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Agency and Metaphor in the Neo-Victorian Imagination: The Case of Ian McEwan

I

Long a punchball of poststructuralist theory and criticism, the “liberal humanist subject” is making a comeback in critical and literary discourse. Genres such as biography, biofiction, and the biopic are (re-)installing the myth of a coherent, unified self to ever wider scholarly interest, and in its classic, 19th century and secular form liberal humanism has found a self-proclaimed bard in Ian McEwan, who wishes to celebrate it in his novels and who aligns himself with it in his political interventions.¹ What is remarkable about the recent spate of liberal humanist imaginings is, first of all, the regularity with which they graft the humanist subject onto representations of the 19th century past, anchoring a vision of enhanced and privileged agency in what this article will refer to as a “neo-Victorian” mode of temporality.² Just as remarkable, secondly, is that these imaginings are now endorsed in precisely those quarters which used to be most critical of classic liberal humanism’s ethical claims. In her recent study Victoriana: Histories, Fictions, Criticism, for example, Cora Kaplan details the emergence of a “new” literary humanism” in neo-Victoriana of the last two decades to argue that the 19th century has come to function as a privileged site for developing and articulating affirmative accounts of individual and cultural agency.³ In brief, her argument is that “the seismic shifts in world politics from 1989 onwards” have given “liberal humanism, and the universalist versions of subjectivity and agency that [de-

¹ McEwan’s ambition to reinstall a 19th-century, secular and scientific humanism is in evidence in many of his interviews and public performances. As this article suggests, it not only informs his ever more conspicuous retour à Darwin but also the anti-modernist and anti-postmodernist polemics in some of his recent works.


fine] it, an ethical boost in unexpected quarters,” including the “left-leaning English departments” which used to engage in critiques of the subject and its literary counterpart, the author. She contends that in effect, neo-Victoriana have been instrumental in salvaging the subject from the “paradoxical suspension” in which poststructuralism had placed it, confirming its psychic as well as political “necessity.”

A new scholarly journal for Neo-Victorian Studies, to give a second example, likewise credits neo-Victoriana with a redemptive capacity for reinfusing contemporary culture with ethical and humanistic content. Its editor Marie-Luise Kohlke, alluding to Fredric Jameson’s seminal critique of the shallow, simulacral historicity of postmodernist fiction, asserts that by comparison, “the neo-Victorian project” constitutes “a worthwhile, even necessary process of historical analysis” which “[contributes] formatively to an ethically informed subjectivity” as it is “mindful of the long-term consequences of socio-political policies, strategic decisions, and ideologies” which date back to Victorian times and “continue to reverberate in the cultural echo chamber over a hundred years later.”

Suspending my criticism for a moment, I am in principle ready to accept that neo-Victorian critical and literary discourse may take part in a larger, ongoing attempt to accommodate (late) postmodernist critical sensibilities to a new ethical awareness. Indeed, the continued attachment to humanist values and the attendant wish to reconfigure them in a new, post-foundational ethics has long been recognised as a viable trajectory within postmodernity. Some twenty years ago, Linda Hutcheon already characterised postmodernism as “contradictory and [working] within the very systems it attempts to subvert,” these systems prominently including “what we usually label our dominant, liberal humanist culture.” More recently, Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth has observed that “the term ‘post’ modernity itself, and the sense it creates “of being ‘after’ a watershed,” “invokes history” as “a central, perhaps the central humanist convention,” while Amy Elias, in her seminal study of postmodernist historical fiction after its initial, formalist phase, asserts that history in the unrepresentable and sublime form as theorised by Jean-François Lyotard and others “leads to ethical action in the present.”

4 Kaplan 42, 36-7. Kaplan’s appraisal of a “new’ literary humanism” is most fully argued in her chapter “Biographilia.” Insofar as this chapter recognizes that the fiction of humanist agency can be regressive, narcissistic, or simulacral, such fears are deflected onto a scathing analysis of Peter Ackroyd’s Dickens (50-62).


Given this trajectory within the postmodern, what is surprising about neo-Victorianists’ critical master narrative is not so much the trope of a humanist “return” as such as the fact that its comeback should be located on the temporal horizon of the present — or even, retrospectively, on yesterday’s — and thereby turned into a genuine *hic et nunc* event.

