The author as the antiquarian: selling Victorian culture to readers of neo-Victorian novels and steampunk comics

Maciej Sulmicki

Introduction - selling the past

"Even realism, rockbottom realism, is considered a bit grand for the twentieth century" states the Martin Amis character in Martin Amis' *Money* (1984), a novel about materialism and the commercialization of successive aspects of life. Pure realism is said to have fallen somewhat out of fashion towards the end of the twentieth century – therefore formal experiments are in fact a form of conformity. On the other hand, even seemingly experimental and nonconformist fiction is shown to have to adapt to the market. Amis' statement is therefore a wink to the reader, as is the whole novel, filled with sex, violence and show business – elements traditionally serving to attract a wide audience in order to increase profits.

Amis' novel is a comment on today's commodity-oriented culture, filled with commercials and information on new fashions and products, where art – be it highbrow or lowbrow – must somehow attract recipients and convince them to become purchasers. As Marshall Berman describes the "cultural commodity market", "no idea can reach or change moderns unless it can be marketed and sold to them" (Berman 1983: 118). This results in a blurring of the boundaries between so-called fine art and popular art due to the existence of some common denominators effective in attracting various groups of recipients. Nancy Armstrong defines "incorporat[ing] what is usually considered commercial, banal, repetitious and lowbrow" as an important element of postmodern art which "assumes that Victorian men and women were every bit as enchanted with the alluring surface of commodities as modernism claimed" (Armstrong 2000: 315). If we assume this to be true, even the orientation of neo-Victorian fiction towards the expectations of the market (cf. Gutleben 2001: 167-176) can be seen as part of the strategy aimed at reconstructing a nineteenth-century text a hundred years after the end of Queen Victoria's reign.

Neo-Victorian fiction is one of a multitude of products available in today's literary market. Moreover, it has some specific features which help it stand out on the shelf. Among the elements

serving to differentiate it from other modern literary trends are elements of the Victorian refashioned as a style – Victoriana (cf. Joyce 2007: 71): the historical background, including all the paraphernalia: setting (which can be compared to stage decorations), costumes, props (especially objects no longer in use), more or less archaic language, etc. These elements of a previous age can be either meticulously researched and strive to be as faithful as possible to what we know of the past or serve as a basis for a more contemporary or fantastic story. The Victorian 'air', however, must remain. On the other hand, among the aspects which make neo-Victorian fiction stand apart from most of its nineteenth century counterparts are a more overt treatment of – among other things – sex and violence. Hence the cover of the first issue of Alan Moore's[1] *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* features murder, rape and drugs, while at the same time imitating nineteenth-century illustrations. Similarly, the extradiegetic but insistently intrusive narrator of Michel Faber's *The Crimson Petal and the White* promises to the reader, in case s/he is bored after the first sixty of the novel's nine hundred pages[2], that "fucking, madness, abduction and violent death" are to come (2002: 65).

The comic versus the novel – main differences

If the choice of Michel Faber's neo-Victorian novel and Alan Moore's *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (vol. 1) steampunk comic books as examples of one and the same phenomenon should still seem surprising, the remainder of the paper will attempt to demonstrate that - regardless of the proportions of Victorian background and contemporary points of interest - the similarities are more numerous than the differences. The fact that the works belong to two distinct genres should make it easier to identify the ways in which the nineteenth century is 'sold' to readers, independent of the type of fictional publication it is packed into. The differences should also facilitate discerning to what extent the connection with the past can be turned into something more than a source of nostalgia and liking for the quaint manners of yesteryear through spurring readers to reconsider the past, the present and their interrelations.

The main difference between the two works is of course that of form – the historical novel versus the comic book, the textual versus the visual and textual in one. These genres are often associated with different groups of recipients and levels of discourse. Comic books at least are

1 While the comic book is the result of the work of several persons, the most important of them apart from the writer being the artist responsible for drawings (Kevin O'Neill in the case of *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*), Alan Moore will function in the paper as the author, as he is responsible for the majority of the ideas discussed.

