Victorian Monsters
Trauma, History, and Identity in the Neo-Victorian Novel

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And yet, unless my senses deceive me, the old centuries had, and have, powers of their own which mere ‘modernity’ cannot kill.

Bram Stoker, Dracula, p. 36
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The Trauma of Trauma Studies

Neo-Victorian theory, which is still a young field, generally assumes that Neo-Victorian fiction is “more than historical fiction set in the nineteenth century. [It] must in some respect be self-consciously engaged with the act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision concerning the Victorians” (Heilmann and Llewellyn, original italics). While all contemporary fiction that references the Victorian period certainly does this in a sense, Neo-Victorian fiction knowingly rewrites history, often with the aim of giving voice to minority perspectives that would otherwise have remained silent. If Neo-Victorian fiction “gives historical non-subjects a future by restoring their traumatic pasts to cultural memory” (Kohlke and Gutleben), then queer and feminist readings of Victorian narratives fit nicely into this analysis. Where, though, can we place the contemporary proliferation of Victorian ‘monster-mashups’ within the field of Neo-Victorianism? These figures do not fit as neatly into such a serious analysis of ‘historical non-subjects’, nor do the styles and genres of the stories that contain them.

What I thus propose to undertake in this thesis is an examination of monsters and the monstrous in Neo-Victorian fiction. Kohlke and Gutleben situate Neo-Victorian fiction within the field of trauma studies, where the “traumatised subject of modernity pre/redisCOVERs itself in its manifold nineteenth-century others” (14). This rediscovery helps the postmodern individual come to terms with the traumatic loss of a sense of history and the self in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Kohlke and Gutleben’s argument seems particularly useful when discussing monstrosity in Neo-Victorian literature, because like other works of historical fiction, Neo-Victorian texts “both communicate memory—that which is already know[n] through a variety of media about the Victorian era, for example—and offer themselves as memory” (K. Mitchell 32).
By offering virtual (and often wildly fantastical) visions of the monstrous set in the actual Victorian era, Neo-Victorian fiction potentially renders the 19th century, with all of its accompanying morals, theories, and meta-narratives, equally fantastical to contemporary readers. The question that remains is whether memory is constructed largely from the fragments of a lived past, or whether memory is primarily something we project back onto the past from the present. To what extent do Neo-Victorian texts bring the Victorians to us, and to what extent do they bring aspects of us to the Victorians?

The monstrous other is a key figure in both Victorian and Neo-Victorian literature. Monsters in literature “provide the principal embodiments and evocations of cultural anxieties” (Botting *Gothic* 2), and as such merit extensive critical study. According to Kohlke and Gutleben, the Victorian other and the Neo-Victorian self are often one and the same. They find their examples in real-life others such as the 19th-century hysteric, who they correctly view “as the harbinger of the omnipresent traumatised and (self-)alienated subject of postmodernity—a subject radically ‘othered’ and ‘other’ even to itself” (2). As I will argue, it is not only the historically-grounded figures of the Victorian hysteric or criminal that can be seen as symbolic of the 21st-century subject. Fictional Victorian monsters such as the vampire or the laboratory construct easily become placeholders for the contemporary self, though the aims and effects of such comparisons often differ.

In any case, the idea that traumatised 19th-century others have come to represent contemporary subjects mirrors Cathy Caruth’s assertion that trauma is the common point between ‘now’ and ‘then’, where “trauma itself may provide the very link between cultures: not as a simple understanding of the pasts of others but rather, within the traumas of contemporary history, as our ability to listen through the departures we have all taken from ourselves” (11). Like Kohlke and Gutleben, Caruth sees trauma and contemporary literature, history and identity, as linked. Where the monster represented the sensational exception in Victorian culture, it has moved from the margins to the centre in contemporary culture. In this way, the monster has become “a veritable paradigm of modern subjectivity in the context of our so-called ‘trauma culture’, as all individuals become (at least in potentia) ‘lost’ and traumatised others-to-themselves” (Kohlke and Gutleben 3). Trauma, monstrosity, and contemporary (Neo-)Victorian literature are thus inextricably intertwined, though the details of this relationship have not yet been fully explored.

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1 For an analysis of Neo-Victorian fiction as ‘memory text’, which is unfortunately outside the scope of this thesis, see Kate Mitchell, *History and Cultural Memory in Neo-Victorian Fiction: Victorian Afterimages* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).
If Neo-Victorian texts are memory texts, trauma theory also offers an explanation for why many authors turn to Neo-Victorian monsters in particular, rather than writing about monsters in an older time period, or in a contemporary setting (as did most of their Victorian counterparts). John Kucich and Dianne Sadoff suggest that we “fixat[e] on the nineteenth-century past as the specific site [...] in which the present imagines itself to have been born and history forever changed” (x). For them, postmodernism could instead be characterised as post-Victorianism, “a term that conveys the paradoxes of historical continuity and disruption” (xiii). If, as Andrew Gibson suggests, “postmodern aesthetics [...] is in large measure an aesthetics of the monstrous” (244), and if we do indeed locate the source of our contemporary traumas and monstrosities in the 19th century, Victorian monsters serve as a very logical site of exploration for contemporary writers. Moving from this assumption, I will explore the results of imposing a distinctly 21st-century monstrousness onto 19th-century monsters. If the aim and occupation of Neo-Victorian fiction is to revise the Victorian Era, exploring the fascination that monsters and the monstrous seem to hold for writers of this genre can tell us more about the traumas and monstrosities of both eras. If Neo-Victorian fiction can also be considered ‘therapeutic’ in the sense described by Kohlke and Gutleben, examining the specific traumas being unveiled will uncover the goals of this therapy, and will potentially suggest new approaches to postmodern trauma.

To address these claims, I will approach the issue of trauma and monstrosity in Neo-Victorian fiction from two different angles. Because postmodern trauma as defined here as the linking of the monstrous other with the postmodern self, in which contemporary culture is seen as inherently monstrous at its centre, postmodern trauma becomes a trauma of inclusion and/or exclusion. In other words, it is unclear whether figures of monstrosity in Neo-Victorian fiction are traumatic (or therapeutic) because of their exclusion from Victorian culture, or because of their inclusion in contemporary culture. The first approach I will take in my examination of postmodern trauma will be an examination of monstrous characters in Neo-Victorian fiction, in the hopes of discovering whether they are vehicles for a trauma of cultural exclusion or inclusion, and whether they represent a therapeutic outlet for that trauma. Do the particular depictions of these characters stem from our fears (as 21st-century Western individuals) that we are overrun by the monstrous, and have become the Others the Victorians so deeply seemed to loathe, or do they stem from the fear that we ourselves have become the Victorians? As Fred Botting and Dale Townshend state, contemporary Gothic’s “use of horror relies on an increasingly fragile and insubstantial opposition between human and Gothic monster” (4). As figures of contemporary
Gothic, in which monsters are both horrifying and romanticised, Neo-Victorian monsters also belong to a wider discussion of anthropocentrism and posthumanism.

In the first chapter of this thesis I will look at two alternate histories of Victorian England in which supernatural monsters have joined the ranks of London society. The first is Kim Newman’s 1992 novel *Anno Dracula*, in which Count Dracula has become Prince Consort of England, unleashing a flood of ‘newborn’ English vampires into the streets of London. In addition, Jack the Ripper is revealed to be none other than Dr Seward, compelled by the death of Lucy to murder and mutilate vampire prostitutes. The second text I will examine is the first novel of Gail Carriger’s *Parasol Protectorate* series, *Soulless* (2009). In this book vampires, werewolves, and other supernatural beings roam London, but traditional roles are reversed: it is these creatures who are responsible for humanity’s enlightenment, and the Dark Ages mark the period when they still lived in secret. Likewise, vampires and werewolves actually possess an excess of ‘soul’, which is what allows them to keep on living after being ‘turned’. It is the novel’s largely rational and intellectual protagonist who is the soulless ‘prenatural’, able to neutralise the powers of supernatural beings.

My second approach to the question of Neo-Victorian trauma, handled in Chapter 2, will be an examination of two Neo-Victorian novels—Alasdair Gray’s *Poor Things* (1992) and David Mitchell’s *Cloud Atlas* (2004)—as ‘monstrous texts’. Here I will continue my discussion of the monstrous as a theme in Neo-Victorian literature, but I will also explore the monstrous as a form or literary mode. Both *Poor Things* and *Cloud Atlas* mimic the patchwork nature of many Victorian novels, but are fragmented and self-consciously deformed in a wholly postmodern way. *Poor Things* jumps from narrator to narrator, each with a radically different account of the disturbing events that take place “in the final week of February 1881” (Gray ix). *Cloud Atlas* weaves together a series of narratives that are apparently distinct yet become inextricably interwoven as the novel progresses, spanning a number of years, styles, and genres, but beginning and ending with a 19th-century travel journal. I will respond to Jason B. Jones’s claim that “what is subversive about the mixing of styles and genres is not that it redefines literary categories, but rather that it can redefine our cultural spaces and identities” (Jones “Betrayed by Time” 105), placing Jones’s argument alongside theories of literature, history, and memory from Hayden White and Paul Ricoeur. In this discussion, I will posit the monstrous Neo-Victorian text as dismissing the postmodernist fear that history is a fictional construct, instead embracing it as having always been the case. These formally monstrous texts (which also contain other examples of monstrousness and trauma on a thematic level) argue against the assumption that the
Victorian era formed a historical haven of coherence and self-assuredness, any more than our own or any other era.

Finally, I will argue that these ‘monstrous’ Neo-Victorian novels exemplify Linda Hutcheon’s theories on the paradoxical nature of postmodern texts, which she refers to by her own term: historiographic metafiction. In the words of Heilmann and Llewellyn, “Are the Victorians like us? Do we seek to be like the Victorians? In both cases the answer is likely to be a resounding ‘No.’ So why this continued and perpetual return to the fictional realms of the Victorian, as both readers and writers?” (24). Rather than simply building on the foundations of the Victorian establishment, I will argue that these texts are also actively engaged in tearing it down—or more accurately, deconstructing it. Neo-Victorian novels re-write familiar texts, and do so in a familiar form (the 19th century was, after all, the Golden Age of the novel), but because their ‘serious’ use of the Victorian is performed ironically, they also make the originals they parody seem less real or even ridiculous. The Neo-Victorian parody affects popular perception of the Victorian original even as popular knowledge of the original provides the possibility of parody.