Yet for at least two reasons, it seems to me that the humanist subject that is presently being resurrected is left dangerously under-theorized. First, the suggestion that the autonomous, empowered, and “ethically informed” subject owes its return to “history” — a cultural category so easily mistaken for an ontological one — ignores that postmodernist historical fictions can represent, conjure up, and place us in relation to the past in a stunning variety of ways. To trace the construction of humanist agency and subjectivity through the many forms of postmodernist historical representation which are available, and thus to define the “new” humanist subject more closely in relation to the sites of its re-emergence, is unlikely to sustain the general conclusion of an ethical or humanistic turn. Second, I am sceptical about neo-Victorianists’ assurance that the new humanist subject does not return to the same, stupendous political and ethical costs as the agent of classic, bourgeois liberal humanism of old. Kaplan casts neo-Victorian literature’s self-reflexiveness and theory-savviness as a guarantee against a critical relapse: as she confidently puts it, “the humanist subject cannot come back unaltered from the moment of theory.” Yet this assurance rests on a notion of textuality which too easily assumes the possibility of a self-reflexive, dialogic attitude towards the past and its traces in the present. One critic, subsuming neo-Victorianism under a “critical paradigm” which “blurs the distinctions between criticism and creativity,” uses the metaphor of “palimpsestuous” textual play to insist on the dialogic nature of neo-Victorian discourse and on how it revitalises our awareness of some of the defining moments of the modernity we have inherited. Kaplan herself says that Victorian fiction “exists ‘inside’ for me as a sort of palimpsest of all my encounters with [it]” from an early age onwards, and she construes this internalised store of literary memories as a metaphor for neo-Victorian textuality more generally in order to stress its

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8 That neo-Victorian critics easily conflate the “historical” and the “ethical” appears from Kaplan’s argument, in which the historical moment of 1989 is not only said to have propelled an “ethical boost” but where, metaleptically, it also serves as its guarantee (Kaplan 42). Kohlke’s argument is similarly flawed where she attributes a politicizing impulse to our apocalyptically inflected, post-9/11 disaster culture, implying that the fascination with (man-made) catastrophe which is registered in contemporary literature and film has a self-evidently ethical dimension (Kohlke 1-18). On the dangers of modern apocalyptic narratives for morality and ethics, see Marina Warner, “Angels and Engines: the Culture of Apocalypse,” *Raritan* 25 (2005): 12-41.

9 Kaplan 71 (emphasis added).

potential (to borrow Kohlke’s words) for “consciousness-raising,” “witness-bearing,” and “cultural memory work.” It seems to me that precisely in this self-assured usage, however, the metaphor of the “palimpsest” risks downplaying the considerable ethical challenges of a condition in which everything appears to us as always already mediated by textual processes and forms. I want to suggest that especially in regard to the figuration of agency, the metaphor may just as well obfuscate the ways in which postmodernist literary techniques are currently being appropriated and re-used in the service of revisionist, possibly reactionary political agendas.

In what follows, then, I will submit the figure of the newly reconstructed humanist agent to closer critical scrutiny in order to demonstrate its contingency: that is to say, to analyse it as a cultural and historical construction which is by no means “natural” or inevitable, let alone redemptive. To this aim, the present paper will not only ask the question how the figure of the fully empowered, self-directing agent is established in neo-Victorian discourse (i.e. through which textual strategies and devices), but also why this figure and the hegemonic, bourgeois and capitalist ideal of individuality which it embodies is now being reconstituted in the first place (i.e. in which field of possibilities). As we will see in the case of Ian McEwan, both questions can be given relief, not only by acknowledging that the “new” humanist agent is constructed through metaphorical procedures which entail particular, and still often overlooked rhetorical displacements, but also by reconsidering the conceptual metaphor of the “palimpsest” itself, which, functioning at the intersections of neo-Victorian critical theory and textual practice, is not only instrumental in shaping but also in limiting the neo-Victorian as a form of historical and ethical imagining.