2 The thickness of the novel is in itself a reference to its Victorian forebears (cf. Kirchknopf 54).

traditionally seen as popular fiction addressed to teenagers[3]. This is partly due to the genesis of comic books as exactly such light entertainment and partly due to the seemingly less serious graphic form. These are only generalizations, however, as the form does not today determine the content (although it may significantly increase the probability of it belonging to a certain category). Both Faber's novel and Moore's comic book mini-series to some extent blur the boundaries of genre. The comic book contains a written story, while the novel makes use of visual tropes such as shrinking font, serving to illustrate the growing distance between the reader and the speaker. Nevertheless, the fact remains that the form of the two works significantly differs.

The other point of difference is in how the Victorian past is treated, or rather which element of it is chosen as the focal point. While Faber opts for the realistic, researched background of Victorian lower and middle classes, Moore creates a conglomerate world of Victorian fantasy and adventure fiction: inhabited by Sherlock Holmes, Dracula, Dr Jekyll etc. and consisting of great steam-powered empires, having at their disposal more advanced technologies than were in fact available at the time. Still, the social background, manners, and visual and material culture are based on Victorian reality. The internal logic of the comic, necessary to achieve plausibility (cf. Clayton 2000: 195), depends upon it being set in Victorian times – not identical to the age recorded in history, but still clearly recognizable. One can say, therefore, that the whole fictional world is based on nineteenth-century documents, even if many of these are works of fiction.

The novel and the comic books diverge mostly on the level of preliminary choices. Once these are made, the approach to the reader, the Victorian background and some common problems of the nineteenth and late twentieth/early twenty-first century are in fact quite similar.

The comic and the novel – similarities

In both cases the reader is treated as a partner in creating the story, though not as well-oriented as the narrator.[4] The reader becomes a partner in a game consisting not only of combining what is shown and told with what the reader knows and feels, not only of the reader's expectations being thwarted and of reminders that the reader actually taking part in a game, but also of learning through playing. Through being shown the Victorian background and inclined to think about it, the reader should at least get to know more about nineteenth-century British culture. At the same time,

3 Alan Moore stated in an interview that responsible for such associations are the comic book publishers who made use of the fashion for 'graphic novels' in the 1980s to repackage exactly that kind of unambitious comics and therefore discredit the emerging new type of serious comics (as self-contradictory as such a term may seem).

4 The term 'narrator' will be understood broadly: in the case of the novel as the third person narrator and in the case of the comic book as the persons responsible for what is shown in successive panels as well as what is said in the extradiegetic parts of the comic book (the letters to the editor, the advertisement, the credits).

the historical background serves as a more or less quaint decoration, something to arouse nostalgia and pleasure stemming from recognition. It consists not only of the setting and costumes, but also of references and allusions to other Victorian texts (not only artistic), as well as play with Victorian forms of narration and presentation. In the case of both analyzed works, however, the notion of commercials and persuading others to buy Victorian products is foregrounded and to some extent derided. Hence the comic and the novel escape a simple definition of re-packaging the past into a nostalgia-oriented product.

Another analogy between both works is visible in the approach to sex, violence and love. The last of the trio of universal arousers of interests is present in both (though to a much lesser extent in the comic books) but, since it is also a standard element of the original Victorian fiction and finds little reflection in the material plane, will not be discussed in detail. The other two may to some extent be more interesting to the reader, due to the air of forbidden fruit of such 'base' subjects, traditionally considered to be suppressed in Victorian art. Sexual intercourse and physical violence are avidly made apparent to the reader in both of the texts discussed, although in reverse quantities - the former logically taking place more often in a novel about a prostitute and the latter appearing more frequently in comic books about the secret service. As the main male character of *The Crimson Petal and the White* exclaims, 'man cannot live on high culture alone' (Faber 2002: 220). Once again, however, the physical is not limited to what ought to attract readers; the less attractive bodily functions such as urination and defecation are also present,[5] though they are brought to the foreground only in the novel.

Finally, both the novel and the comic books adhere to the currently common approach of foregrounding the groups whose voices were not so often heard in Victorian times (cf. Yates 2009: 203; Clayton 2000: 195). Discussion on the discrimination of women permeates both texts, but is a central subject only in the novel (in the comic book it is introduced primarily through the character of Miss Mina Murray – kept in the background in the original *Dracula*, she is now the head of the team of superheroes). Another minor difference is that Faber focuses on prostitutes and Moore on the poor (Naomi Schor remarks that 'the crowd and the female are on the same continuum in the nineteenth-century […] imaginary' (Schor 1987: 21). Their approaches differ, however; the novelist literally gives voice to females, while the comic book writer prefers to show the underprivileged classes visually. They often take up the majority of space in panels portraying public places but can rarely be heard, which is a statement in itself.