In their form, but also in their content, Poor Things and Cloud Atlas also question the academic process of historical reconstruction and revision. As Kohlke and Gutleben write, quoting Ricoeur, “Such historical fictions, which ‘focus on the formation of values’ that inform individual and collective historical action, are not just recreations of the past, but of past subjects’ constructions of their own futures and thence, at least in part, their constructions of our present also” (21). Through the discourses of power, speech, and literature found in these texts, and through their self-conscious preoccupation with their own fragmentary nature, these narratives explore the potential of Neo-Victorian literature (and literature in general) to erase trauma. They also explore the potential for new perspectives on that trauma.
Kohlke and Gutleben state that Neo-Victorian fiction “involves a volitional anticipation or preparedness to expose oneself to otherness” (19). This is certainly true in its depiction of a time and space very alien to our own—the Victorian era—but also in its frequent inclusion of characters typically considered ‘monstrous’. Fred Botting points to transgression as a central concept of the Gothic, something that is “not simply or lightly undertaken in Gothic fiction, but ambivalent in its aims and effects” (Botting Gothic 7). More specifically, he refers to “a play of ambivalence, a dynamic of limit and transgression that both restores and contests boundaries” (Gothic 9). Gothic characters and villains transgress society’s boundaries or ‘limits’, creating a sense of horror and uncertainty within the reader, and this relationship between transgression and limit forms the central dynamic of the Gothic.

In an analysis of Gothic monstrosity in the Victorian period and beyond, Judith Halberstam writes: “Gothic infiltrates the Victorian novel as a symptomatic moment in which boundaries [...] dissolve and threaten the integrity of the narrative itself” (2). In Neo-Victorian texts this is not necessarily the case, as more often than not they are also postmodernist texts. While the Gothic is still related to monstrosity in literature in an important way, in such texts it is less an expression of the Gothic that ‘threatens the integrity of the narrative’ and more a side effect of post-structuralism. Gothic transgressions of boundaries thus become redundant, as a similar kind of transgression is already present at the structural level. As Andrew Gibson points out in Towards a Postmodern Theory of Narrative, monstrosity is an inherent trait of contemporary literature. Monstrosity “emerges out of the ‘inexorable dislocation’ of presently inescapable terms and structures. It is the hybrid image of our current crisis” (244). In other words, all contemporary fiction is essentially Gothic, born out of the postmodernist blurring of borders that were previously seen as impermeable—most importantly, the border between self and other.

Halberstam also notes how, at least in contemporary Gothic, “multiple interpretations are embedded in the text and part of the experience of horror comes from the realization that
meaning itself runs riot” (2). This definition of the Gothic sounds especially postmodernist, and in an analysis of how contemporary monstrosity is transposed onto Victorian literature, it is useful to explore how postmodern scholars theorise the subject. In postmodernist theory, any question of the monstrous automatically becomes one of the human. For Foucault, for example, monstrosity is the otherness that undermines any concept of man as a unitary, knowable being. Rather than being something that only exists outside of and apart from us, the monstrous is there to remind us that we ourselves are not wholly ‘normal.’ The Gothic play between the horror and allure of monstrosity reinforces this process.

In any study of monsters in literature, we must also take into account how “forms of the monstrous are actually reversible as epistemic shifts take place. Thus those who so horribly execute the ‘monster’ Damiens are themselves considered ‘monsters’ by a later age” (239). Victorian monsters are the potential (or even typical) heroes of Neo-Victorian literature. We will explore how this reversal works in practice through an examination of two primary texts, one from the 20th century (Anno Dracula) and one from the 21st (Soulless). Both are vampire narratives set in Victorian England, though in each case the traditional Victorian monster receives a contemporary twist. David Punter and Glennis Byron state of the vampire that “no other monster has endured, and proliferated, in quite the same way - or been made to bear such a weight of metaphor. Confounding all categories, the vampire is the ultimate embodiment of transgression” (168). As we will see, in Neo-Victorian fiction the vampire continues to confound categories.

“Ourselves Expanded”: Rewriting the Other in Anno Dracula

Anno Dracula by Kim Newman was first published in 1992 by Simon & Schuster, and recently repackaged and reprinted by Titan Books in 2011 after a being out of print for nearly ten years. The story supplements Bram Stoker’s Victorian Gothic novel Dracula, shifting to “an alternate timetrack half-way through Stoker’s Chapter 21” (Newman Anno Dracula 456, author’s afterword), where Dracula instead outsmarts Harker, Van Helsing, and the rest of the crew. The Count arrives in England, where he succeeds in his plan to take over the British Empire, marrying the widowed Queen Victoria and becoming Prince Consort, ruling the Empire in her stead.

The novel concludes with Victoria’s suicide and Dracula’s expulsion from power, but despite their centrality to the premise of the novel, both characters only make brief appearances.

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Instead, the central characters in the work are the numerous minor figures plucked from Victorian fact and fiction that populate the novel (Lord Ruthven, Arthur Holmwood, and the Stoker family, to name a few), as well as British secret agent Charles Beauregard and centuries-old vampire Geneviève Dieudonné, who team up together to solve the mystery of the Jack the Ripper murders and end up defeating the Prince Consort in the process.

Although at the time this novel was first released the term ‘Neo-Victorian’ was not in use by either scholars or the publishing community, and was thus not attached to the work in any meaningful sense, the new edition represents a more direct attempt to link the book to the worlds of Neo-Victorian and steampunk fiction. A complete examination of the differences between the marketing of the original release and the current re-release lies outside of the scope of this thesis, but for the purposes of this discussion I will note that the 2011 edition of *Anno Dracula* has an entirely new series of footnotes, alternate endings, and other “bonus materials to sweeten the package” (Botelho). Many of these new additions also add to the self-aware Neo-Victorian redressing of the novel. For example, in the author’s afterword Newman states that he “was trying, without being too solemn, to mix things [he] felt about the 1980s, when the British Government made ‘Victorian Values’ a slogan, with the real and imagined 1880s, when blood was flowing in the fog and there was widespread social unrest” (Newman *Anno Dracula* 455).

Retrospectively, Newman thus stakes a clear claim to being a Victorian revisionist, though here he takes a stand against conservative Neo-Victorian sentiments of the 1980s.

This overtly revisionist aim on the part of the author leads us to question what Newman, apart from an enjoyable romp through the streets of Victorian London, succeeds in communicating with his Neo-Victorian *Anno Dracula*. In her 1999 chapter on Newman’s vampire novels in *Blood is the Life: Vampires in Literature*, Elizabeth Hardaway correctly points out that “Newman’s alternate-reality novels, rather than reflecting the external characterization and tone of *Dracula*, instead reflect on that work’s subtext” (Hardaway 177). In doing so, *Anno Dracula* is self-consciously engaged in playing with reader expectations of *Dracula* and *Dracula* criticism that would not have been available or readily apparent to Victorian readers.

If it does not do so through Victorian eyes, then how does *Anno Dracula* depict the monstrous, and what underlying trauma can this depiction be seen to address? Many reviews speak of *Anno Dracula* as picking up where Stoker’s *Dracula* leaves off, but in actuality it picks up neatly where 1970s scholarship leaves off, linking both Freudian and Foucauldian theories of sex, power, otherness, and foreignness built into Stoker’s *Dracula* over the years and plugging these back into what has now become a Victorian classic. Though *Anno Dracula* plays with traditional concepts of the monstrous, the monsters in *Anno Dracula* certainly do not represent the fear of Molé 11
foreignness, homosexuality, or general otherness that have been read into Stoker’s *Dracula* over the years. Instead they make these fears appear ridiculous.

To cite one example, Newman takes scholarly discussions of homoeroticism in *Dracula* and “demystifies homoeroticism by bringing it to the surface of the text and making it one more characteristic that vampires and men have in common in *Anno Dracula*” (Hardaway 179). Not only does Newman bring homoeroticism to the surface in *Anno Dracula*, he goes a step further, transforming Dracula from “a grotesquely romantic outsider” into a power-hungry politician and giving “an additional ironic twist to *Dracula*’s homoerotic subtext by making the Dracula of *Anno Dracula* aggressively homophobic” (179). Indeed, Dracula decides that he will punish sodomy by execution, and a stern Victorian public supports him: “Elsewhere in the papers there were editorials in support of the Price Consort’s newly-published edict against the ‘unnatural vice’.

While the rest of the world advanced towards the twentieth century, Britain reverted to a medieval legal system” (Newman *Anno Dracula* 119). Because this outspoken homophobia actually reflects the behaviour of many *Fin de siècle* Englishmen, the homoerotic subtext of *Dracula* becomes yet another way for Newman to make the world of the Victorians seem at once sinister and foreign and yet monstrously familiar in *Anno Dracula*. By choosing to depict Victorian issues that remain politically relevant today, Newman not only seamlessly links Dracula’s monstrous government with Victorian England in the mind of the reader, he also draws attention to the monstrousness of 1980s England, and potentially to the monstrousness of our own contemporary culture.

Newman draws on classic Victorian texts for his parodies, but he also makes liberal reference to contemporary culture (albeit culture with a Victorian past). Consider, for example, the following statement in the novel that many vampires, “especially the elders, regarded those who creep through graveyard shadows in batwing capes and fingerless black gloves as an Edinburgh gentleman might look upon a Yankee with a single Scots grandparent who [...] affects a fondness for bagpipes and haggis” (Newman *Anno Dracula* 148). This is an observation that the Victorians would have likely also found amusing, but is a specific reference to the silver screen Draculas of Bela Lugosi and Christopher Lee, with their self-consciously dapper attire and the endless array of copycats they would inspire. The novel even indirectly pokes fun at itself, and the sheer volume of the cultural material that has emerged in and after the 19th century. In the opening chapter, Dr Seward muses that “[i]n the twentieth century, new means of setting down human thought may precipitate an avalanche of worthless digression” (*Anno Dracula* 11). This statement gently mocks film and television, and is made all the more identifiable through the
proliferation of written material on the internet—a medium that had not yet reached its full potential in 1992, but that Seward (and Newman) here seems to predict.³

Newman also explores how England becomes more clearly and stereotypically definable as ‘English’ under Dracula, again deconstructing the traditional reading of this classic Gothic figure. In her analysis of the Gothic in Skin Shows, Judith Halberstam suggests that in 19th-century texts “we might consider the Gothic monster as the antithesis of ‘Englishness’” (14).

