INTRODUCTION

The term "Victorian" has often been praised or criticized at various periods of history. Besides all the wonderful things the Victorian Age is connected to, the economic, social, cultural development it is largely known for, it has also suffered criticism and stigmatization as regards poverty, insecurity and, mainly, women's rights and freedom of feminine self-expression. A reevaluation of the so-called rigidity of the age would reveal a number of values the Victorianism supported: respect for domesticity, the concept of the family, and the values represented by the institution of marriage. Contemporary readers enjoy the escape of being entertained by the narrative of the Victorian novel. They are continuously drawn by these struggling humans who managed to turn heartbreak, war, prison, or the dreaded work of housekeeping into something charming. (Enciu, 2014) Since the last decades of the twentieth century many writers have evoked in some way the nineteenth century which has led to the rise and development of the neo-Victorian novel, a category of fiction that is involved both with the Victorian historical, cultural and literary past which is reproduced, recycled, interrogated, and appropriated and with a contemporary timeframe that is examined and evaluated in a dynamic and complex dialectic.

Ideologically, various speeches have dichotomized the connotations of the term "Victorian". Thus, it has been looked at either as connected to the policy of progress, with entrepreneurship and values such as perseverance, peacefulness and responsibility, or to the exact opposite: poverty, exploitation, social inequality, seen as consequences of a system that encouraged greed and ruthless individualism. Invoked either to subscribe to liberal and progressive policies or to criticize protectionist ideologies, the term "Victorian" disintegrates as ineffable due to the polarizing meanings it has.

To modernists, the term invokes visions of authoritarianism, parsimony, rigidity, and intolerance, which they antagonize with more affectionate and nostalgic views of later generations, who find value in the relics of the past not only because of the connections of continuity with the present, but also because of the fissures of many other discontinuities. The concepts of a Victorian era or Victorian style are based on a fragile chimera of homogeneity. As Hugh Kingsmill states, the age "owes the illusion of its spiritual unity to the longevity of a single person."

(Kingsmill in Heilmann and Llewellyn, 3) Thus, the semantic instability of the term is amplified, beyond its obvious denotative chronological meaning.

In the absence of the certainty in relation to the unequivocal meaning of "Victorian," the prefix "neo" has been attached to it. The combination does not have inherent guidelines to glimpse possible angles of significance or application, as the prefix does not necessarily imply a creative imitative style, does not allude to mechanical recycling, and does not characterize the nature of the implicit hybridization. The prefix "neo" in itself is burdened with its own duplicity, as it tends to invoke the new, but alludes to the old. Therefore, the topic of this thesis presents important challenges that derive from its protean, polyvalent state and susceptible to be explored from multiple approaches. It should be noted that the combination of the volatile topic, the conceptual multiplicity and the promise of adventure have directly contributed to the consolidation of interest in this research.

The first verifiable mention of the term "neo-Victorian," as an adjective to denote a type of novel, is attributed to Dana Schiller who used it in 1997 in her article "The Redemptive Past in the Neo-Victorian Novel," offering a hesitant definition to refer to a type of novel set in the nineteenth century, in the context of the controversy she had with the critic Fredric Jameson. The latter, in his discourse on postmodernism, as the "cultural logic of late capitalism," (1992) argues that in relation to the possibilities of knowing the past, postmodern skepticism has led to a complete dissolution of the interest in the historical past and to its aesthetic recovery, highlighted in what he called:

> […] the random cannibalization of all the styles of the past, the play of random stylistic allusion, and in general […] the increasing primacy of the 'neo'. This omnipresence of pastiche is not incompatible with a certain humor, however, nor is it innocent of all passion: it is at the least compatible with addiction - with a whole historically original consumers' appetite for a world transformed into sheer images of itself and for pseudoevents and 'spectacles'. (Jameson, 18)

For Jameson the postmodern recognition that the past is accessible only through its textualization of narrative reconstruction had the consequence of diverting the interest in the political importance of history and the past, in order to favor a superficial and aesthetic appreciation of their representations. Shiller questions