5 This is in accordance with what Christian Gutleben dubbed 'an aesthetics of the unsavoury' (Gutleben 2001: 128-134 et al.).

A more minute analysis of each of the texts and of the traits they have in common will show how individual aspects of Victorian visual and material culture are used in the neo-Victorian texts discussed. It should become increasingly apparent that the same elements can serve to problematize the relationship between the present and the past and procure a pleasant presence of a previous period, providing the market with what many readers are willing to pay for.

Nostalgia and disillusionment in Alan Moore's comic

In the case of *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, the appeal to a longing for the look of the past is visible as early as the front cover. That of the first issue proclaims the debut of a 'grand new picture paper' above a set of miniatures depicting scenes from within. The subtitles promise that the reader will find within 'an affront to womanhood in foreign parts' and 'opium – a heathen curse on Christendom'. Each of the drawings' being largely monochromatic (one in red, another in sienna and another in blue) completes the retro image. However, a total of four at least half-unclothed women on the cover immediately shows that the contents are unlikely to be a strict pastiche of nineteenth-century fiction. The dichotomy between pastiche and parody is emphasized by the subtitle to the central image on the cover, a portrait of Miss Mina Murray, the head of the titular league. The picture is described in smaller font as 'an artist's impression'. Such a phrase at the beginning of a comic book – in which the artist's impression is the only reality - immediately shows that the authors will not be facilitating the voluntary suspension of disbelief in order to create the illusion of a return to the past. Instead, the gaps separating the reader from the past are foregrounded: those between the reader and the comic and those between the comic and the Victorian age.

Among the first characters introduced are Miss Wilhelmina Murray from Bram Stoker's *Dracula* and Allan Quatermain from Rider Haggard's novels. The term 'menagerie' is rightly underlined through repetition at the beginning of the first issue of *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* to describe the titular group – the characters are collected from various works of Victorian fiction, mostly from the second half of Victoria's reign. In fact, not only members of the League, but each and every character in the series is taken from other works of fiction (Kavanagh 2000: n.p.), usually written in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century, even if they appear in different circumstances than they originally did. The series is therefore a kind of recycling plant, turning elements of old popular fiction into new popular fiction. As Miriam Bailin puts it when speaking of tangible Victorian memorabilia, “in our disposable culture, the ability to transform discarded objects of another century into the “found” treasures of our own may offer some reassurance that […] all is not lost” (Bailin 2002: 45).

The cover of the second issue shows the main characters as collectible cigarette box inserts (appealing anew to fashions of the past) and once again foregrounds the incongruity of the realities contributing to the comic. Next to each character's name is listed the year in which the novel or story they appeared in was originally published. This can be seen also as a way to "preserve and celebrate the Victorian past" (Shiller 1997: 540) through reminding readers of the historical period which the authors are indebted to. It should be noted that the characters in the comic book universe are aged approximately in accordance with the distances between their dates of publication. Auguste Dupin from Edgar Allan Poe's 1841 short story is therefore a very old man in the comic book, which takes place in 1898, while Nina Murray is roughly the same age as in Bram Stoker's 1897 novel. Nevertheless, the publication dates on the cover remind the reader that the members of the titular league were originally elements of texts by various authors and therefore underline the constructed, derivative nature of the comic.

An interesting amalgamation of anachronisms takes place in the advertisement section towards the end of each issue. Four to five pages of illustrated ads bring to mind not only nineteenth-century newspapers or novel installments (cf. Womack 2002: 33), but also standard twentieth-century comic books in which analogical illustrated intermissions were included as late as the 1980s. Most of the products in Moore's comic (such as the "Safety" Wringer & Mangle, Mr. C.B. Harness' electropathic belts or "Frame Food" porridge) seem to have had their ads taken from original papers, even if those more comic to the modern reader were selected. Among them, however, are encouragements to buy subsequent issues of *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, as well as other comics by the same author. The textual discourse in the ads is similar to that of the outdated ones:

> PITY the little CHIMNEY SWEEP! [...] happiness is far beyond his grasp for he shall never have occasion to peruse THE FOURTH EXCITING NUMBER OF OUR STIRRING PERIODICAL. To expire of a croup upon a doorstep at the age of nine is without a doubt a dreadful thing but how much worse to never know the PURE, UPLIFTING JOY of first-rate PICTO-SERIAL NARRATIVE? (No.3: 29)

The methods employed to achieve emphasis by Victorian letterpress printing, for example, "using different point type [...] [, adding] variation and interest through the use of different typefaces, and [organizing] information through the deployment of words on a page and the use of decorative lines, boxes, and woodcut icons and images" (Roof 2000: 106) are all present, but the accompanying pictures taken from the late twentieth-century comic book stand out as incongruous among the ads, even more so in the case of commercials of *Tom Strong*, a superhero comic set in

contemporary times. The dissonance is decreased through the comic book ads being presented in black and white, in a box and with similar fonts to the other advertisements – in later issues the contemporary pictures are removed or replaced by ones with a more antiquated air.

The second type of incongruity among the advertisements is that of blatant parodies, such as an advertisement for the 'Edison patented electrical negro' to 'be hired to stand beside your bed should you choose to sit up and read [...] (Please note: batteries are not included)' or a 'promising young private investigator [...] [in the] Baker Street area [...] [who] Has own bumbling assistant [...] [and] will consider adopting violin and/or Cocaine addiction, as required' to be contacted under P.O. Box 221B. It should be noted that among the bizarre original ads Moore has found, these too can go unnoticed to an unobservant reader. If they are spotted, however, they collide with the seeming authenticity and antiqueness of the rest.

On the other hand, the ad pages also contain references to the world presented in the comic book. These include an advert for Quong Lee's Tea-House "Where there's always something brewing" and Rosa Coote's Correctional Academy for Wayward Gentlewoman (Please enclose recent Daguerrotype) with a miniature depiction of a whip. Both are visited by the main characters in subsequent issues. Therefore the world depicted in the main part of the comic book is validated by information from a seemingly independent source, as the rest of the ads have little or nothing to do with the League's adventures. Analogically, the advertisements appear in retrospect if not more authentic, then at least more relevant.

Each issue of the comic contains three more elements not yet discussed: the credits page, the letters column and a story in installments. As the letters to the editor page is the least visual, it will be discussed later on. The credits page is textual only in the first issue, antiquated through choice of words ('penned by' instead of 'written by', 'tints and hues' instead of 'coloring'), adding 'Mr.' before every name and 'God Bless Her Majesty!' before the obligatory fine print. In the remaining issues, however, the credits serve as a chance to play with fitting the persons responsible for the creation of the comic book into various forms of nineteenth-century publications, ranging from concert advertisements (featuring Mr. Alan Moore – the Northhamptonshire Nightingale and Mr. Kevin O'Neill – the Tupenny Tintoretto), through 'A Boy's Treasury of Medical Horrors' (including Moore's Torpor, afflicting those of a literary profession, to be cured by electrical baths) to the table of contents of 'The Sunday At Home' (including 'I was a president of vice' – 'a candid, searing true confession from the man they once called "Soho's Sultan of Sin". Hear how the so-called "Vice President" ran his company of tragic desperate harlots with an iron hand' by Mr. John Nee). Though always risible, in fact only half of the credits pages fit thematically to the rest of the issue – pages

from other publications (the 'Treasury' and 'Sunday' mentioned above and 'The National Police Gazette') are consistent in terms of periodical stylization, but their appearance between the cover and contents of the 'illustra-fiction' serial - as it is called in one of the ads – is in no way explained or justified. Instead, they serve to evoke laughter and expound the spirit of the age through adding paraphernalia visually and phraseologically fitting to the period presented while at the same time reminding the reader that the old forms are being filled with new content. They could serve, however, as an example of what induced Fredric Jameson's anxiety that "once we have reduced history to a collection of glossy images sundered from their real-life roots, we [will] have deprived the past of its capacity to transform our collective future" (Shiller 1997: 539). In this case the images are not even rooted in the fictional world.