Although this statement relates specifically to her analysis of the racial ‘otherness’ often found in Gothic fiction, her argument seems to ring true where many other aspects of the Gothic monster are concerned as well. In Stoker’s Dracula, the Count is not only racially different from the Englishmen, but also emotionally, spiritually, religiously, and culturally distinct. He is thoroughly un-English, however hard he may try to affect Englishness. Though this remains true on some levels in Anno Dracula, the installation of Dracula as Prince Consort and the vampires roaming the streets ultimately fail to make much of a change to stereotypical Victorian society, to great comic effect. Newman pokes continuous fun at the Victorians, their hobbies, their beliefs, and their fears, and the way that adding vampires to the Victorian landscape seems to actually make these things sound more plausible. Charles Beauregard reads about murders in the paper (Anno Dracula 118), and in the light of the Jack the Ripper killings this everyday human cruelty is depicted as being rather mundane—something we as readers can imagine being true for the Victorians and their sensationalised media as well.

The vampire Prime Minister Ruthven ultimately dismisses the apparent monstrousness of this new England under Dracula with the statement that “[w]e should all like to believe the English incapable of atrocious conduct, but such is not the case” (Newman Anno Dracula 160).

In Ruthven’s eyes, the English are themselves responsible for the apparent decay of their country, and while Dracula may have hastened their fall from grace, but they were well on their way to being monstrous all on their own. At one point, Lord Ruthven contemplates “the dread possibility that Alfred, Lord Tennyson, will hold the post of poet laureate for dreary centuries. Egads, imagine Locksley Hall Six Hundred Years After” (Anno Dracula 67). Ruthven also takes a jab at the Victorian concerns about religion:

³ Heilmann and Llewellyn characterise this kind of ‘self-consciousness’ as a particular feature of Neo-Victorianism, as opposed to other aspects of contemporary culture, “which embrace historical settings but do not involve themselves to such a high degree in the self-analytic drive that accompanies ‘neo-Victorianism’” (5). Though this is true to a point, I would tend to agree instead with Hutcheon’s assessment that all postmodernist fiction is reflexively historical and parodical. In this view, it is not academic self-awareness that defines what can be counted as historiographic metafiction (or Neo-Victorianism)—instead the emphasis is on the degree to which a text is engaged in parody of earlier historical periods, something Hutcheon argues all postmodernist texts do (The Politics of Postmodernism 126).
'Were you aware,' began Lord Ruthven, 'that there are people in these isles whose sole objection to the marriage of our dear Queen [...] to Vlad Dracula [...] is that the happy bridegroom happened once to be, in a fashion I shan’t pretend to understand, a Roman Catholic?' (Anno Dracula 61).

Contemporary readers of this statement who have any knowledge of English history can well imagine that Victorian subjects would be willing to forgive all manner of sins in a monarch (even vampirism), provided he is not a believer of this much-hated foreign religion. This humourous observation also highlights the widespread secularisation of vampires in contemporary fiction, a key factor in their potential to be seen as sympathetic figures. As Hardaway points out, "is the secularization of Dracula and, even more importantly, of vampires in general that finally transforms Stoker’s ‘Demonic Other’ into Newman’s ‘ourselves expanded’" (Hardaway 185).

Newman goes a long way to demonstrate that whether we are talking about the Victorian era or our own, the difference between man and monster is not at all as great as the reader might initially assume. In this he avoids the formula in which (according to Halberstam) “in the Gothic, crime is embodied within a specifically deviant form—the monster—that announces itself (demonstrates) as the place of corruption” (Halberstam 2). Rather than depicting monsters as ‘specifically deviant’ beings, Newman underlines the monster in everyone. In a later installment of the series, The Bloody Red Baron (1995), Anno Dracula protagonist Charles Beauregard speculates that vampires “are not a race apart. Not all demons and monsters. They’re simply ourselves expanded. From birth, we change in a million ways. Vampires are more changed than the warm” (Newman The Bloody Red Baron 79). For Newman, everyone is in fact caught up in “a painful fusion in which all, warm and vampire, carry the seeds of their own destruction” (186).

The two clearly definable ‘monsters’ in Anno Dracula are a human and a vampire, alternately, and neither is truly vilified in the novel. The novel’s first ‘monster’ is one of its key narrators, Dr Jack Seward, who is revealed to be the serial killer Jack the Ripper. In Anno Dracula, Seward was slowly driven mad by the events of Dracula (namely the death of Lucy) and the Count’s subsequent reign. He runs a vampire halfway house for the newly undead, using it to find victims for his night-time rampages. For all his monstrousness, however, even Seward is a sympathetic character. Early in the novel, Geneviève notes that many “who’d lived through the changes were like him, older than their years” (Newman Anno Dracula 26). Seward comes to view his earlier actions in Dracula as erroneous, noting: “If I had known that vampirism was primarily a physical condition and not a spiritual one, Lucy might be un-dead still” (Anno Dracula 115). This thought only serves to drive him further into madness.

During the course of the novel Seward comes to feel that the murders are actually wrong. He becomes physically involved with a vampire prostitute, pretending that she is Lucy, and
comes to the personal discovery that he never truly loved the ‘warm’ Lucy at all, but rather the
sexually awakened vampire Lucy. Though Seward dies at the hands of Geneviève and Beauregard
towards the end of the novel, it is a mercy killing, and Geneviève states to Beauregard that Seward
was insane, “and not responsible” (Anno Dracula 395). When Beauregard asks who is responsible,
her reply is the “thing who drove him mad” (Anno Dracula 395). The implication is that the
‘thing’ who drove Seward mad is Dracula, but although this reference is de-humanising it is also
vague, and leaves the reader somewhat uncertain who to blame for the events of the novel. Even
the Prince Consort fails to achieve the same kind of monstrousness he did in Stoker’s Dracula. He
is also robbed of his agency through the idea, mentioned offhand in Anno Dracula, that his
bloodline is simply tainted, rendering him and all of his offspring inferior and malformed at best,
and insane at worst.

In additional support of the blurred line between monster and man, criminal and victim,
the novel is full of characters who do not change much after they became vampires, like the
Comissioner, “a soldier before he was a policeman and now a vampire before he was a
soldier” (Newman Anno Dracula 22). One key (and revealing) relationship in the novel is the
grudging friendship between the human Inspector Mackenzie and the Carpathian vampire
Kostaki, who are initially very disdainful of each other’s physical state. These two characters work
together to keep public order as panic over the Ripper murders escalates, and they form a strange
rapport as a result. The relationship causes both characters to admit that the other is not so
different after all. When Mackenzie reacts negatively to Kostaki’s suggestion that he become a
vampire, Kostaki asks him: “What is more unnatural? To live, or to die?”, to which Mackenzie
replies: “To live off others”. Kostaki retorts by arguing: “Who can say they do not live off
others?” (Anno Dracula 278). In other words, though vampires literally live on the blood of
humans, humans are equally capable of metaphorically ‘sucking the lifeblood’ of those around
them. Kostaki then points out that he and Mackenzie have more in common than Mackenzie and
Jack the Ripper do, even though Mackenzie and Jack are both warm. To this, Mackenzie can only
respond: “You have me there Kostaki. I confess it. I’m a copper first and a living man
second” (Anno Dracula 278). Against the backdrop of greed, brutality, and mass hysteria, both
Mackenzie and Kostaki are equally (in)human, united by one goal.

At one point, Beauregard asks Geneviève why she dislikes Dracula and his Carpathian
guard so much, to which she replies: “No one dislikes a Jewish or Italian degenerate more than a
Jew or an Italian” (Anno Dracula 208). Geneviève is not opposed to Dracula because he is a
vampire, with all the associated symbolism of the vampire, but because he is a bad vampire, who
conforms to the degenerate stereotype and discredits the good behaviour of the rest of the group.
This focus on the link (or lack thereof) between physical monstrosity and morality relates to how, as Gutleben and Wolfreys outline, “trauma—or rather the reflection upon trauma—has in itself an ethical virtue, since it entails an exodus from oneself and an openness to the traumas of others” (63). The way Anno Dracula makes victims out of villains invites the reader to identify with the vampire characters, traditionally Othered, and to accept that as with humans, monsters come in moral and immoral varieties.

If, as Kohlke and Gutleben suggest, the Neo-Victorian novel can be read as a kind of therapy, then the trauma Anno Dracula addresses is not traditional Otherness with a capital O, but rather the postmodern problem of otherness-to-ourselves, in which we come to see “the human’ in narrative as caught up in a network of signs which actually construct it in terms of the relations and differences internal to the signifying network itself. The human became an effect of the system, rather than the reverse” (Gibson 245). In effect this means that instead of the power being in the hands of a transcendent and universal human nature that is capable of shaping narrative, postmodern culture sees the human (and the self) as the construction of a communal narrative that individuals are ultimately powerless to change, and which is thus constantly perpetuated. 4 In turning to narratives of the inhuman, Victorian Gothic figured the monstrous as a foil to the human. In the way literature once turned to the monstrous in order to highlight the differences between the Other and the Self, it "subverted anthropocentrism only by fleeing to its opposite. It thus lent support to the very structure of thinking that, ostensibly, it set out to question” (Gibson 245). In highlighting the ways monsters are not like humans, such literature effectively paints (in negative) a portrait of the ideal human, as separate from the monstrous as ever. Contemporary Gothic texts like Anno Dracula seek to avoid such binary concepts of self and other, sidestepping the classic narrative of monster versus human to explore the question of monstrosity itself.

Most obviously, Anno Dracula is a speculative novel about the world we might have lived in had the fictional character of Dracula escaped from the pages of Stoker’s novel and become ruler of the Empire on which the sun never sets. In other ways, it is also a novel about how, metaphorically, this is exactly what happened—the ‘other’ has set up shop close to home, but not in the way the Victorians or even the 20th-century critics of Dracula might have feared. Instead, the other is each of us, estranged from ourselves by traumas of self-estrangement set in motion in the Victorian era and settling upon the postmodern self. In many ways, the vampire-filled Victorian London represented in Anno Dracula is our world, and the novel sets up this parallel

4 As Linda Hutcheon puts it: “After all, we can only ‘know’ (as opposed to ‘experience’) the world through our narratives (past and present) of it, or so postmodernism argues” (A Poetics of Postmodernism 128).
very effectively. Newman makes both the real Victorian England and the world of Stoker’s *Dracula* (and following criticism) into a circus-ground for contemporary readers,\(^5\) in which they find their own fears, and not those of the Victorians, reflected in the funhouse mirrors.