II

I want to take as my basic starting point that in the postmodern or “discursive” condition (to use Ermarth’s term), subjectivity, identity, moral freedom, individuality, and indeed agency can no longer be assumed as foundational essences, universal values, or metaphysical absolutes, but that we are constantly aware of their constructedness in language and cultural codes. This

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11 Kaplan 10-1; Kohlke 9.
12 In giving priority to the “why” question, I am committing myself to the radical project of history writing and cultural criticism as forms of critique in the Marxian, Nietzschean, and Foucaultian sense. For a recent defence of this tradition of critique see Joan W. Scott’s contribution to *Manifestos for History*, ed. Keith Jenkins, et al. (London/New York: Routledge, 2007) 29.
13 For an astute theorisation of the problem of individuality and agency in the discursive condition, see: Ermarth, “Agency in the Discursive Condition”; and also Elizabeth
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insight has, of course, been pursued through numerous deconstructions of the “subject” and the ideological formations that sustain it. In recent years, following the lead of gender theorists, scholars have shifted their concerns towards the study of agency as process or performance by which subjects who function as agents of power can occasionally empower themselves within the linguistic or semiotic structures that contain them. In keeping with the reorientation towards enlightened modernity which is currently under-way, however (not least in Victorian studies), these conceptualisations of agency as a culturally situated practice with counter-discursive potential are now criticised in the name of a liberal, rationalist, and public sphere model of politics and identity that has little patience with the paradoxes of “theory.” Amanda Anderson in particular has castigated scholars’ deployment of tropes of “aggrandised agency” by which exceptional agents are allotted a “critical lucidity” and “political potency” for which present “cultures of theory” in her eyes fail to offer satisfying explanations.14

My concern in this paper is not with carving out a new theoretical position in this widely ramifying debate. Rather, my aim is to tease out some of the ways in which neo-Victorian literature itself envisions agency and in a sense produces its own theory or conceptual understanding of it, as embodied in its poetics. Specifically, my claim is that agency in neo-Victorian texts is always already “aggrandised” (or self-aggrandising) in proportion to the auto-suggestive presence of the classic humanist agent of old, and that the logic of aggrandisement by which “new” humanist agents are currently being represented takes shape as a metaphorical logic of substitution which both flaunts the agent’s metaphoricity and seeks to contain it. If we recall that the notion of “metaphor” literally refers to a process of transferral or a “carrying over” of meaning from one thing to another, the idea of metaphorical agency can be seen as integral to the postmodern or discursive condition. The subject of language – the subject through which language speaks – strives to become a “self” at the moment of its articulation. But this moment involves a metaphorical transfer in that the self wrests agency from something external or even alien to it, constructing a “face” with which it cannot fully identify. The moment we see agency embodied or represented, then, we are within a process of metaphor or metaphorization by which one thing (an agent who is


free from determining structures) is made to stand in for another (the con-strained, containable subject of language).

Clear instances of the problematic of aggrandised agency can be found in the novels of Ian McEwan. As the case of *Saturday* and *On Chesil Beach* exemplifies, his work simultaneously offers a representation of agency (people seizing or regaining control over their lives), a model of agency that is pitted against the erosive forces of time (and which is functional within McEwan’s philosophy of the “defining moment,” in which agents are presented as realising themselves ethically through the choices they make or fail to make), and a cultural practice of agency (as in the public interventions which McEwan himself makes through interviews, newspaper articles, or blog entries when he dismisses some (geo-)political decisions or strategies and endorses others). In regard to each of these aspects, however, McEwan’s liberal humanist faith in coherent and uniquely capable and autonomous selfhood proves difficult to maintain in the face of the postmodern dispositif in which his fiction is implicated.

The controversial “Dover Beach” scene in *Saturday* is a case in point. As readers of the novel know, its narrative about a day in the life of Henry Perowne, a successful, affluent, and contented neurosurgeon of forty-eight, is set against the backdrop of the large anti-war demonstration that was held in London in protest of the pending invasion of Iraq on February 15, 2003. At the apex of the plot, the scene sets Perowne against Baxter, a thug whom he had a violent encounter with that morning and who now intrudes on a lavish family reunion party at his Fitzrovia residence. Their final showdown is a drama of agency, played out as a drama of consciousness. Baxter, on the one hand, is a mere cipher with little interiority. Suffering from Huntington’s disease (as Perowne astutely recognizes), he faces the decline of his mental abilities as well as physical coordination skills. While he sizes up the company at Perowne’s place to measure the damage he could inflict by way of his final, resentful message to the world – “[the] scale of retribution could be large” – his mood swings and physical tics establish him as an incompetent troublemaker. There is a sense in which the spectacle of his eclipsing mind is homologous to *Saturday*’s famous opening scene: the intimations of apocalypse which Perowne strains to interpret while watching an apparently fire-struck plane descend over London in the early hours of the morning are by it