Finally, the story of 'Allan and the Sundered Veil' told in six chapters, one towards the end of each issue of *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, seems the most conformist part of the comic book in terms of formal experiments – it is a standard science-fiction story supplemented with illustrations. The form immediately brings to mind Victorian fiction, published in installments and often accompanied by whole-page drawings or etchings similar to those in *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, subtitled with the appropriate quotes. The problems in credibility arise first of all from the unexplained relationship between the graphic part of the comic book and the short story. Both feature Allan Quatermain and – at one point – also other characters from the graphic part of the comic. At the end it turns out to be a prequel to the main part of the comic, though told simultaneously thereto. Such a choice of sequence well illustrates the subject matter of the story, which is time travel. However, two plots – that of the comic book *sensu stricte* and that of the short story - developing simultaneously and featuring the same character at different times in his life serve to illustrate the artificiality of the stories being told. Characters are shown to be able to exist in different stories simultaneously. The effect is enhanced by the fact that in the later (in terms of sequence in the publications) and simultaneously earlier (in terms of story time) story Quatermain meets characters and creatures from H.P. Lovecraft's stories, in other words, characters derived from twentieth-century texts. The problem of distance between the time when the story takes place and when it was published is thus foregrounded. The arbitrariness of story time is perhaps best shown through the written story's ending (that is the final part of the final narrative in the first volume of *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*) being the beginning of the illustrated story presented five issues earlier. The loop can be seen as an ironic comment on historical fiction – seemingly feeding upon the past and not moving forward.

The mainstream and the marginal in Michel Faber's novel

Commentary upon the presented world and the methods of presentation are more overt in Michel Faber's novel, told by a self-conscious modern-day narrator aware of the presence of the reader and the distance dividing the presented world from that in which the book was published and will be read. It fits therefore into Dana Shiller's description of neo-Victorian fiction as "tak[ing] a revisionist approach to the past, borrowing from postmodern historiography to explore how present circumstances shape historical narrative" (Shiller 1997: 540). The opening paragraph – addressed to the reader - well illustrates the position assumed by the narrator:

> 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 those 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*. (3, my emphasis)

The narrator can be interpreted in several ways – as a prostitute, a procurer, a travel guide, or in fact the book speaking for itself. In each case, however, the relationship with the reader is a commercial one – something is offered in return for choosing and following (buying and reading) him/her/it. Once again the seemingly obvious option of pandering to the purchaser's expectations appears to be rejected. Instead, the narrator insists on introducing the Victorian society from the bottom up, beginning with a prostitute underclass. The focus is largely on females, partly in order to throw more light on 'those almost unlit corridors of history where the figures of generations of women are so dimly, so fitfully perceived' (Woolf 1929: 141).

In fact such a beginning can serve two functions. On the one hand it foregrounds the dingy material side of existence of the majority of Victorian England's society. The filth, darkness, stench and other tangible aspects of poverty are described in detail. This is in accordance with Richard Rorty's definition of the novelist's function as serving to "sensitize us to the pain, suffering and humiliation of others" (Schulenberg 2007: 382). The destitute are made visible and to some extent allowed to speak – even though it is clear from the beginning that they are only to serve as a step up the ladder of society and not as a goal in themselves. On the other hand, the opening of the novel also makes clear that the beginning is set in an area ripe with sex ("Church Lane has more whores living in it than almost any other street in London") and violence ("you find yourself hoping to God that the voices come no closer", "This is a street where people go to sleep […] when exhaustion will permit no further violence"), which should rather attract than discourage readers (if not real tourists). A similar conflict of repelling naturalistic description and compelling elements is visible

on several layers. The down-and-out woman of the street Caroline is introduced when applying a mixture of aluminium sulphate and zinc to her vagina with an old bandage on a wooden spoon. While these crude rituals of post-coital contraception are in themselves revolting, they make clear that the characters will not conceal anything before the reader and suggest more tempting scenes are to come.

On the level of narration, many of the objects described are decrepit and/or disgusting but the language is poetic rather than prosaic, even if the tropes used often make use of repellent imagery. Hence, for example, rather than being told of crumbling hovels we see: '[c]enturies-old buildings support themselves on crutches of iron piping, their wounds and infirmities poulticed with stucco, slung with clothes-lines, patched up with rotting wood' (5). Similarly, while the setting should repel most readers, the main characters appear to be quite attractive. The description of Caroline herself focuses on her admirable hair and her half-naked body (in particular her breasts) being wet and shivering in a cold breeze. At one point in the novel, the main character – William Rackham – attends a variety show wherein the horrors of proletarian life presented through song become entertainment. The scene is a reflection on a similar effect achieved by the novel. Finally, while the reality in which the action takes place is said to be alien to the contemporary reader, the narrator is to serve as a link. Knowing both worlds, he can lead the way, encourage the reader to persevere and explain what may be unclear. In this he fulfills a similar function to the letters section of *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen.*