Instead of ending with an epic battle and the death of Dracula, in *Anno Dracula* the Prince Consort is rather anti-climactically defeated by Victoria’s suicide. The throne will pass to one of her human heirs (many of whom, it is implied, are worse options than Dracula), and history will continue as scheduled—not even the horror of Dracula as Prince Consort can make a dent in the inexorable progress of modernity. The trauma hinted at in *Anno Dracula* is the contemporary self’s loss of a part of its identity, brought about in part by the attempted exclusion of otherness and monstrosity in its narratives, and the novel ends without offering a viable solution to or replacement for these losses. After debunking the monstrous other, Newman’s novel leaves the reader with nothing to replace it other than a vague and unspecific emptiness, which is perhaps most terrifying of all: “After they were past the piked skull of Abraham Van Helsing, Geneviève looked back and saw only darkness” (*Anno Dracula* 424). Not only is this an abrupt and unexpected ending, it echoes the history of the monstrous in literature and culture, in which we have moved from a tradition of boldly-outlined monsters and Others to the monstrous self-as-other of contemporary literature, looking back to the past for answers but finding only darkness.

**Better Off Monstrous: *Soulless* and the Inversion of the Vampire Problem**

Another Neo-Victorian text that deals with similar themes (though much less subtly) is Gail Carriger’s 2009 novel *Soulless*, the first book of the now-completed Parasol Protectorate series. Numerous titles in this series have climbed the New York Times bestseller list, and its popularity has resulted in a number of spinoff novels. In their introduction to the Gothic, Punter and Byron explain that “[i]n nineteenth-century vampire fiction, the representation of the vampire as monstrous, evil and other serves to guarantee the existence of good, reinforcing the formally dichotomized structures of belief” (270), but in this alternate-history novel, it is vampires who are responsible for the world’s philosophical and technological achievements. The Dark Ages are depicted as the period when vampires, werewolves, and other supernatural creatures lived in secret. A number of other historical details, such as the premise that the American pilgrims left for the New World because they disapproved of these

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\(^5\) Newman even alludes to this himself when he talks about how he tweaked certain dates in *Anno Dracula* to fit his timeline, stating: “This allows me to make the novel as much a playground as a minefield, and go beyond historical accuracy to evoke all those gaslit, fogbound London romances” (*Newman Anno Dracula* 453).
supernatural beings (instead of their religious extremism), serve to round out the novel’s self-stated revisionist approach to 19th-century England.

In addition to this monster role reversal, with supernaturals serving as the political mainstream and humans aspiring to someday join their ranks, in the world of the Parasol Protectorate supernatural beings actually possess an excess of ‘soul’ rather than being soulless as superstition had previously held. This excess soul is precisely what allows them to keep on living once they have technically died. The protagonist of the series is Alexia Tarabotti, a half-Italian, half-English spinster from a family of moderate standing. She is also what the novel refers to as a ‘preturnatural’: someone capable of neutralising supernatural abilities with a single touch. Ms Tarabotti is able to do this because she is, as the first book’s title states, ‘soulless.’

Though the novel’s aims may be revisionist, *Soulless* is clearly enamoured first and foremost with the superficial trinkets and trappings of the 19th century, and it is filled with stereotypical Victorian details. It is rare for the reader to go a chapter without reading about someone having tea, and gleeful references to parasols, carriages, and bustles abound. Unlike in *Anno Dracula*, little attention is paid to environmental or historical details from the Victorian era that are anything more than superficial, and the stars of Victorian fiction are absent from its pages. The main basis for categorising *Soulless* as Neo-Victorian comes from the book’s marketing blurb, which describes the book as “a comedy of manners set in Victorian London: full of werewolves, vampires, dirigibles, and tea-drinking”. The novel’s American author, Gail Carriger (the pen name of Tofa Borregaard), is a self-professed Anglophile, who in her author biography makes much of the English side of her background, even mentioning that although she lives in the ‘Colonies’, she “insists on tea imported from London” (Carriger, author blurb).

Although this novel represents a less serious attempt than that of *Anno Dracula* to superimpose substantial contemporary concerns onto a real Victorian past, *Soulless* can still provide interesting perspectives on the Neo-Victorian monstrous. As in *Anno Dracula*, the monstrous and supernatural is demystified (or rather, normalised). In the world of *Soulless*, supernatural creatures have been part of public history for a long time, and the facts of their existence are common knowledge. When she is attacked by a vampire who does not seem to know what she is, Alexia Tarabotti is “surprised. Supernatural creatures, be they vampires, werewolves, or ghosts, owed their existence to an overabundance of soul, an excess that refused to die. Most knew that others like Miss Tarabotti existed, born without any soul at all” (Carriger 8). Though in the end this ‘soul’ is shown to be merely a specific pattern of electrical impulses in

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6 The word ‘tea’ appears 46 times over just 251 pages.
the body,\(^7\) the reversal of the standard premise is rare enough to merit notice, particularly given Halberstam’s observation that “Victorian monsters produced and were produced by an emergent conception of the self as a body which enveloped a soul, as a body, indeed, enthralled to its soul” (2). It is also unusual that the author chose to incorporate the concept of the soul at all, given that this generally religious concept has been abandoned in most of the secular vampire literature of the 20th and 21st centuries.

*Soulless* is not atypical in its other depictions of vampires, however. In a manner that should be familiar to readers of recent vampire fiction, London’s supernatural subset are glorified as educated, cultured, and discerning in a way that far surpasses their mundane human counterparts. This is once again attributed to excess soul: in the series, musicians, actors, and other artists often have the best chance of surviving the transition into one of the undead. Alexia, on the other hand, lacks artistic sentiment because she lacks a soul, and has to do her best to appreciate the arts through what she can learn from books. This becomes evident when she visits a vampire hive, which is richly decorated and furnished with an art collection that spans lifetimes: “Alexia did not have the soul to truly appreciate any of it. However, she understood style well enough to know that it surrounded her” (Carriger 62). Alexia instead turns to science, preferring her “bluestocking” (15) ways to her sisters’ preoccupation with fashion and society.

*Soulless* openly addresses a fear of becoming Victorian, instead suggesting that we might better turn to their monsters as examples. In *Soulless*, the true monsters are the conformists. Alexia’s odiously ‘proper’ sisters and mother, who mock her for being a swarthy, bookish spinster, evoke far more horror than the vampire Lord Akeldama, Alexia’s homosexual friend and sometime protector. Unlike *Anno Dracula*, *Soulless* is not directed at an audience who fears the monster within or the inseparability of the other and the self—the novel embraces all things traditionally ‘monstrous’: Those supernatural characters who do not exhibit some kind of alternative sexuality are Othered in different ways—often racially. Lord Maccon, the leader of the werewolf pack, is a Scotsman, which Carriger frequently emphasises. In addition to being a preternatural, Alexia is half Italian, and is “tall, and brown, and [has] a large nose, and large everything else” (Carriger 209), which keeps her from finding a husband. She is also intellectually Other, depicted as combining womanly compassion with a scientific mind.

Though Alexia is depicted as a rational and level-headed girl who is extremely interested in science, the actual scientists in the novel are depicted very negatively. Scientists are ultimately the worst of the monsters in *Soulless*, playing the part usually allotted to members of religious

\(^7\) “Because supernatural beings react to light: were-wolves to the moon and vampires to the sun. Light, we are beginning to theorize, is but another form of electricity; thus, we believe the two may be connected” (Carriger 189).
organisations in yet another role reversal. The Hypocras Club pursues science zealously, subjecting supernaturals to all manner of inhumane experiments in their quest to understand what makes them tick. It is revealed that they maintain an irrational hatred of the supernatural, which they feel makes a mockery of their discipline. They wish to abuse science to study vampires against their will, with the ultimate goal of destroying them and taking over the world they have built. When they ask Alexia to participate in their experiments, she replies:

I am beginning to understand [...] who is the monster. What you are doing is farther [sic] from natural than vampires or werewolves could ever get. You are profaning creation [...] It is you, Mr. Siemons, who is the abomination (Carriger 216).

The traditional scholars of the natural world thus become its monsters, and its monsters become its saviours.

Conclusion

The trauma indicated by monsters in contemporary Neo-Victorian fiction is elusive and shifting, as we can clearly see from the amicable portrayals of traditional Victorian monsters in Anno Dracula and Soulless. In these two works of Neo-Victorian vampire fiction, the traumatised self (the reader) pre/rediscovers itself in multiple nineteenth-century others, but this discovery is revealed as being meaningless, because true monstrousness has little to do with established tropes. There is no self to discover through the monsters—self and other have both become too fragmented to pin down. In many cases the forces of tradition and normativity are marked as monstrous, but more often than not a person's monstrousness is simply a matter of circumstance. In the words of Judith Halberstam, in contemporary Gothic the monster is no longer totalising:

The monstrous body that once represented everything is now represented as potentially meaning anything—it may be the outcast, the outlaw, the parasite, the pervert, the embodiment of the uncontrollable sexual and violent urges, the foreigner, the misfit. The monster is all of these but monstrosity has become a conspiracy of bodies rather than a singular form (Halberstam 27).

Botting agrees with Halberstam, if rather pessimistically, stating that vampires, like many other Gothic figures, “now disclose only the formlessness, the consuming void, underlying the flickering thrills of contemporary western simulations” (Botting “Aftergothic” 298). This inability to define the monstrous reflects our inability to define the self. Intentionally or unintentionally, these two Neo-Victorian monster texts also exploit and de-sanctify the contemporary reader’s expectations regarding the completeness of the Victorian text/self, exposing this as no more than an illusion. In contemporary Gothic, monsters are us, and we are all monstrous. In these texts, the only sin is and always was choosing to be monstrous and
intolerant (as in *Anno Dracula*) or in thoughtlessly embracing conformity, failing to actively seek out and embrace everyday otherness (as in *Soulless*).

