is impossible to resolve or thrash out and it is" by forcing analysis to the point of aporia or self-contradiction – that thought comes up against the gap between itself and the aberrant 'logic' of the text" (Norris 104). The following then is going to be an examination of the philosophical impasses that the characters often encounter, and the suspicion and unease that permeate the text accordingly.

Faith versus Doubt in *Morpho Eugenia*

Reverend Harald Alabaster, who is an amateurish naturalist, has previously bought exotic items from the naturalist William Adamson, and is now offering him a job at his mansion where the latter is to arrange his huge collection of the natural world. Though Adamson finds the job insipid and uninspiring, he accepts it as he is financially destitute, but more importantly because the affluent Reverend has promised to fund his upcoming expedition to the Amazons. It is between these two characters that Byatt introduces a number of intellectual debates centered on faith and doubt, and science and religion.

In one of the intellectual exchanges between Alabaster and Adamson, the former finds that the glory of God's creation testifies to His existence: "the extraordinary beauty of these creatures is in itself the evidence of the work of a Creator" (19). To this Adamson replies:

> But from the scientific viewpoint I feel I must ask what purpose of Nature's might be fulfilled by all this brilliance and loveliness. Mr Darwin, I know, inclines to think that the fact that it is very preponderantly male butterflies and birds that are so brilliantly coloured - whilst females are often drab and unobtrusive - suggests that perhaps there is some advantage to the male, in flaunting his scarlets and golds, which might make the female select him as a mate. Mr Wallace argues that the drabness of the female is protective coloration - she may hang under a leaf to lay her eggs, or sit in the shades on her nest and melt unseen into the shadows. (19)

Adamson starts his answer with invoking science and Darwin's theory. Unlike Alabaster, his premise is clearly scientific. Instead of interpreting the beauty of nature as a sign of God's existence, he explains each phenomenon scientifically and tries to find a logical rather than a metaphysical explanation for it. Thus, instead of regarding the colourful and vibrant male butterflies as proof of God's existence, he is interested in the reason why they have evolved into such a state to attract the females, while the females remained unappealing and timid so that predators would not spot them.

The debates between Alabaster and Adamson perforate the entire novella. In fact, Alabaster proposes that they "write down [their] discussions as a kind of philosophical dialogue" (57). In another exchange between them, Alabaster, who believes "the idea of the Creator is as natural to man as his instincts" (34) further asks Adamson about his religious beliefs, to which Adamson responds:

> I have indeed been led by my studies - by my observations - to believe that we are all the products of the inexorable laws of the behaviour of matter, of transformations and developments, and that is all. […] Indeed, I would agree that the religious sense - in some form or another - is as much part of the history of the development of mankind as the knowledge of cooking food, or the tabu against incest. (34)

Adamson is not the only source of skepticism in the text. Ironically enough, Alabaster himself "admits the hopelessness of thinking his way back to God. […] a new worldview driven by science has ruined the romance of Christianity and left him

feeling antiquated and worthless" (Glendening 158). At this point, a thematic impasse is reached in the text; an aporetic moment that forces the text into tension and conflict.

Byatt presents this debate via Victorian characters while still relating it to the present time. Rather than presenting this traditional debate between science and religion with anxiety and an eagerness to resolve it, Byatt seems to present it with a sense of "discomfort with orthodox Christianity" (Burstein 178), an attitude which pervades anti-Victorian fiction. The reason being that "religion, especially orthodox Christianity, is normally cast as the "loser" because it enters the text with determinate meanings and authorised endings for problems of sexuality, morality, and gender, none suited to the actual questions" (Burstein 182). In Neo-Victorian fiction, the debate is introduced not with the aim of arriving at conclusions or definite answers, but with the ultimate aim of continuously questioning fixed beliefs and dethroning authorities. As such "the neo-Victorian is very much a product of postmodernism in its treatment of truth as being arbitrarily portrayed by the writer and appropriated by the reader as to what is relative and meaningful" (Ayres & Maier 3). In fact, Adamson confesses that he cannot agree to Reverend Alabaster's arguments because he has been "much changed by the pattern of [his] life, of [his] work" (90). It is these variables that create his "uncertain views of things" (92).