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reduced to comprehensible, if ludicrous proportions. Perowne himself, meanwhile, observes Baxter and analyses his condition in McEwan’s characteristic blend of third-person narration and free indirect discourse, here inflected with a mixture of neurosurgical, Darwinian, and genotypical language. While Perowne passively looks on as the thug breaks the nose of his father-in-law, and then holds his wife at knife-point and threatens his daughter with rape, he ironically calculates that Baxter’s disease may come to the rescue: while in one way it makes him an antinomian, in another it only gives him “a bleak kind of freedom,” isolating him in “the confining bright spotlight of the present.” As Perowne considers, with the apparent endorsement of McEwan’s narratorial voice, it is “of the essence of a degenerating mind” like Baxter’s “periodically to lose all sense of a continuous self.”

But if Saturday defines Perowne’s agency in the terms of modern (neuro-)science, the “Dover Beach” scene simultaneously offers a model of cultural or aesthetic agency in that it links Perowne to the tableau of civilisation that is so impressively embodied in his family. The cast of characters who are assembled at his house replicates in miniature a Victorian “intellectual aristocracy” in which Perowne’s surgical gifts blend with the considerable intellectual, poetical, and musical talents of his wife Rosalind, his father-in-law John Grammaticus, and his children Daisy and Theo, who, between the four of them, conjure up a 19th-century atmosphere of progressive civilisation, in which clear lines of familially transmitted talent guarantee an unbroken “march of minds.” Daisy in particular functions as a symbolic connecting piece: the daughter of Rosalind (a fragile, “reddish-brown” haired beauty of the Pre-Raphaelite type) and the inheritor of Grammaticus’s poetic muse (her début My Saucy Bark stands up to his towering oeuvre), she also cements the relations between art and science in Saturday as she has given Perowne the biography of Charles Darwin to read which triggers many of his scientific meditations on human character, and confirms for him that “there is grandeur in this view of life.” It is against the backdrop of this Victorianized tableau of cultural capital that Daisy plays her role in the taming of Baxter. Being forced to undress, she narrowly escapes a rape by reciting not her own poetry for him, as he asks her to do (but which is erotically charged), but Matthew Arnold’s “Dover Beach.” This tranquillises Baxter and sets in motion the final chain of events in which he can be overpowered. All things considered, the scene symbolically unites, in the platitudinous fashion of Victorian melodramatic fiction, a masculinized scientific rationalism and a feminised model of the civilising agency of art to pit both against the threat posed by an evil, pathologized other.

As John Banville puts it, the “Dover Beach” scene has “a level of bathos that is hard to credit.”\(^{18}\) One of the problems is that, against all apparent ironies, the scene’s tableau-like visualizability and Baxter’s place in it as an obvious stand-in for something else invest it with a strangely unengaging political-allegorical potential. The different interpretations one must at least entertain – that Baxter signifies the dispossessed, the third world, or perhaps an Arab extremist\(^ {19}\) – seem facile or even absurd, and yet cannot be ignored. Are we really invited, to specify one blatantly literalist reading, to see Perowne’s operation of Baxter towards the end of the novel as signifying the 2003 invasion of Iraq (just as the cutting up of Otto’s body in The Innocent supposedly allegorised the partition of Germany)? Is Perowne himself, by implication, a metaphor for what philosopher Charles Taylor has called the “moral exceptionalism,” the special commitment to altruistic action, of our Western, Judeo-Christian civilisation?\(^ {20}\) Could McEwan’s point “really be,” as Elizabeth Kowaleski Wallace asks,

> to suggest that, when confronted by those who hate us, the West need only resort to its wits, its encyclopedic knowledge of science, and to hold out hope of a ‘cure’ in order to distract those who would otherwise seek to harm us? That, in the end, we will easily overpower those who invade the sanctity of our homes, and that it will then be our obligation and duty to ‘fix’ whatever injuries they’ve received in the process?\(^ {21}\)

Can McEwan really be effacing his own, carefully devised grotesquerie when he appends Arnold’s poem at the back of the book, casting the “Dover Beach” scene retroactively as educational matter in a bid to uplift the reader?\(^ {22}\)

What interests me here is not McEwan’s politics as to the Middle East or the third world, but rather the political instrumentality of his elusive intertextual techniques more generally. The “Dover Beach” scene flaunts the metaphoricity of Victorian models of agency: anchoring Daisy’s action in a dramatic moment where the self is under threat, the scene momentarily invests her with enhanced, aggrandised agency, as if she is a “nonce agent,” installed


\(^ {21}\) Wallace 476.