Jameson and, in a visionary manner, coins the term "neo-Victorian novel." She argues that there is a type of postmodern novel that is involved in the task of recovering the essence of a past period and not simply its styles. (Schiller, 540)

Nevertheless, it has been acknowledged that the neo-Victorian novel may have had its founding text in the novel *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) by John Fowles. Also the last decades of the twentieth century were particularly prolific in this novelistic genre, especially in the publication of the novel that perhaps had the exclusive role in turning the genre to celebrity: A.S. Byatt's *Possession* (1992). However, it was the year 2000 that brought about the founding of a new academic area of interest and a new disciplinary field supported by the creation of a publication based on and supported by Swansea University in Wales, *The Journal of Neo-Victorian Studies*, fully devoted not only to the exploration of the neo-Victorian novel, but to the neo-Victorian phenomenon as a whole.

In the years preceding the establishment of this emblematic publication, important theoretical developments took place and aimed at achieving an approach to this cultural trend. Among the first and most important extensive studies specifically dedicated to the attempt to define the neo-Victorian novel are those by Louisa Hadley (2010), Kate Mitchell (2010), and Anne Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn (2010). These authors, in a continuous dialogue with one of the most important researchers in the field, Marie-Louise Kohlke, point at various differences in the latter's approaches. It is uncontestable that for a time there was an experimental neo-Victorian "canon," which generally overlaps with the texts until recently considered to be postmodern. This overlap calls for the answer to the question whether neo-Victorian novels should be included as a subgenre of the postmodern novel or as a genre in itself.

In her article "'But it's only a novel, Dorian': Neo-Victorian Fiction and the Process of Re-Vision" (2009/2010), Louisa Yates expresses her undeniable concern about the difficulty of finding uniform criteria that would give neo-Victorian novels the opportunity to unite and protect themselves under the requirements of the novelistic genre. What she finds is that this is a "genre of contemporary fictions, the chief collective characteristic of which […] is an obstinate resistance to generic characterization." (Yates, 186) This is due to the fact that the novels share a reluctance to conform to a certain narrative model. This aversion to a principle of regularity in narrative technique threatens to block even the possibility of granting them the privilege of belonging to a genre.

If to this debate the controversy surrounding the choice of the term "neo-Victorian" is added, the argument of this research is extended to understand the vicissitudes of the process establishing the new disciplinary field oriented towards the study of the phenomenon. In particular, for example, in the inaugural edition of *The Journal of Neo-Victorian Studies* (2008), Marie-Louise Kohlke launches an explicit urge to create a forum for debating new cultural surge, the boundaries of which "remain fluid and relatively open to experimentation by artists, writers and theorists alike, a state of affairs that forms part of its strong attraction." (1)

In the same edition of the publication, but in her own article, "(Re-)Workings of Nineteenth-Century Fiction: Definitions, Terminology, Contexts" (2008), Andrea Kirchknopf suggests that the preferred term for delimiting the new cultural trend should be "post-Victorian fiction" because "it displays nuances in both the historical and the aesthetic realms and does not yet seem to exhibit enough distinctive features" (*Journal of Neo-Victorian Studies,* 2008: 59) that would clearly set it apart from postmodernism. This question of the "neo-" prefix itself in the inaugural publication dedicated precisely to the "neo" phenomenon deserves an in-depth investigation regarding, at least, the terminological aspects.

The subversive character of the neo-Victorian novel was claimed as antagonistic to the nostalgic intention. In her article "Putting the 'Neo' Back into Neo-Victorian: The Neo-Victorian Novel as Postmodern Revisionist Fiction" (2010), Samantha J. Carroll attributes to the neo-Victorian novel the subversive value of the redistribution of power and the reallocation thereof, from prominent to marginal figures in history, which is why she considers it "recognitive justice claims." (*Journal of Neo-Victorian Studies,* 195) Suitable for the dismemberment and dissolution of categories such as subjectivity, history, race and gender, among others, the neo-Victorian novel has a strong transgressive potential anchored in "the confrontation of revisited Victorian texts with the shifts in ideology since their production, especially those brought about by postmodern critical theory." (Carroll, *Journal of Neo-Victorian Studies,* 182).