Thus, neo-Victorian writings present old debates as an open dialogue that is unlikely to yield final answers or reassuring results. Instead of finality, what the Neo-Victorian offers is uncertainty, relativity, ambivalence and undecidability. As the novella progresses, Eugenia, Alabaster's eldest daughter, turns out to be in an incestuous relationship with her brother Edward and the children she begets from her wedlock with Adamson turn out to be Edward's children. This comes in sharp contrast to the Bredely Hall that is presented at the beginning of the novella with its morning chapel prayers and the sermons that are delivered by Reverend Alabaster himself. The religious rituals carried out in the public space remain diametrically opposed to what lurks in the dark entrails of the house. As per Adamson's words, what he regarded as a well-kept, orderly and religious house turned out to be "a whorehouse" (150). The Neo-Victorian "frames itself around doubt, not faith, for any careful reading of the fiction of the mid-nineteenth century reveals the same uncertainties posthumously" (Schor 235). It is for this reason that the present reimagines itself culturally and reads its debates in light of the indeterminacies and aporias of the nineteenth century.

The New Woman versus the Victorian Stereotype in *Morpho Eugenia*

At the beginning, the blonde Eugenia figures as the well-dressed, innocently attractive Victorian stereotype. She is seemingly angelic and quiet. Adamson is instantly drawn to her and writes in his notebook "I shall die if I cannot have her" (13). However, he is to discover on their first night together that "she does not subscribe to the sexual passivity assumed to be the typical sexual role of the woman categorized as the angel in the house" (Cheira 158). Thus, the novella debunks the binary opposition between the innocent virgin and the voluptuous seductress. Eugenia comes to stand for "the fluid embodiment of discordant meanings" (Cheira 160). She even transgressively trespasses that opposition on account of her incestuous relationship with her brother Edgar. She just turns out to be "a monstrous and incestuous mess" (Schor 242).

On the other hand, Matty emerges, at first, as the plain-looking, intellectual who acts as a foil to Eugenia. Thin and demurely dressed, Matty Crompton occupies a strange position in the house, for she is neither the governess, nor the nursery nurse. By and by, Adamson discovers her great intellectual and artistic abilities when he stumbles upon her one day as she is closely studying an ant colony and registering all her findings in "incisive, careful drawings" (77). He is instantly overcome by her grueling work, which "put[s] him to shame", as per his words (77). It is this encounter that is to change the course of his life at Bredely Hall as he is to embark on a grand study of the ant communities and the beehives in the Hall grounds for three years aided by a group of helpers, chief among whom is Matty Crompton. In fact, it is Matty who suggests that he writes a book, and also advises him not to write an overtly specialized study, but to write instead an accessible natural history addressed to the general public. She is, thus, the master-mind of the project and the chief assistant.

Despite her outstanding intellectual and artistic abilities, Matty lacks self-confidence for she has always been banished to the shadows. Her exchange with Adamson clearly shows that she prefers to remain backstage. Adamson encourages her to write the book herself since it is her idea, to which she responds, "'Oh no. I have not the requisite knowledge […]. 1 do not see myself as a writer. But as an assistant" (93). As per her words, she sees herself as no more than an assistant, though she is the one who instigated the whole project. Meanwhile, she also suggests that the book is to include drama to appeal to the readers, provides relevant citations which are to be placed at the head of each chapter and draws the exquisite illustrations of the book. Later, Adamson reads a tale she has written with fertile imagination and overflowing emotions. The tale "Things are not what they Seem" runs for almost twenty-two pages (119-140) and in a postmodernist vein, Byatt includes the tale with all of its citations and drawings into the corpus of the novella. Thus, Byatt consciously puts the main narrative on hold and foregrounds Matty's tale, which occupies a relatively large portion of the main text, despite Matty's persistent desire to live in the shadow.

In the final encounter, or rather confrontation, between Adamson and Matty in the novella, she points to the fact that he has never treated her as a woman: "You do not know that I am a woman. Why should that not continue as it is? You have *never seen me*" (156). Imprisoned and confined by her looks, she yearned to be seen by Adamson and to be recognized as a woman: "And she put up her hands to her head and undid the plaits of her hair over her ears, and shook it out, and came and stood before him. And her face between the dark tresses was sharp and eager and hungry" (157). Her "eager and hungry" face reveals her torrential femininity, which has been curbed and concealed for so long. Interestingly, Adamson too reveals his sexual interest in her which has been evolving over the days: "I have seen your wrists, Matilda. I dreamed about them now and then. You have - remarkable - wrists" (157).