Though the monstrous, as something other, is in some ways incalculable (we can only attempt to imagine it—we can never realise something fully 'other' or it would be unrecognisable), art can still address the monstrous, precisely as part of a "critical ontology of ourselves" (Foucault *The Archaeology of Knowledge* 50). On the one hand, images of the monstrous can help us to become more human, in that despite the blurring of boundaries between self and other, through their difference monsters can still help us to define who we are or who we would like to be, though at the same time we risk falling into old stereotypes of the human that exclude large parts of humanity, and even of ourselves. On the other hand, as Gibson notes, monstrosity can also work "to undermine anthropocentrism" (244) by helping us to identify with the monster and imagine ourselves as other. Though this is arguably just another way of inventing the human, it is also a way of constructing subjectivity that does not necessarily marginalise the other. In any case, this blurring between human and inhuman indicates, as Botting suggests, that we live in Gothic times (Botting “Aftergothic” 287). This means that, while horror still has power, in contemporary Gothic this power is of a new and different nature.

What, then, is the power of horror in contemporary literature, and to what end is it employed? I personally favour Gibson’s theory, in which the reader is able to assume real power of interpretation and revision precisely through resisting its expressions. In his words, such resistance is precisely “to begin to think of narrative in terms of monstrosity, to turn aside from the clarity with which narratology conceives of its objects” (271). According to Gibson, we can all potentially become enabled readers if only we remain open to the inherent otherness of contemporary texts:

The thought of narrative monstrosity also implies a reader involved—like Foucault’s ‘knower’—in ‘straying afield of himself’. He or she would be endowed, not with the ‘curiosity’ that merely ‘seeks to assimilate’ (or even reflect back on), but with that curiosity ‘which enables one to get free of oneself’ (272).

These contemporary texts, which play with themes of racial, sexual, or cultural discrimination, ultimately instruct us to keep an open mind about otherness in others, and to be aware of the otherness in ourselves. The difference is that in monster fiction, the lesson is playful rather than stern. Monsters are just people in disguise, with the added benefit that the text has the space to claim a certain degree of immunity from social, political, and cultural criticism—because after all, monsters are not real. Monstrous fiction sidesteps the binds of power described by Foucault,
imposing internal checks in greater and greater measure upon the contemporary, traumatised self. As Gibson points out, “if power increasingly determines interiority and individuality and seeks to attach all singularity to known and recognised identities, the thought of monstrosity is a liberating thought. It affirms the right to difference and variation, the possibility of becoming other” (Gibson 271). As long as we are capable of envisioning ourselves as monstrous or aberrant, we are capable of transcending ourselves and the boundaries imposed on those selves by systems of power.
3 Historical Burdens and Monstrous Utopias

Having examined how Victorian monsters are re-written in examples of Neo-Victorian vampire fiction, we can see how monstrous bodies in Neo-Victorian fiction symbolise (and problematise) the relationship between self and other. We can also begin to explore the relationship of the monstrous to memory and history, both in the Victorian period and in the context of postmodernism. In their discussion of trauma in the Neo-Victorian novel, Kohlke and Gutleben specifically choose the historical novel because “it could be said to mimic the double temporality of traumatic consciousness, whereby the subject occupies, at one and the same time, both the interminable present moment of the catastrophe which, continuously re-lived, refuses to be relegated to the past, and the post-traumatic present that seems to come after but is paradoxically coterminous” (2). In other words, when reading Neo-Victorian novels we both live in the virtual past, during the moment of catastrophe that we make present through reading it, and in an actual present rendered futuristic through our displacement of ourselves in the past.

The way Kohlke and Gutleben describe this feature of Neo-Victorian fiction is evocative of Linda Hutcheon’s discussions of historiographic metafiction, which she defines as “those well-known and popular novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages” (A Poetics of Postmodernism 5). As Hutcheon later notes, a key contributor to this paradox is postmodernist literature’s substantial use of irony, which she defines as “a doubled or split discourse which has the potential to subvert from within” (Splitting Images 73). According to Hutcheon, this is “a popular rhetorical strategy for working within existing discourses and contesting them at the same time” (Splitting Images 73). Both as examples of traumatic consciousness and historiographic metafiction, Neo-Victorian novels are thus capable of allowing us to lay claim to the past by imagining it as present, but are also capable of rewriting the present by allowing us to view it as a construction, shaped by an equally constructed past.
Unnatural Sanity: *Poor Things* and the Problem of History

Alasdair Gray’s *Poor Things* is a very different kind of monster narrative than either *Anno Dracula* or *Soulless* (though all three are examples of historiographic metafiction). Published in 1992 (the same year as *Anno Dracula*), this delightfully strange novel tells a new version of the *Frankenstein* story, in which both the protagonist and the very form of the text are patchwork creations. *Poor Things* has been described by critics as “An odd combination of *Pygmalion* and *The Island of Dr. Moreau*” (Henscher 32), “a retelling of both *Frankenstein* and *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*” (Kaczvinsky 791), and a collection of “various nineteenth-century potboilers” (Hawley 175). One reviewer commented that “interpreting *Poor Things* is like peeling an onion” (Harvie 38). More than mere juxtaposition and pastiche, *Poor Things* parodies its own form. One of the novel’s ‘factual’ narrators exclaims, “What morbid Victorian fantasy has [this story] NOT filched from?” (Gray 272-73), and in the spoof review found on the book’s opening pages *Poor Things* is denounced as “yet another exercise in Victorian pastiche, a fictional genre which deserves to be neglected [for a] century or two” (Gray v).

From at least three separate accounts we are presented with the story of one woman alternately called Victoria Blessington, Bella Baxter, and Victoria McCandless. The novel is edited by ‘Alasdair Gray’, the fictional doppelgänger of the author, who has put the book together in its patchwork state, combining publishing and historical notes, etchings allegedly produced by Scottish painter and engraver William Strang, and the book *Episodes from the Early Life of a Scottish Public Health Officer* by Archibald McCandless, which he has retitled *Poor Things* because “Things are often mentioned in the story and every single character […] is called poor or call themselves that at sometime or other” (xiii, original italics). McCandless is the primary narrator of *Poor Things*, and his part of the book is also divided between his first-person narration and the various letters, articles, and images that he comes across during the events he narrates.

From the account of events provided by McCandless, we can gather that a pregnant Victoria committed suicide on February 18, 1881, after which her body was recovered by the great scientist Godwin Baxter. Baxter reanimated her body, but only after replacing her brain with that of her unborn child, dubbing his creation Bella Baxter and raising her to be a new person. Following all this is a letter written by Victoria McCandless (nee Blessington), which was found with the manuscript for *Episodes from the Early Life of a Scottish Public Health Officer*, and refutes

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8 Throughout the rest of this thesis, the character of Bella Baxter/Victoria Blessington will be referred to in one of three ways, which also reflect how she is referred to within the text itself. So when we are dealing with the woman from the McCandless narrative, she will be referred to as Bella. When discussing the woman depicted in the closing letter, her name will become Victoria. When we are talking about the character as a whole, or when it is not entirely clear which persona is being represented, we will refer to this woman as Bella/Victoria.
most of what Arthur McCandless relates. According to Victoria, she was at no point pregnant and she certainly did not commit suicide—instead, she simply ran away from a loveless marriage to the upper-class English war hero General Blessington (and an unwanted clitorectomy), all of which was preceded by an unhappy and impoverished childhood. According to her letter, after escaping her first marriage she went to live with Godwin Baxter and his mother, who trained her to be both a doctor and “an unprejudiced, straightforward Scotswoman” (259). Victoria describes Baxter as “the only man I have truly loved” (259), though he refuses her advances on the grounds that he has inherited a “syphilitic illness” (266), which will result in his untimely death. This leads her to settle for the “convenient” (251) substitute of the jealous and impotent Archibald McCandless. ‘Alasdair Gray’, openly biased towards Archibald’s order of events, dismisses this letter as that of “a disturbed woman who wants to hide the truth about her start in life” (xiii).

*Poor Things* is an amalgam of literary techniques and narratives, but also of historical and philosophical ones. On both a narrative and a formal level, *Poor Things* is a book uniquely self-conscious of the problems of memory, history, and literature in a postmodernist context. *Poor Things* presents these competing dialogues as inextricably intertwined narratives, using the “gorgeous monster” (Gray 91) that is Bella Baxter as a metaphor to discuss the boundary between the other and the self, and to explore questions of the science of history and memory. As Joanna Malecka describes in her deconstructivist analysis of *Poor Things*, “Bella embodies the main concerns of the novel: the blurring of boundaries between concepts (such as centre-periphery; memory/forgetfulness; life/death), and the continuous questioning of their definitions” (147). Her body (and her mind) becomes a historical artifact, explained through text and often literally part of the text, as on the front and back covers of the McCandless excerpt, where her naked form peers out from the mouth of a skull. Various anatomical drawings throughout the book also invite the link between Bella’s metaphorical construction as a subject and her literal construction by Godwin Baxter.

Like Bella/Victoria, *Poor Things* is fragmented and multiple, suffering from too much fact here and not enough there, but still somehow allowing the reader to draw a complete picture. Victoria also takes the liberty of interpreting her other ‘self’, specifically a portrait near the beginning of the novel:

*The portrait of me is copied from one in an illustrated newspaper of 1896, and strikes me as a good likeness. If you ignore the Gainsborough hat and pretentious nickname it shows I am a plain, sensible woman, not the naive Lucrezia Borgia and La Belle Dame Sans Merci described in the text.* (Gray 251, original italics)
Even Victoria’s statement contradicts itself—the image is a good likeness, provided you ignore certain aspects of it. Whichever account of events the reader accepts as ‘true’, the traumatic event that causes Victoria Blessington to adopt the name Bella Baxter forms the centre of the Bella/Victoria narrative. How this trauma is experienced and characterised, however, clearly differs radically between accounts, and has a great deal to do with how the mind-body split in the account is envisioned. The text as a whole is obsessed with the interaction between mind and body, memory and culture, history and present, and draws parallels between these alternately abstract and pragmatic topics. In doing so, it explores both the vital nature of the former (mind, memory, history) in shaping and informing the latter (body, culture, present), but also the impossibility of separating the one from the other with any kind of scientific objectivity.

In the first narrative—where Victoria’s brain is replaced with that of her unborn child to create Bella, a new being in an old body—the split between the mind and body is literal. Through the transplantation of a new brain, Bella/Victoria becomes a completely new person. Following the line of thought laid out by posthumanist scholars such as N. Katherine Hayles, however, who argue that as the mind commands the body, so the body defines what the mind can command, Bella’s old body also exerts its influence upon her new mind on multiple levels. Not only does the body dictate things like accent (Gray three.v/four.v) and sexual appetite (three.v/six.v), it also becomes clear that in the eyes of the law, the body takes precedence. When General Blessington comes to retrieve his former wife, his lawyer makes it clear that the diagnoses of “a horde of foreign brain doctors” (223) do not absolve her of her marital duties. Whether or not she remembers being General Blessington’s wife, legally they are still married. In this case, lack of memory (or lack of mind entirely) do not absolve a person of the actions of their body.