\(^ {22}\) On the face of it, Arnold’s poem chimes with McEwan’s brand of humanism. As Elaine Hadley puts it, with its emphasis on the redemptive power of love and affection in the face of apocalyptic angst, Arnold’s verse “details” McEwan’s “belief in the liberal subject’s ability to seek out a private space of thoughtful emotion, of human intimacy, where subjects alienated in mind or body can become fully authentic and intentional in relation to themselves and to each other, in spite of the chaotic world without”; Hadley 93.
for the occasion. The dubious fact that it should be Arnold’s lines, and not Daisy’s own poetry that should do the civilising here only further underlines her spectral quality; as in a metaphor, the agent is other than herself. Yet in the novel’s penultimate paragraph, where Perowne reflects upon the events of the day, McEwan’s narrative endorsement of the scene by far exceeds his self-created bounds of credibility:

Daisy recited a poem that cast a spell on one man. [...] Baxter fell for the magic, he was transfixed by it, and he was reminded how much he wanted to live. No one can forgive him the use of the knife. But Baxter heard what Henry never has, and probably never will, despite all Daisy’s attempts to educate him. Some 19th century poet – Henry has still to find out whether this Arnold is famous or obscure – touched off in Baxter a yearning he could barely begin to define. That hunger is his claim on life, on a mental existence, and because it won’t last much longer, because the door of his consciousness is beginning to close, he shouldn’t pursue his claim from a cell, waiting for the absurdity of his trial to begin. This is his dim, fixed fate, to have one tiny slip, an error of repetition in the codes of his being, in his genotype, the modern variant of a soul, and he must unravel – another certainty Henry sees before him.\(^{23}\)

With Perowne as in turns internal and external focalizer, this passage emplots “Dover Beach” within a progressivist and scientific conception of history. Over and against Arnold’s fears that moral progress might be a fiction, history cyclical, and civilisations the subject of perpetual ebbs and flows, it reinstates a conception of human self-direction as supremely effective, if only the space for its interventions would be maximised. Indeed, it would be hard to imagine a more eloquent plea for resurrecting the eugenics movement than the above passage. To better understand this forceful erasure and reinscription of the Arnoldian text (a procedure of which Perowne’s ignorance as to who Arnold was functions as a residual sign), we need to examine McEwan’s neo-Victorianism more closely as a palimpsestuous form of textuality.

III

The history of the metaphorization of the “palimpsest” is relatively young. Described in one dictionary as “a written document, typically on vellum or parchment, that has been written upon several times, often with remnants of earlier, imperfectly erased writing still visible,”\(^ {24}\) the palimpsest did not become a metaphor until Thomas De Quincey used it to theorise the workings of the human mind in his *Suspiria de profundis* (1845). In De Quincey’s usage,

\[^{23}\text{McEwan, Saturday 278f.}\]

\[^{24}\text{Qtd. in George Bornstein, Ralph Williams, eds., Palimpsest: Editorial Theory in the Humanities (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1993) 1.}\]
the palimpsest signifies both the simultaneity of the entire stock of memories which the mind contains (its capacity for “retention”), and the potential of forgotten memories to become newly visible and legible (to be “resurrected”). More recently, the metaphor has been taken up by structuralist critics such as Gérard Genette and by editorial theorists who study processes of textual construction, revision, and transmission. George Bornstein for instance calls the palimpsest “less a bearer of a fixed final inscription than a site of the process of inscription, in which acts of composition and transmission occur before our eyes.” Between them, these examples already indicate some of the ambiguities of the “palimpsest” as a constructivist metaphor. It has both a passive and an active side; it refers to a process of layering by means of erasures and re-inscriptions, but also to the surface structure that results from that layering. These different, pliable meanings are captured by the adjective “palimpsestuous,” which, coined by French structuralists, has recently been recovered by Sarah Dillon to refer to the “complex structure of (textual) relationality embodied in the palimpsest,” or, “the structure that one is presented with” as a result of the “process of layering that produces [it].”