Thus, Matty, like Eugenia, disrupts the Victorian binary opposition for she emerges as both sexual and intellectual. She now emerges as "a new force, the intellectual New Woman who is neither tied down by her position in society, nor her gender" (Primorac & Balint-Feudvarski 232) and who is determined that he recognizes her sexually and intellectually. She is also to embark with him on his journey to the Amazons, despite his threats and warnings that it is a dangerous and

dire place. In another dialogue. Adamson and Matty act as Socratic interlocutors, as is the case with most of their exchanges, hence creating more conflict and tension:

> 'I shall come with you,' said Miss Crompton. […]
> 'You cannot do that,' said William. 'Think of the fever, think of the terrible biting creatures, think of the monotonous insufficient food, of the rough men out there, the drunkenness - '
> 'Yet you wish to return.'
> '*I* am not a woman.'
> 'Ah. And I am.'
> 'It is *no place* for a woman -'
> 'Yet there are women there.'
> 'Yes, but not of your kind.'
> 'I do not think you know what kind of woman I am.'
> She rose, and began to pace, like a prisoner in a cell, in a little room. (156)

Victorian representations of women, which traditionally depended on dyads, are dissected and reinterpreted through long dialogues between the characters of the novella, who embrace different views. Their dialectical conversations create aporetic moments of undecidability and confusion. Victorian attitudes towards women's representations, experiences and bodies are questioned in the novella bringing forth new possibilities. Binary oppositions are dismantled and the Victorian structure is deconstructed via a postmodern lens.

Civilisation versus Savagery in *Morpho Eugenia*

The othering of the Amazons is evident right from the very beginning of the novella. While the Alabasters and their invitees are dancing, the racist Edgar Alabaster affirmatively states: 'Not much dancing in the jungle', to which Adamson responds:

> 'On the contrary. There is a great deal of dancing. There are religious festivals - Christian festivals - which occupy weeks together with communal dancing. And in the interior there are Indian dances where you must imitate the hops of woodpeckers, or the wriggle of armadillos, for hour after hour.'(3)

From their seemingly refined mansion, the Alabasters exercise colonial snobbery and arrogance. In a purely imperialist fashion, they regard the Amazons as a place which connotes savagery, paganism, and exoticism. Adamson's discourse, however, reveals there is more to the Amazons than the stereotypical image projected by the Alabasters. It is worth noting that Adamson himself partakes of that racist discourse as he too believes that Bredely Hall is the seat of civilization and regards Amazonian women as the embodiment of base sexual desires. While dancing at the Hall, his mind takes off to the times when "he had whirled around with olive-skinned and velvet-brown ladies of doubtful virtue and no virtue" (5). He believes that the women of the Amazons are virtueless, if compared to the refined ladies he is surrounded by in Bredely Hall. He is shortly infatuated by Eugenia and this "allows him to project onto her his ideals of womanhood, including sexual purity, a prized Victorian quality lacking in the Indian women he had enjoyed" (Glendening 154). Little does he know that Eugenia will subvert all of those ideals, for he is to discover her lecherous nature,

then he is to discover her incestuous and adulterous practices. In fact, what the text presents is "the deconstruction of domesticity embodied in the figure of the "pure" domestic woman: Eugenia Alabaster" (Avci 203).

Eugenia like her mother turns into a breeding female surrounded by an army of servants who feed her and take care of her children. By depicting the so-called civilized Eugenia as a breeding female insect, the civilization/savagery binary is dismantled. In fact, in their breeding activities, all of the Alabasters are compared to insects and the analogy runs throughout the novella. Like the drone who dies shortly after mating with the Queen, Adamson, too, is disposed of and rejected by Eugenia once she conceives. He is to be invited into the hive only when she is ready for a new pregnancy. The recurrence of this pattern sustains the entomological metaphor. Moreover, the elaborate investigations and discussions of the entomological world that perforate the text clearly highlight the parallelism between the human and insect worlds. Bredely Hall, thus, is no better than the insect world which Adamson studies. The only difference is that it comes under the guise of civilization and refinery. It is in this context that "Neo-Victorian missionary fiction instead foregrounds how Christians reinstate racial hierarchies despite avowing that all belong to one universal family in spirit" (Burstein 190). Once more, hierarchical structures are dismantled through aporetic moments which create tension and unease in the text; they paralyse Adamson's thinking leaving him baffled and confused.