The main difference results from the comic book appearing in installments. This allows the 'Letters to the Editor' section to consist partly of actual dialogue with readers, where both sides speak for themselves rather than the voice of the reader being assumed to have said something as is the case in the novel. Appropriately, the letters section appears for the first time in the third issue. The first letter and the fictional editor's response thereto could be taken as paraphrasing the opening of Faber's novel quoted earlier. The comic book correspondent writes:

> Mr Moore it is a pleasure to read a comic again that actually makes me feel stupid. This is [...] a comic rife with literary and historical references that had me wishing I had studied a little more.

And the editor responds:

> I have, Sir, be assured, passed on your missive to both Messrs. Moore and O'Neill for perusal. They [...] inform me that as Englishmen their chief delight lies in making Americans feel stupid. (3/32)

The contrast between the reader's contemporary language and the editor's old-fashioned discourse is evident. The editor appears to be a character from the past, but is in fact aware of quite recent events (such as the building of the Millennium Wheel in London) as well as of his not being alive when the letters he answers are being written.[6] For the most part, however, his responses attempt to stay antiquated in form and content (although they appear a bit too aggressive for the nineteenth century). This is facilitated through fictional letters from Victorian individuals being included among fan mail. At the same time, though, the editor's presence and comments, for example concerning the sources which inspired the characters, emphasize the fictionality of the comic which precedes it. Interestingly enough, after the first letters column, letters from the readers in subsequent issues are in the great majority written in a style similar to that used by the fictional editor; they are old-fashioned even when dealing with contemporary subjects. This shows that readers are in fact able and willing to make use of historical forms of language, and are at least in part helped in this by the examples set in previous issues.

In Faber's novel the reader, assumed to be the narrator's companion and protégé, also hears responses to what s/he is assumed to be thinking of the story and world presented. Once again, the attitude is sometimes mocking and fixed on foregrounding the fictional nature of the novel. This is particularly visible in two types of interjections. One consists of self-derogatory statements, such as the promise of things to come quoted at the beginning of the paper or a valiant intervention whereby the narrator 'rescue[s] you from drowning in William Rackham's stream of consciousness' (65). These show that the narrator is aware of the novel being a construct. Defining his customer's expectations as a desire to become intimate with "the main *characters* in this story" (4, my emphasis) signals this at the very beginning. The other type of interjection makes use of an inverse approach, treating the world presented in the novel as existing and accessible to the reader outside of the verbal presentation – not only through the text. Hence the narrator feigns surprise at the reader not recognizing that a character is wearing a new hat ("can't you see it's shorter?" (232)) or turns to the reader for confirmation as to whether the person they "see" is William (207). Such statements underline the fact that the reader knows only what the narrator will tell him, but should at the same time spur some interest in getting to know the presented world better.[7]

6 The fact that the character who answers the letters is not in fact a real person is emphasized in the first issue in which the letters column appears by publishing a letter addressed to Mr. Dunbier - the actual editor of the series - followed by a response from 'Scotty Smiles' – the fictional one, named only in the illustration at the top of the letters column, next to a stack of books including 'Moral Fibre', 'Holy Bible' and '..lf Abuse'.

7 An interesting point on the subject of reader's orientation in the nineteenth century is made in the letters column in the third issue of *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* by a reader who postulates clearer indicators as to what works of art which characters are taken from "or at the very least a bibliography", taking into account that the

One of the elements emphasized by both authors in the nineteenth century realities they present is the multitude of the poor. Faber foregrounds it through multiple scenes taking place in the derelict districts of London wherein the main characters alternatively belong to the poor themselves, try to provide them with spiritual guidance, seek entertainment among them or are robbed by them. The problematic nature of presenting those worse off by and to those belonging to a higher stratum of society is touched upon several times in the novel. At one point 'a grizzled man of indeterminate age [...] rises up from a smoky subterranean stairwell' to ask William Rackham's brother, come to see if he could be a parson among the poor, whether he isn't one of those fellows 'as writes books about poor men that poor men can't read' (343). Similarly, upon returning to her book about fallen women, William Rackham's mistress, formerly a prostitute like many others, but now freshly after her first season in higher society, realizes that 'the downtrodden may yearn to be heard, but if a voice from a more privileged sphere speaks on their behalf, they'll roll their eyes and jeer at the voice's accent' (443). Hence even though the lower classes are portrayed, it is made clear that they are not really allowed to speak for themselves – not only the filter of time but also of wealth, education and other aspects in which the author differs from the nineteenth-century poor, separates them from the reader.