At this place, I want to recruit the notion of “palimpsestuousness” as the structuring principle of a range of textual operations by which the Victorian past is reconfigured in Ian McEwan’s fiction, in particular his latest novel, *On Chesil Beach*. Published in 2007, *On Chesil Beach* is McEwan’s most elaborate neo-Victorian text to date. Although situated in 1962, its plot about a young couple of newlyweds who are mortified at the prospect of their wedding night is shaped with reference to a rigid social structure whose fixed class and gender barriers are construed as relics from the Victorian past. The sexual inhibitions of the novel’s protagonists Florence and Edward — which censor their strained conversations over dinner, are played out in a disastrous sexual encounter, and finally drive them apart in a prolonged quarrel on the shingle near their hotel at the Dorset coast — are stereotypically defined in terms of the “repressive hypothesis” for which the adjective “Victorian” often functions as an eponym. Indeed, McEwan capitalises on the cliché of Victorian sexuality as “repressed” when he has Edward say to Florence, at the height of an argument in which he reproaches her for prudishness: “You carry on as if it’s eighteen sixty-two. You don’t even know how to kiss.” In addition, the novel presents Edward’s early-1960s conception of history as hopelessly Victorianized. Although he is waking up to new forms

26 Bornstein/Williams 4.
27 Dillon 4.
28 Dillon too has analysed “palimpsestuous textuality” in McEwan’s work, in particular *Atonement*, but differs from the present essay in that she offers a far more positive appreciation (Dillon 92-101).
of political empowerment (he took part in a ban-the-bomb demonstration in Trafalgar Square in 1959) and, holding a degree in history, takes notice of the new developments in historiography that would soon democratise the discipline of history in Britain (he reads Norman Cohn’s 1957 study of apocalyptic popular movements, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*), in the end he is most interested, to his tutor’s dissatisfaction, in pursuing the Carlylean and rather undemocratic “‘great men’ theory of history”: a project which throws into comic relief not only his narrow, masturbatory mindset (“How extraordinary it was, that a self-made spoonful, leaping clear of his body, should instantly free his mind to confront afresh Nelson’s decisiveness at Aboukir Bay”), but also his insignificance as a lower-middle-class anti-hero who feels intimidated by his distinguished Oxford in-laws.²⁹

Yet while McEwan ironically overstretches the historical reference of “Victorian” to dramatise the late 1960s and 1970s moment of emancipation, shoring up models of agency that are slightly more recent than those actually represented in his text, he simultaneously recovers the early 1960s as a temporal layer through which the Victorian past can exert greater, not less appeal to readers. Making an obvious allusion to the Arnoldian intertext in *Saturday*, the title of *On Chesil Beach* also directs us to John Fowles’ neo-Victorian novel *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* (1969), which cites “Chesil Bank” as a minor location and which, like McEwan’s text, is set in a pre-emancipation temporal mode.³⁰ This intertextual relationship is underlined by the cover of the novel upon its first release in the UK: depicting the figure of a woman in a virginal white dress, walking away over the shingle, isolated in a coastal landscape, it links Florence to Fowles’ Sarah Woodruff (and to Meryl Streep’s iconic rendering of her in Karel Reisz’ filmic adaptation).

But if Fowles’ novel enters the relational structure of McEwan’s Victorian palimpsest as one extra textual layer, the palimpsestuous operations in *On Chesil Beach* are more complex than its simple plot and chiselled prose suggest. The cover hints that Florence can be read as a rewriting, not only of Fowles’ Ernestine (the fiancé whom Charles Smithson, in Fowles’ multiple endings, does or does not marry for her money and family connections), but also of the exotic, seductive Sarah Woodruff. If anything, this conflation of both female characters dramatises the social difference between Edward and his wife, and redefines the class struggle between them in terms of natural or sexual selection. Remark Edward’s occasional relapses into the “spectacular tantrums” by which his early childhood had been “marked”; well into his time at college, and establishing him as an outsider compared to his better