Though Bella Baxter’s body/mind split is literal, the metaphorical mind/body split of Victoria McCandless is no less significant. In Victoria’s letter at the end of Poor Things, she describes how she came to live with Godwin Baxter. After being trained alternately as a poor man’s wife and a rich man’s wife, she decides to abandon the traditional role of a wife entirely. As John Hawley points out, Bella/Victoria is not only monstrous in the Frankenstein sense, but also in that she becomes the New Woman “so feared in late Victorian society” (175). Victoria thus tries on many different selves before learning to be self-aware, discovering that “what the scullery-maid and the master’s daughter have in common, apart from their similar ages and bodies” is that they “are allowed to decide nothing for themselves” (Gray 263). Victoria’s transformation is another kind of re-birth, a metaphorical parallel with Bella’s literal re-birth in her mother’s body. Much as with Bella’s transformation, however, Victoria’s mental evolution into an independent intellectual does not stop an unforgiving Victorian public from prioritizing her body over her
mind, branding her as an “unwomanly woman” (304), and dismissing her medical work as creating effeminate “mother’s boys” (309).

One marked difference between the two accounts of Bella/Victoria's life and re-birth is the place of memory, specifically as it relates to both personal and national identity. Before running away with Duncan Wedderburn, Bella explains to Archie that she is “only half a woman [...] I need more past” (Gray 61). She also responds very positively whenever others share their earlier memories, stating: “I am a collector of childhoods since that collision destroyed all memory of my own” (50). Bella must make up for her lack of childhood memories by learning all she can about the world (and about herself) in the present. In Bella's account of her journey with Wedderburn across Europe, she meets an un-named Russian gambler who seems to confirm this link between memory and identity. On the one hand, he argues that “a nation is only as old as its literature” (115), and moreover that people “who care nothing for their country's stories and songs [...] are like people without a past—without a memory—they are half-people” (116). On the other hand, Bella notes that in the USA and Russia the people “seem more ready to talk to strangers without being formal or disapproving” (115), speculating that this is because the country, like herself, has very little past weighing it down. It is also revealed that Bella's unusual clarity, sanity, intelligence, and kindness all stem from her lack of memory of her childhood. As Godwin Baxter puts it: “Nature gives children remarkable emotional resilience to help them survive the oppressions of being small, but these oppressions still make them into slightly insane adults” (69). Bella's body was always strong, lovely, and adult, suggesting that it is the condition or trauma of being weak, ugly, and young that causes most of society's problems.

In contrast, Victoria McCandless characterises her re-birth as one of intense memory, in which God “would not let me forget anything I had already learned” (Gray 262). It is this excess of memory, not a lack of it, which allows her to clearly see the problems with the world and how to begin solving them. In denouncing Episodes from the Early Life of a Scottish Public Health Officer, Victoria also explains what she views as Archie's ‘trauma’ in the context of memory and expectation: “having had a childhood which privileged people would have thought 'no childhood' he wrote a book suggesting that God had none either” (Gray 273). If too much of the wrong kind of memory can produce immoral and ‘slightly insane’ adults, then clearly an excess of the right kind of memory can instill a person with the same sense of civic and social responsibility that Bella's entirely clean slate seems to do. It is also clear that in some cases the correct interpretation or implementation of a memory is as important as the presence of one.

The question remains how this discussion of mind and body can be applied to broader understandings of memory and culture. In his book Searching for Memory, Daniel Schachter
place emphasis on the role that ‘cues’ play in memory. In other words, he explores the importance of the context in which memory is recalled, and in which the original memories were shaped. Rather than envisioning memory as one static imprint, Schachter describes it as a fluid process than continues into the present, shaped and re-shaped by the constant intermingling of old memories with various cues and new memories. We constantly see this process at work in Poor Things, especially as readers, where we receive multiple accounts (or ‘memories’) of the same events (or ‘cues’) that constantly change our evaluation of the novel as a whole. In an article called “Memory, Distortion, and History in the Museum” Susan A. Crane likens this system of memory to a museum, as “one which confounds as much as it synthesizes information, by bringing together ‘cues’ or artifacts and historians or rememberers to interact in the production of memory” (50). This process also sounds very familiar to postmodernist definitions of literature, in which readers and critics interact with textual cues in a particular historical context to produce meaning.

As early as 1966 Hayden White noted that the production and definition of meaning and memory in the arts and sciences did not correspond to the historian’s way of viewing the world. For White, when the historian of the late 20th century claims that “history is a combination of science and art, they generally mean that it is a combination of late nineteenth-century social science and mid-nineteenth century art” (127, original italics). This dedication to portraying events in a ‘natural’, chronologically ordered, Victorian way still forms the foundation for the way the general public view the progression of history, but this contrasts with the postmodernist distrust of systems and grand narratives, which White indicated had already lead to widespread distrust in the historian: “Contemporary Western man has good reason to be obsessed by his sense of the uniqueness of his problems and is justifiably convinced that the historical record as presently provided offers little help in the quest for adequate solutions to those problems” (124). Poor Things may provide a solution to the problems White goes on to outline—particularly his assertion that ‘the historical record as presented’ in neat and linear form is rightly perceived by the general public as faulty.

On the narrative level, Poor Things is self-referentially occupied with a discussion of history in a postmodernist context, but also with the value of depicting history from a Victorian perspective. It both gives a surprisingly accurate picture of the Victorian era and deconstructs our expectations of how the Victorians should be read from the perspective of the present. As Hutcheon points out, the paradox of postmodern parody is that this parody does not set out “to destroy the past; in fact to parody is both to enshrine the past and to question it” (A Poetics of Postmodernism 126). In Poor Things we have Archibald McCandless, who serves as a
stereotypically conservative Victorian, suspicious of science and art alike: “I hate mysteries Baxter!’ I told him, ‘especially the man-made sort which are always a fraud” (Gray 21). Godwin Baxter is also a stereotypical Victorian, but of the fantastical ‘mad scientist’ variety. God’s physical monstrosity is matched by his heretical scientific practices and opinions. In the way he practices science, God is behaves much like a mystic, arguing: “Our great scientists have cleared away these mysteries in some directions by deepening them in others” (100). In the heated discussion between the American Dr Hooker and the “obvious Englishman” (129) Harry Astley, the debate over who ‘owns’ a particular language—and who owns cultural memory—surfaces in their discussion on the politics of using the King James Translation of the Bible rather than the original Greek and Hebrew to introduce foreign peoples to Christianity (131). As the novel progresses it becomes increasingly clear that there is no objective truth to any of these opinions—except perhaps McCandless’s allegation that man-made mysteries are always a lie.

Poor Things continuously demonstrates how history and its scholars are often suspect, and it does so by explicitly undermining the figure of the author and historian, exemplified by ‘Alasdair Gray’ the editor, whose methods for sifting truth from fiction in Poor Things are dubious at best. At one point ‘Gray’ examines the other (fictional) books McCandless has published in order to show how terrible and lacking in detail they are, and how, by contrast, the fact that Episodes from the Early Life of a Scottish Public Health Officer is both detailed and ‘good’ proves that it cannot be a fiction (Gray 301). In the cold and analytical (yet wildly speculative) way ‘Alasdair Gray’ analyses the texts arrayed before him, one cannot help but feel that the real Gray, as an educated, ‘literary’ author, is poking fun at the critics he knows will read his books. It is not hard to relate literary criticism to God’s definition of morbid anatomy, which “leads many doctors into thinking that life is is an agitation in something essentially dead. They treat patients’ bodies as if the minds, the lives were of no account” (17). Many scholars and literary historians are guilty of reading texts as though they are static objects, and as if the life of the book, informed by its context but also its history of reception and readership, is irrelevant.

In ridiculing both the 19th-century scholar and the contemporary one, texts like Poor Things question the validity of the generalisation made by Heilmann and Llewellyn that Neo-Victorian texts are only after “the comfort we still desire, from the classic realist mode” (27). Some Neo-Victorian texts represent both the “contemporary fragmentation of narrative structure at the level of the historical narrative” and the “attempt to return to the ostensible security of coherent narrative structures and textual order as represented by the nineteenth century” (Heilmann and Llewellyn 11). Like Poor Things, these texts are both fragmented and coherent, deconstructive and nostalgic. To suggest that contemporary fiction pines for the
narrative order of yesteryear is first to assume that such order actually ever existed. As Hutcheon rhetorically asks, “Are we really in the midst of a crisis of faith in the ‘possibility of historical culture’? (Or rather, have we ever not been in such a crisis?)” (A Poetics of Postmodernism 126).

Though Neo-Victorian fiction is certainly guilty of resorting to and valorising nostalgia, in its very form it also questions the logic behind that nostalgia.

Poor Things rewrites its monstrous postmodernity onto Victorian monster narratives, but it also presents 21st-century readers with an alternate reading of 19th-century ideals. Like all historiographic metafiction, and like all parody, Poor Things does not wrest past art from its original historical context and assemble it into some sort of presentist spectacle. Instead, through a double process of installing and ironizing, parody signals how present representations come from past ones and what ideological consequences derive from both continuity and difference. (Hutcheon Politics 93)

By rewriting our Victorian past to allow for such a varied reading of its most sacred themes, Poor Things also fulfills a part of what Hayden White sees as the task of the modern historian. This task — already laid out by thinkers in the early 19th century — is to free people from the burden of history, to “force upon them an awareness of how the past could be used to effect an ethically responsible transition from present to future” (White 132). The historian can do so by presenting people with many varied interpretations of history rather than a “specious continuity between the present world and that which preceded it” (134). Victorian monster stories (and ‘monstrous stories’) are not necessarily out to scare us. Often, they are specifically designed to entertain, and to present the reader with a thrilling glimpse of otherness that is still safely distant from the real world. The Neo-Victorian monstrous is also intended to entertain, but the basis of that entertainment is not sensation or otherness. Instead, what makes Neo-Victorian monsters horrifying is that very sameness and continuity, and their perceived closeness to our own reality.