One might therefore be tempted to say that the way the poor are foregrounded in *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* is in fact less hypocritical. Moore does it more literally: in multiple scenes, in particular the ones taking place outside, as well as in public spaces such as bars, common men and woman occupy the first (and often second) plane of the panel while the titular gentlemen remain little figures in the background. They could in fact be said to be lost in the mob. As Naomi Schor pointed out, 'in most instances the [...] privileging of the detail entails a dangerous blurring of the line between the principal and the incidental event, the main protagonist and the secondary characters' (Schor 1987: 21). This usually does not happen due to one important element of the picture: while the poor are mostly monochromatic, drawn in the same color as the rest of the background, the main characters usually stand out through having their colors portrayed more realistically. Attention is therefore drawn to the more privileged main characters even when the people in the background are having adventures of their own. Members of the League seem in fact oblivious to what the lower classes are doing. The attitude is well discernible in the two bottom panels on page nine of the second issue of the comic. In the first one, it is difficult to make out at first glance who is speaking. The head of the League and its governmental supervisor take up less

---

"target audience is [unlikely to be] as well read on Victorian literature as we would all like".

than one percent of the area of the picture. They have been placed at the bottom and in the background of a portrayal of a numerous team of harbor workers operating an immense machine. Even if the speakers are in the background however, their white speech balloons stand out most and are given priority over (placed in front of) all other elements of the image. Since the speech contains no references to the setting, it is clear that from the point of view of the main characters the laborers surrounding them are in fact invisible – serving solely as a backdrop (even if placed in front). The gentlemanly characters pay no attention to the commoners in the last panel on the page as well. Their attention is drawn neither by a boy prodding a corpse washed up on the bank of a stream or sewer nor by a man jumping out of a window with a full sack, immediately bringing to mind a robbery. The division is therefore clear: however many of them there might be and whatever they might be doing, the common people are not the subject of the story. A poster on the wall of one of the ramshackle houses in the last panel aptly describes whose attention the poor can at best count on, urging in capital letters: 'God help us'.

Both works therefore fit into Fredric Jameson's characterization of newer "texts" as "transcend[ing] the old opposition between a work and its criticism or interpretation" (Jameson 2008: 385). Both contain more or less overt suggestions as to what conclusions may be drawn from their contents. At one point Faber overtly reminds the reader of the anonymity of the majority of the masses when describing a meeting of a few secondary characters:

> A short, plump lady [...] is trotting towards them [William Rackham's brother and the woman he's in love with]. [...] (In point of fact, there are *two* women walking towards them, but the servant is of no consequence and doesn't warrant a name.) (199)

Similarly, the derisive studies prepared by William Rackham's college friends serve not only as comic relief but also point out the not too uplifting statistics. The first one - on 'The Efficacy of Prayer' can be set in contrast to the sign on the wall in the comic; the research which preceded its printing showed that to the average man God is not a reliable source of aid in everyday life. Another, 'The War with the Great Social Evil – who's winning', derides the efforts to combat omnipresent prostitution. Both, however, once again emphasize the gap between the writing about the poor and the poor themselves.

Conclusion

The Crimson Petal and the White ends with a final reminder of its fictional nature (reminiscent of

the closing of John Fowles' *The Magus*), a darkening to an 'unreadable darkness' (894). There is, however, a short afterword from the narrator, once again foregrounding the commercial aspect of the novel's relationship with the reader and its parallels to other services, such as prostitution:

> An abrupt parting, I know, but that's the way it always is, isn't it? You imagine you can make it last for ever, then suddenly it's over. I'm glad you chose me, even so; I hope I satisfied all your desires, or at least showed you a good time. [...] and still I don't even know your name! (895)