Fowles’s novel opens in March 1867, less than half a year before the passing of the landmark Second Reform Act that would reshape Britain’s political culture.
behaved and more upper-crust peers, “Edward found in fighting a thrilling unpredictability, and discovered a spontaneous, decisive self that eluded him in the rest of his tranquil existence.” This inclination for violent physical release stalks him during the failed attempt at marital intimacy with Florence, and again contributes to his loss of self-control when he vents his anger and resentment towards her family during their final encounter on the shingle. The novel’s gestures towards Edward’s and Florence’s unrealised potential for political, social, and sexual self-direction, then, are not as fully endorsed as, on the face of it, readers are led to believe. While on the level of its mildly ironising narratorial register, On Chesil Beach guides readers into correcting Edward’s “great man” theory of history, and into ascribing more agency to him than he allots himself (permitting a notion of agency as a linguistic function by which subjects achieve a degree of freedom in consequence of the meaning which they attribute to their actions as social agents), on another level the novel re-erects the social Darwinism to which we have already seen Henry Perowne subscribe, and credits it with full explanatory authority. Mapped onto the rigid class structure that is in place in the world of On Chesil Beach, McEwan’s Darwinian model of sexual selection functions with a deterministic logic.

Space forbids me to develop my analysis of On Chesil Beach at greater length. The point to make here is that McEwan’s palimpsestuous procedures amount, once again, to an incisive erasure. First, they undo Fowles’ far more playful reinvention of Darwinism as a postmodern interpretive framework in its unsettling, but potentially redemptive and liberating de-centring of the human and anthropomorphic. McEwan’s fiction, by contrast, endorses a fundamentalist Darwinism to provide a grounding for the thematic linkages between society and sex in his neo-Victorian plot. Second, McEwan erases the existentialist humanism that informs Fowles’ de-vice of multiple endings, replacing it by a moralising variation on the theme of the “missed chance.” If we take into account that McEwan’s authorial self-fashioning often focuses on a defence of his palimpsestuous re-inscriptions of Victorian models of agency – in interviews he takes the moral high ground when explaining why

31 McEwan, On Chesil Beach 91.
he privileges 19th-century above modernist literary models— the contours of a revisionist project become visible in which new metahistorical strategies are turned against older, modernist or postmodernist strategies of historical representation to reinstate less self-reflexive, and more deterministic conceptual models. The extent to which McEwan seeks to literalise Victorian models of agency should not be underestimated. He says somewhere that “I do think that the 19th century invented for us some extraordinary things,” such as “the notion of character,” and that “we’d be crazy to turn our backs on them.”

Yet while he talks the language of individual agency, the metaphorical displacements in his fiction indicate that he is rather talking about human nature. What is ultimately erased, in my view, are postmodernist qualities like distrust of empiricism and anxiety about historical narrativization per se which Fowles, for one, brought to bear on his recreation of the Victorian past.

IV

This essay has sought to question the assumption that the neo-Victorian is so much wedded to the defining moments of modernity that it has a redemptive capacity to (re-)connect us to the real stuff of history. Neo-Victorian imaginings, we are now regularly invited to believe, as they shed the much narrower political and cultural identifications of “Victorian,” as they analyse the 19th-century “as a harbinger of our own trauma culture” in regard to sexuality, ethnicity, and empire, and as they draw upon an international idiom that can be understood around the globe, are too implicated in “on-going historical processes,” too involved in “consciousness-raising,” “witness-bearing,” and “cultural memory work,” to reduce the past to that numbing flatness which other postmodern temporalities may indeed produce. My reading of McEwan’s reinscriptions and erasures of the (neo-) Victorian palimpsests of “Dover Beach” and The French Lieutenant’s Woman, however, suggests a second, and very different trajectory within the neo-Victorian: one in which the 19th-century does not so much function as a sublime domain whose pastness and ineffability permit a critically detached, yet dialogic attitude towards modernity and enable us to reconfigure it along more humane and ethically acceptable lines, but rather, a trajectory in which the social aesthetic of a 19th-century, bourgeois and empiricist liberalism is reinstated in the name of a neo-conservative supremacism which encourages only the most reified and

35 McEwan qtd. in David Lynn 51.
36 Kohlke 7, 9.
hackneyed models of reciprocity and has very limited tolerance for other-