“I Was Not Genomed to Alter History”: Rewriting the Present in Cloud Atlas

When a ‘monstrous’ work of Neo-Victorian problematises the relationship between mind and body, but also between fact and fiction, what does this mean for scholars of historical fiction and of history? What are the implications for the average reader? Does the traumatic nature of postmodernist fiction (under which Neo-Victorian fiction, as historiographic metafiction, also falls) render it therapeutic for the postmodern reader, or ultimately meaningless? As we will see, the answer to these broad yet very pressing questions is largely a matter of perspective. This section will show how historiographic metafiction (specifically Neo-Victorian fiction) uses trauma to rewrite the past (and sometimes to pre-write the future) in order to validate both the
individual and broader cultural present of the reader. Now that I have explored several ways in which not only characters, but also texts can be considered monstrous, I will examine David Mitchell’s *Cloud Atlas* (2004), a novel told from multiple perspectives over many time periods, which begins and ends in a Neo-Victorian frame. In a way characteristic of all historiographic metafiction, *Cloud Atlas* questions and undermines the inexorable progression of history while simultaneously affirming its prestigious place in Western culture.

In 1963, Stephen Spender argued: “The great modern achievements [...] laid no foundations for a future literature. They led in the direction of an immensity from which there was bound to be a turning back because to go further would lead to a new and completer fragmentation, utter obscurity, formlessness without end” (Spender 259). If we follow Spender’s prediction into the present, postmodernist fiction is a hopeless dead end, and postmodernism does indeed represent a new level of fragmentation and formlessness. For Spender, modernity represented a trauma from which we could only turn back, and which could not possibly sustain a meaningful literature. Fortunately Spender’s prediction proved to be inaccurate, as it is precisely this fragmentation and formlessness that Linda Hutcheon sees as the strengths of postmodernism/historiographic metafiction. Charles Russell, also quoted in Hutcheon, points out that postmodernism places a hefty burden on the reader. It is “an art of criticism, with no message other than the need for continuous questioning. It is an art of unrest, with no clearly defined audience other than those predisposed to doubt and to search” (Russell 58). Hutcheon agrees, stating that “[a]s the very label of ‘historiographic metafiction’ is intended to suggest, postmodernism remains fundamentally contradictory, offering only questions, never final answers” (*A Poetics of Postmodernism* 42). For Hutcheon, it is precisely this contradiction that finally makes room in literature for “a consideration of the different and the heterogeneous, the hybrid and the provisional. This is not a rejection of the former values in favor of the latter; it is a rethinking of each in the light of the others” (*A Poetics of Postmodernism* 42). It other words, the fragmentation and formlessness inherent in historiographic metafiction allow for the formation of new connections. This effectively places the hermeneutical power in the hands of the individual reader, rather than awarding that power either to the normative ‘centre’ of society or to the privileged ‘other’ on margins that move all too readily into the dominant position.

This place both on the inside and the outside of the centre (“both off-center and de-centered”) is something Hutcheon terms the “ex-centric”, where “[t]hat which is ‘different’ is valorized in opposition both to elitist, alienated ‘otherness’ and also to the uniformizing impulse of mass culture” (*A Poetics of Postmodernism* 130). This understanding of postmodernism and description of the ex-centric are both readily applicable to *Cloud Atlas*. *Cloud Atlas* is a conscious
study in otherness, both in the characters it incorporates and in its form. The effectiveness of the novel lies in the ways in which it allows the reader to choose his or her own perspective on (and interpretation of) the text, while also maintaining threads of meaning and guiding symbolism at every turn.

In this narrative there are no Victorian monsters quite like those we find in *Anno Dracula*, *Soulless*, or even *Poor Things*. Structurally and thematically, however, *Cloud Atlas* is most certainly concerned with both monstrosity and the 19th century. The novel consists of six separate novellas, beginning with the nineteenth-century journal of the American notary Adam Ewing, who is temporarily stranded in the South Pacific on his task to find the beneficiary of a will. Halfway through this story (and literally midway through a sentence) we jump to 1931, and a series of letters to Rufus Sixsmith from his friend and former lover Robert Frobisher, a young English musician attempting to make a name for himself as the apprentice of a famous Belgian composer. We make it through half of these letters before *Cloud Atlas* jumps to the next story, written in the style of a mystery novel. Reporter Louisa Rey meets a much older Sixsmith in a lift, and after he is killed as part of a conspiracy involving the Seaboard HYDRA nuclear power plant, she finds a copy of Frobisher’s letters in his hotel room. The fourth story details the adventures of Timothy Cavendish in the present day (a.k.a. 2004). Cavendish accidentally lands in a nursing home that he mistakenly assumed was a hotel while fleeing from some rather less reputable clients of his publishing company. He reads a copy of the Louisa Rey mystery while he is incarcerated in the nursing home. The fifth story jumps into the future, where we follow an interview between an ‘archivist’ and Sonmi~451, a genetically engineered clone on trial for becoming self-aware and attempting to undermine the totalitarian state known as Nea So Copros (formerly Korea). Sonmi~451 has seen Cavendish’s story in the form of a film called *The Ghastly Ordeal of Timothy Cavendish*, and her own interview survives in the sixth and final narrative.

‘Sloosha’s Crossin’ an’ Ev’rythin’ After’ is the oral narrative of a man named Zachry. Zachry’s people, who worship a goddess named Sonmi, are constantly under threat from the violent Kona living on the other side of the island. This final narrative is set in post-apocalyptic Hawaii, and unlike the other narratives, which break off halfway and resume later in the text, the reader is invited to experience Zachry’s narrative as an unbroken whole. After the completion of Zachry’s story, we revisit all of the other stories again in reverse order.

From one perspective, the narrative of *Cloud Atlas* represents a vicious circle of power and violence. At its heart (literally and figuratively) the novel is an apocalyptic text, showing mankind’s capacity for self-destruction. The destruction brought upon the Moriori by the white colonisers in Adam Ewing’s narrative is turned inward and inverted in Zachry’s story, where
consumerism has ultimately resulted in a reversion to primitivism, and the dark-skinned and technologically sophisticated Prescents study the remains of Western society. The cyclical nature of history is also a recurring theme throughout the novel. As the fabricant Sonmi-share states, “in a cycle as old as tribalism, ignorance of the Other engenders fear; fear engenders hatred; hatred engenders violence; violence engenders further violence until the only ‘rights,’ the only law, are whatever is willed by the most powerful” (D. Mitchell 344). Frobisher, about to take his own life, hints that “We do not stay dead long. Once my Luger lets me go, my birth, the next time around, will be upon me in a heartbeat” (490).

The author has even indicated that “all of the main characters, except one, are reincarnations of the same soul” (BBC Radio 4). Frobisher, Luisa Rey, Cavendish, Sonmi-share, and Meronym (a Prescent) all bear a similar, comet-shaped birthmark, though Cavendish for one dismisses the concept of reincarnation as “far too hippie-druggy-new age” (373). Whether or not these characters actually represent the same ‘soul’, the fact that each of the six stories are bound together in a single volume, and that they occasionally refer to and echo each other, is already reason to consider them as theoretically bound. Nearly all the narrators of Cloud Atlas are readers, and their interactions with the stories that come before them are the bridges between the six individual sections of the novel.

Cloud Atlas can be interpreted as a number of different readers responding indirectly to the events of the opening Victorian frame narrative. Rather than subverting this reading, the fact that in the second half of the novel each narrative is subsumed by the previous one confirms the causal effect of the initial chapter. As Wallhead and Kohlke point out, “reading each subsequent section (re-)produces a sense of repetition and both active and involuntary remembering, as the reader responds to perceived convergences, resonances, and interconnections between the historically distant traumas” (222). The Victorian narrative on its own begins and ends very neatly, but by splitting it open in the middle into a nesting doll of other stories, Mitchell subverts this tidy reading. Cloud Atlas asks us what happens when tidy stories interact with one another, and the rest of the narrative reveals how the themes of the frame (violence, oppression, predation) are as present in today’s stories as they are in the 19th century. In this way, the Victorian frame is ‘remembered’ all the way through into the future, and the Victorians indirectly become the scapegoats for the final apocalypse at the novel’s heart. Dr Goose’s stereotypical 19th-century greed, selfishness, and vicious spirit is echoed in every subsequent immoral deed in the narrative, and doubly emphasised because his example bookends all the others. In a way evocative of our earlier readings of monsters in Neo-Victorian fiction, here “trauma becomes
vampiric [...] the nineteenth-century section both feeds and feeds off—via intratextual cannibalism/vampiricism—the subsequent traumas” (227, original italics).

In addition to examining interactions between narratives of many different genres and styles, and the way such juxtaposition can disrupt what might otherwise be tidy, unrelated stories, Cloud Atlas also questions the function of memory. At this point, it is useful to consider what we mean when we discuss ‘memory’. Paul Ricoeur describes three levels of memory (and the study of memory) within the context of ethics—in other words, he attempts to describe what appropriate memory would entail and how memory should be approached as the object of study. The first level of memory is personal or individual. In this level of memory, we must consider what kind of past constitutes an acceptable past for a specific individual, and what kinds of things that person might consider traumatic. The second level of memory as described by Ricoeur is pragmatic or functional memory. This level of memory links the individual to his or her identity, answering the question ‘who am I?’ This level of memory is strongly linked to time, not only in the sense of the era in which a person is born, but also in the sense that an individual’s sense of self changes as he or she grows older. The third and potentially most complex level of memory is ethical or political memory, which I would suggest is closely related to history. This level of memory is the ever-changing metanarrative we pass from generation to generation, choosing what to include and how to include it, and also what to forget. Ricouer argues that, instead of seeking to emancipate ourselves from this metanarrative per se, we should instead take responsibility for the manner in which we appropriate it. The protagonists of Cloud Atlas alternately agree and disagree with this idea, and yet at the meta-level of the novel each participates in the transmission of political memory. Sonmi—451, for example, acknowledges that she has changed the world with her Declarations—twelve ‘blasphemies’ designed to bring down the dystopian Nea So Copros. She admits that the form and content of the Declarations are entirely her own, but also denies that she had any choice in writing or distributing them: “free will plays no part in my story” (365).

In the course of his or her own story, each character in Cloud Atlas is preoccupied with their personal memories and past, becomes conscious of their identity in a wider context, and is concerned with how the events of their time will pass into the memories of other times and places. With the novel itself, Mitchell also gives us his own vision of the processes of personal and political memory. Several times throughout the novel characters wish for an insight into these processes: “What wouldn’t I give now for a never-changing map of the ever-constant ineffable?”