By virtue of the retreat from the historical past, an essential feature of postmodernism, especially in its British type, the concept of nostalgia is unavoidable. When the adjective "nostalgic" is attached as a qualifier of this type of novel, its connotations assimilates terms such as sentimental, escapist or evasive, as if it were a type of imitative novel that would lack originality. Even worse, the term "nostalgic" associated with the neo-Victorian novel may suggest that, in order

to compensate for its lack of seriousness and quality, the greatest merit of the neo-Victorian novel is the simple reiteration of genres, themes and style. The nostalgic gesture is equated with an immature desire for an irretrievable past.

In her article, "Why 'Victorian'?: Response", Kate Flint recovers the pathological features of nostalgia and indirectly places neo-Victorian fiction as a form of fetish. Compared to a form of "bric-a-brac of a *Masterpiece Theater* interior, or […] sing-along performances of music-hall songs, or […] the retro-marketing of sepia street scenes," (*Victorian Studies*, 230) the novel embodies the overestimation of the nineteenth century by the postmodern culture, which did not detached itself from practices of revived mercantilism and tourist promotion of the past, fueled by the economy of late capitalism that turned history and culture into profitable resources. From this point of view, the neo-Victorian novel is a simple sepia-colored postcard that does not guarantee historical authenticity, and much less activates subversive energies due to its complicity with the market that propels it.

Thus, the divergent opinions reduce the novel to a pastiche that capitulates to virtues that are impossible to imitate or a parody intended to blame value systems, lifestyles or ways of representation outside of the synchronization with the evolved present, as expressed by Christian Gutleben in *Nostalgic Postmodernism: The Victorian Tradition and the Contemporary British Novel* (2001):

> Does the contemporary novel set out to rectify certain historical wrongs, to fight against specific prejudice and to subvert ideological and aesthetic commonplaces? Or does it take over a set of themes, of characters and of novelistic devices either because they appear as tokens of an unsurpassed art or because they perpetuate the immense success of the Golden Age of the British novel? (7)

Gutleben insists that the paths opened by this bifurcation have aesthetic consequences, as a subversive approach will have formal repercussions on abandoning realistic techniques, while a nostalgic approach will put conservative priorities first. The mechanism for determining whether a text uses one or other framework is to evaluate whether it prefers the sardonic quality of the parody or the mimetic quality of the pastiche. Although, in the same study, Gutleben admits that the line between parody and pastiche is somewhat blurred, he presents the temporal

perspective as a classifying criterion, since there "cannot be an illusion of faithful imitation." (8)

The harshness of such formulations does not correspond to comparable levels of effectiveness, because determining whether a character or production is clearly situated in the past is tantamount to neglecting the fact that such a construction can only be simulated, mediated and textualized in the present. Also, the line between seriousness and play can be quite evasive, and the texts can contain parody and pastiche at the same time.

The use of these categories, which are not used as analytical tools, but as monolithic labels to praise or discredit the genre, dichotomized the phenomenon and led to a series of questions: is the neo-Victorian canon an ambivalent one, in which some novels are subversive, and thus critically productive, and others are nostalgic and therefore sterile and unproductive, doomed to a gesture of blind imitation? Can neo-Victorian novels be nostalgic and subversive at the same time?

First, in a general sense, this research is framed in comparative studies, because the topic involves two divergent temporal and cultural frameworks involved in a continuous dialogue. In "Comparative Literature, Its Definition and Function" (1961), Henry H. H. Remak proposes that comparative literature should be understood as the study of literature beyond the borders of a particular country as it is defined as:

> The study of the relationships between literature on the one hand and other areas of knowledge and belief […] on the other. In brief, it is the comparison of one literature with another or others, and the comparison of literature with other spheres of human expression. (3)

The implicit inter-discursiveness in this conception of comparative studies marks the general context in which a thesis that explores the phenomenon can be framed. By its very nature, such a thesis analyses two temporally separated cultures, though the novels under discussion are written in the same language in different English-speaking countries.

Intertextuality studies provide a context limited to the framing of the thesis in a study that takes advantage of the multiple intertextual relationships proposed by the neo-Victorian novel in general. Intertextuality reveals the communicative