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The metaphor of the “palimpsest” not only figures as a structuring prin-
ciple within both trajectories, but, when submitted to critique, may also help
us spell out some of their implications. Of course, as a metaphor derived
from the source domain of textuality, the palimpsest has also become a
metaphor for textuality, for what it means to think, act, and live historically in
a condition in which so much appears to us as always already textualized.
But if metaphors are never innocent, this one is not exempted from the rule.
In some of the critical remarks that were quoted earlier on, the metaphor of
the palimpsest was blended with either that of dialogic “exchange” or that of
the personal “encounter” to suggest that the relationality between the differ-
ten palimpsestic layers – or between the agents who do the work of (re-)
inscribing – is an open, positive, equal, and democratic one. Yet it seems to
me that precisely at this point, critics risk missing out on some of the more
problematic consequences of a practice of palimpsestuous textual operations
for how agency and subjectivity can be imagined – and realised – within the
discursive condition. I want to propose that, in effect, the palimpsest forms a
“weak” constructivist metaphor which barely sustains neo-Victorianists’ high
hopes. When its passive side is emphasised, and the subject it assumes stands
in awe of, or is saturated by, the richness of historically accumulated signs
which the palimpsest incorporates, the metaphor tends to naturalise our
position in the “prison-house of language.” In this view, qualities like self-
reflexiveness or the ability to engage with alterity naturally seem to fall un-
der the rubric of the textual. The metaphor’s active side, however, presup-
posing an aggressively intervening subject who disrespects the integrity of
the palimpsestuous structure as a whole (and even the principle of relational-
ity per se which this structure bodies forth), should not be disregarded. In
McEwan’s neo-Victorian project, the classic “humanist subject” is reinstalled
at the site of an erasure. McEwan’s literary principle is to deploy postmod-
ernist techniques of intertextuality to fold a literalised figure of aggrandised
agency over and against the alternative historical models of agency which he
blots out and reinscribes. This is a palimpsestuous practice that works against
agency in that it limits the extent to which it can be understood historically at
the present, critical juncture: that is, as shaped by a condition of textuality

37 For three incisive discussions of how revisitations of the Victorian past in the public and
political domains since the early 1980s have supported neo-conservative or neo-liberal
agendas, see: Elaine Hadley, “The Past is a Foreign Country: the Neo-Conservative Ro-
mance with Victorian Liberalism,” The Yale Journal of Criticism 10 (1997): 7-38; Raphael
Samuel, “Mrs. Thatcher – and Victorian Values,” Island Stories: Unraveling Britain (Lon-
don: Verso, 1998) 330-48; Simon Joyce, The Victorians in the Rearview Mirror (Athens:
which is permanently fragile in its post-foundationalism, and permanently at risk of collapsing – or being collapsed – upon itself.\footnote{38}

Unless “neo-Victorian studies” is alert to the possibility of this second trajectory and its dangers, I fear it will not nearly be neo-Victorian enough.\footnote{39} It would be implicating itself in the reinstatement in neo-Victorian literature – and possibly in historical representations more generally – of what I can only designate as a pre-postmodernist social imaginary: one in which social and cultural barriers which we have come to see as contingent and open to transformation and critique are reaffirmed and re-naturalised, and in which alternatives to an outworn, ethically weakened liberal humanism are cancelled out. What is required is a self-reflexive, and indeed a metaphorical engagement with the myth of palimpsestuous history itself: a form of engagement which allows us to re-inflect and re-inscribe the sites of memory which neo-Victorian writings mediate and transmit, but which also incites us to be on our guard against the politics of their erasures in the present.

\footnote{38} It is worth emphasising that the fragility of human agency in the discursive condition is not a merely academic point for which postmodernist “theory” is to be held responsible. As Joanna Bourke has recently observed, the growing imperviousness to and neglect of natural law thinking in world politics in the last ten or twenty years testifies to a dramatic, and dramatically widespread, erosion of the integrity of the individual: Joanna Bourke, “Foreword,” Manifestos for History, eds. Keith Jenkins et al. (London: Routledge, 2007): xi.

\footnote{39} If my usage of Kaplan and Kohlke à titre d’exemple in this article seems questionable or uncharitable, it should be considered that Shiller’s article (see footnote 2) already set neo-Victorian novels off against a grossly oversimplified version of the Jamesonian analysis of postmodern historicities. Distrust of and impatience with 20th century postmodernisms (poststructuralist, neo-Marxian, and other) appear to have been constant in “neo-Victorian studies” from its inception, and persist at the present moment of its institutionalisation.
Works Cited