From her ivory tower, Eugenia asks Adamson about the Amazons, and though his answers show a degree of prejudice, they also uncover a different world which the Alabasters are totally ignorant about:

> Did you live entirely without the company of civilised peoples, Mr Adamson? Among naked savages?'
> 'Not entirely. I had various friends, of all colours and races, during my stay in various communities. But sometimes, yes, I was the only white guest in tribal villages.'
> 'Were you not afraid?'
> 'Oh, often. Upon two occasions I overheard plots to murder me, made by men ignorant of my knowledge of their tongue. But also I met with much kindness and friendship from people not so simple as you might suppose from seeing them.' (31)

This exchange between Eugenia and Adamson is typical of "the contradictory set of feelings that the Victorian provokes" (Kaplan 5). Eugenia represents one of "the defining features" of the Victorian age, which is "triumphalist imperialism" (Joyce 5), while Adamson offers a revisionist attitude from a post-colonial premise. His voice challenges the old imperialist attitude since "neo-Victorian postcolonial fiction […] celebrate[s] the power of Indigenous beliefs rooted in ancestors and the land" (Burstein 200). What the Neo-Victorian does is that it captures those contradictions and highlights their relevance to contemporary concerns.

Adamson "was doomed to a kind of double consciousness. Everything he experienced brought up its contrary image from out there, which had the effect of making not only the Amazon ceremonies, but the English sermon, seem strange, unreal, of an uncertain nature" (24). What Byatt describes is an aporetic mode of thought, where dialectical dialogues run through the character's mind causing

confusion and haziness. Right from the beginning, Adamson is subject to two contradictory images constantly juxtaposed to each other, leaving an "uncertain" (24) impression on his mind.

The Form of the Text and Aporia

It is worthwhile noting that, in a postmodernist vein, the text is playfully infused with different styles and genres. For instance, philosophico-religious arguments written by Harald Alabaster (83-89) and long debates between the characters perforate the fabric of the novella. Proverbs (15) and citations of Tennyson's (87-88), Ben Jonson's (12), Robert Browning's (79), Milton's (31, 79-80), John Clare's (104) and Coleridge's poetry (116) frequently infiltrate the text. At times, Byatt decides to interrupt the flow of the novella and include long pieces written by the characters, one of which runs over twenty pages. For instance, a long book excerpt (109-116) written by William Adamson and a whole tale written by Matty Crompton (119-140) are solidly placed in the text. Byatt's novella also has a pictorial dimension with many insect illustrations (3, 21, 129, 134, 136, 160) incorporated in the text. Thus, even the form of the text challenges the traditional dominance of a single genre. By blending different genres and moulds, Byatt creates a postmodern text which defies conventional modes of writing.

The inclusion of different genres and forms gives voice to a number of varied and at times conflicting views. It enables Byatt to raise questions and evoke doubt. Rather than presenting one singular narrative, the form of the text represents aporia, creating confusion and instability, rather than order and harmony.

Conclusion

Rather than being a text that takes place in the Victorian age, Byatt's novella comes across as a Neo-Victorian text as it does not offer a traditional presentation of the Victorian, but self-reflexively engages with the Victorian period to open new dialogues regarding pertinent contemporary anxieties related to gender, sexuality, imperialism and civilisation. Far from a nostalgic appropriation of the past, Neo-Victorian writings revisit the nineteenth-century as the source of modern turbulence. Though on the surface the Victorian age boasted of respectability and conservatism, deep down it suffered from contradictory currents, which ravaged its peace and quiet. It is because of those contradictions and anxieties that the Victorian period offers Neo-Victorian writers a fertile ground to re-explore those issues.

In the novella, Byatt sets modern debates in a Victorian context; the characters engage in Socratic dialogues and encounter aporia. The form of the text reflects this confusion as well, since it incorporates different genres and moulds, which express different views. Confusion debunks old structures and traditions, and the present holds a mirror to the past to explore open-ended possibilities. In so doing, the text largely foregrounds the poetics of postmodernism, subverting conventional discourses and replacing them with conflicting voices and multiple narratives. Convergence with the poetics of postmodernism runs throughout the text, since Neo-Victorianism is firmly rooted in postmodernism.

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