The addresses to the reader in the advertisements for subsequent issues of *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* are less personal due to their being overt advertisements, but the underlying meaning is the same: the artists' goal is to strive to please and amuse the reader, thereby convincing him to buy his work and – having bought it – to consider it worthwhile. This does not exclude, however, the possibility of including material which will not perhaps 'fortify the mind, improve the blood, and in this manner build a just and fair society for all', as claims one of the comic book (or rather 'photographic narrative') ads at the end of the second issue, but at least provide food for thought. Even if narratives set in the nineteenth century and based on the documents from that time are in a way cyclical, rethinking and rewriting Victorian myths and stories, as well as problematizing our relationship with the past, provides something more than pure entertainment (cf. Shiller 1997: 539). In the dilemma of choosing between nostalgia and passive restoration and entering into dialogue with the past (cf. Joyce 2007: 79), the analyzed works have chosen a middle road. Dialogue has definitely been commenced, but largely through the use of nostalgic elements or recreating the past. Although the attitude is playful rather than confrontational, the fact that both comic book and novel fit into the trend of re-visionary fiction as defined by Peter Widdowson show that the form adapted by works looking back at the Victorian age does not automatically determine their content or inherent value.

Bibliography:

Amis, Martin. 1986. *Money*. London: Penguin

Armstrong, Nancy. 2000. 'Contemporary Culturalism: How Victorian Is It?' in *Victorian Afterlife. Postmodern Culture Rewrites the Nineteenth Century*, John Kucich and Dianne Sadoff (eds.). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press: 311-326

Bailin, Miriam. 2002. 'The New Victorians' in *Functions of Victorian Culture at the Present Time*, Christine L. Krueger (ed.). Athens: Ohio University Press

Berman, Marshall. 1983. *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air. The Experience of Modernity.* London: Verso

Clayton, Jay. 2000. 'Hacking the Nineteenth Century' in *Victorian Afterlife. Postmodern Culture Rewrites the Nineteenth Century*, John Kucich and Dianne Sadoff (eds.). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press: 186-210

Faber, Michel. 2002. *The Crimson Petal and the White*. Orlando: Harcourt

Gutleben, Christian. 2001. *Nostalgic Postmodernism. The Victorian Tradition and the Contemporary British Novel*. Amsterdam, New York: Rodopi

Jameson, Fredric. 2008. 'New Literary History after the End of the New' in *New Literary History*, 39: 375-287

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

Kavanagh, Barry. 2000. 'The Alan Moore Interview', 17 October 2000 in *Blather*. http://www.blather.net/articles/amoore/

Kirchknopf, Andrea. 2008. '(Re)workings of Nineteenth-Century Fiction: Definitions, Terminology, Contexts' in *Neo-Victorian Studies* 1:1 (Autumn 2008), 53-80

Kucich, John and Sadoff, Dianne (eds.). 2000. *Victorian Afterlife. Postmodern Culture Rewrites the Nineteenth Century*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press

Moore, Alan; and O'Neill, Kevin. 1999. *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen:* Vol: 1 (1-6). La Jolla, California: America's Best Comics

Roof, Judith. 2000. 'Display Cases' in John Kucich and Dianne Sadoff (eds.). *Victorian Afterlife. Postmodern Culture Rewrites the Nineteenth Century*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press: 101-121

Schor, Naomi. 1987. *Reading in Detail. Aesthetics and the Feminine.* New York and London: Methuen

Schulenberg, Ulf. 2007. 'From Redescription to Writing: Rorty, Barthes, and the Idea of a Literary Culture' in *New Literary History*, Vol. 38: 371-387

Shiller, Dana. 1997. 'The Redemptive Past in the Neo-Victorian Novel' in *Studies in the Novel*. Vol. 29 (4): 538-560

Shillingsburg, Peter L., 2002. 'Book Publishing and the Victorian Literary Marketplace' in *A Companion to the Victorian Novel*, William Baker and Kenneth Womack (eds.). Westport: Greenwood Press: 29-39

Woolf, Virginia. 1929. 'Women and Fiction' in *Collected Essays*, vol. 2. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World (1967)

Yates, Louisa, 2010. '"But It's Only a Novel, Dorian": Neo-Victorian Fiction and the Process of Re-Vision.' *Neo-Victorian Studies* Vol. 2.(2): 186-211. *Journal of Neo-Victorian Studies*. Swansea University. Web. http://www.neovictorianstudies.com/