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⁹ For a more extensive analysis of these three levels of memory see Paul Ricoeur, “Memory and Forgetting,” Questioning Ethics: Contemporary Debates in Philosophy, eds. Richard Kearney and Mark Dooley (London: Routledge, 1999).
To possess, as it were, an atlas of clouds” (D. Mitchell 389). Mitchell’s *Cloud Atlas* attempts to provide that map, tracking the personal and pragmatic memories of each protagonist, but also outlining the inexorable dissolution of personal and pragmatic memory into political memory, offering the reader the possibility to track the ever-changing narrative of this third level of memory over an extended period of time. In reading *Cloud Atlas* we also become aware of our role as reader in piecing together the historical memory of the entire text, as we are the only ones who can see the whole story, fragmented though it is.

The traumas that resurface throughout *Cloud Atlas* are inevitably intertwined with questions of centre, margins, and the location of power. According to Dr Henry Goose, from ‘The Pacific Journal of Adam Ewing’, power belongs to those willing and able to take it by force. His Darwinian motto is “The weak are meat the strong do eat” (D. Mitchell 489, 503). Dr Goose’s Victorian perspective is one the reader is encouraged to resist, associated as it is with colonialism, slavery, and war. Despite this, Adam Ewing’s idealistic point of view is not portrayed very favourably by the protagonist of the successive narrative, Frobisher, who lives after the first World War, and knows Dr Goose’s philosophy will come to triumph, regardless of Ewing’s optimism. “[H]appy, dying Ewing” muses Frobisher, “who never saw the unspeakable forms waiting around history’s corner” (479). In an unusually self-reflective passage in the Louisa Rey story, Isaac Sachs explores how power can undermine our access to the “actual past” by controlling how it is overlaid by the “virtual past”, or the collection of documents, memories, and artifacts that persist once the actual moment is behind us: “Power seeks + is the right to ‘landscape’ the virtual past. (He who pays the historian calls the tune)” (408-09). Characters not in places of power may be granted a voice, but their voice is always appropriated by those at the centre. Though the stories in *Cloud Atlas* loop back on each other, in one sense the narrative is also linear—events in the 19th century lead to events in the present and future, and eventually to apocalypse. From this perspective, no amount of optimism can save the future. The future has already been written.

There are also a number of factors that contradict such a reading, however. *Cloud Atlas* does not only show us an endless circle of destruction—it also opens possibilities for restoration. In the story of Sonmi~, the power of the totalitarian state is not enough to silence the persistent disobedience of a genetic fabricant, and we see that her narrative is the only one that survives the apocalyptic events between her story and Zachry’s. In some cases, the privileged place of certain outsiders at certain moments clearly have the power to undermine the system. In *Cloud Atlas*, these outsiders are inevitably members of the “ex-centric, the off-center: ineluctably identified with the center it desires but is denied” (Hutcheon *A Poetics of Postmodernism* 60).

These figures are others in a sense, but in their embrace of the system that would exclude them
they become impossible to ignore. The difficulty in placing them in binary categories defies the imposed boundaries of power. Sonmi is undeniably other, but in her understanding and acceptance of the system in which she finds herself, it is impossible to place her solely on the margins. As Hutcheon writes, “[t]he ‘ex-centric’—as both off-center and de-centered—gets attention. That which is ‘different’ is valorized in opposition both to elitist, alienated ‘otherness’ and also to the uniformizing impulse of mass culture” (A Poetics of Postmodernism 130). To initiate real change and achieve true difference, Hutcheon suggests, one cannot occupy a position at the centre of mass culture or a position as a privileged Other, rejecting the centre entirely. Instead, we should strive to be at once ‘inside’ and ‘outside’. This again echoes Ricoeur’s statements that instead of rejecting the metanarrative of political memory, we must consciously and ethically appropriate its methods of transmission.

By being part of the greater system of power while also outside it, accepting it while also critiquing it, ex-centric figures are able to change the system. As Paolo Portoghesi writes: “In place of faith in the great centered designs, and the anxious pursuits of salvation, the postmodern condition is gradually substituting the concreteness of small circumstantialized struggles with its precise objectives capable of having a great effect because they change systems of relations” (12). In other words, these individual struggles work together to build towards bigger questions, rather than relying on ‘grand centered designs’ created by figures of power. They become the sea Sonmi describes where “[a]ll the woe of the words ‘I am’ seemed dissolved there, painlessly, peacefully” (D. Mitchell 355). This is not the same as the abandonment of the self. As Ewing’s rhetorical question states, “what is any ocean but a multitude of drops?” (529). Instead, Cloud Atlas calls for the dissolution of modern individuality in favour of the monstrous self-as-other, the ex-centric self, where, as in “postmodernity, the idea of the monstrous involves a disruption of the supposed orders or nature” (Gibson 237).

In an article on the ‘apocalyptic problem’ of historicism on Cloud Atlas, Heather Hicks draws on Mircea Eliade’s argument that “the abandonment of cyclical ontology in favor of modern historicism has made Western subjects profoundly vulnerable to what he terms ‘the terror of history’” (Hicks). For Eliade, modern, linear history is end-driven and ultimately meaningless, and he presents a cyclical ontology as vital and re-emergent in the postmodern 20th century. According to him, premodern societies embraced cyclical models of time, placing emphasis on the beginning rather than the end, and he reminds us that “interest in the ‘irreversible’ and the ‘new’ in history is a recent discovery in the life of humanity” (Eliade 48). Hicks uses Eliade’s theories to suggest that Cloud Atlas shows how “if we believe both events and selves are old as well as new, we may invest ourselves in both in a less destructive
fashion” (Hicks). Indeed, a thorough reading of the novel supports this statement, and in a 2004 interview Mitchell himself also agreed that Cloud Atlas has a conscience, stating “I think this is because I am now a dad. I need the world to last another century and a half, not just see me to happy old age” (Book World).

In the end, Cloud Atlas is a Utopian novel, a “boomeranging arc” (Hicks) that visits the dystopian future, but returns to the idealistic past, urging the reader to adopt Ewing’s vision rather than Dr Goose’s. It marks a return to what Marcuse once called the utopian imagination, characterised by Jameson in Archaeologies of the Future as “the imagination of otherness and radical difference” (289). The stories a culture tells itself about the possible future can be vitally important in creating the actual future, and a good way to create space for otherness in the actual present is by imagining a space for it in the virtual future. As Jameson puts it:

Utopian form is itself a representational meditation on radical difference, radical otherness, and on the systemic nature of the social totality, to the point where one cannot imagine any fundamental change in our social existence which has not first thrown off Utopian visions like so many sparks from a comet (xii)

Cloud Atlas’s six protagonists, with their comet-shaped birthmarks, are vehicles for change in the novel, but also in the reality outside the novel. Having seen the terrible future that follows from the first four narratives, the reader is encouraged to stop the cycle before it is too late. Having experienced Cloud Atlas as fiction, the reader is nevertheless encouraged to add their own path-altering ‘chapter’ to the story, projecting the desired virtual future onto the actual present. This creates in the reader the belief that, as Ewing proclaims in his concluding chapter, “If we believe that humanity may transcend tooth & claw, if we believe divers races & creeds can share this world as peaceably as the orphans share their candlenut tree […] such a world will come to pass” (D. Mitchell 528).

While Cloud Atlas gives us an image of ex-centricity at the level of its characters, it also plays with the idea of the historical novel as ex-centric, and thereby capable of producing change. In its jumping from story to story, and also in its mix of genres and styles, Cloud Atlas redefines our expectations of narrative in general. In his discussion of the Neo-Victorian graphic novels of Alan Moore, Jason B. Jones argues that what makes style mixing subversive is not its disregard for literary categories, but its potential redefinition of our very identities and cultural spaces (“Betrayed by Time” 105). He states: “[s]uch game playing foregrounds the estimate aspects of historical change, as something neither wholly external nor subjective” (106). In other words, texts that mix history and fiction while also playing with genre convention make the reader more readily aware of the constructed nature of the most serious history. Jones also indirectly links
history to the ex-centric in his use of the term ‘extimate,’ hinting that “[t]o say that history takes place both inside and outside historical subjects is also to suggest that it might be ‘extimate’—a word Lacanian psychoanalysis uses to describe a kind of otherness right at the heart of subjective experience” (102). In other words, historiographic metafiction seems to clearly represent otherness, in the sense that it is a genre distinctly separate from the more factual world of historical writing, but it also suggests that history is already subjectively other, placing historiographic metafiction in a surprisingly central and powerful position. Historiographic metafiction (and Neo-Victorian fiction as a key genre within this field) enables the definition of the present through the past and the definition of the centre from the margins, but it also allows the opposite—that is, the definition of the margins from the centre and the revision of the past through the lens of the present.

Linda Hutcheon has also commented on the ex-centricity of historiographic metafiction, citing parody as one of its key markers. Of *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*, she writes:

This complex and extended parody is not, however, just a game for the academic reader. It is overtly intended to prevent any reader from ignoring both the modern and the specifically Victorian social, as well as aesthetic, contexts. We are not allowed to say either that this is “only a story” or that it is “only about the Victorian period.” The past is always placed critically—and not nostalgically—in relation with the present. (Hutcheon *A Poetics of Postmodernism* 45)

This statement is equally applicable to Cloud Atlas. Historical fictions play with historical fact, but they refuse to allow us to treat anything as ‘only a story’. As Isaac Sachs muses, “[t]he actual past is brittle, ever-dimming + ever more problematic to access + reconstruct: in contrast, the virtual past is malleable, ever-brightening + ever more difficult to circumvent/expose as fraudulent” (D. Mitchell 408). Not only do historical fictions often de-other the other, they de-other fiction as well, placing it on equal footing with any other form of narrative. As Mitchell himself states, “all you have to do is take what’s here already, just take the present and exaggerate it slightly and you’ve got some sort of awful, grotesque world” (Sinclair).

*Cloud Atlas*, then, calls for a monstrous Utopia, where a recognition of the self in the other and a belief in a better future might eventually bring that future to life. At its heart it is an apocalyptic narrative, a dystopia, but because of its nesting doll structure, in which time can be reversed, the reader is instead invited to read it as something Tom Moylan calls “critical dystopia”. In a critical dystopia, the hope of escape from the dystopic world of the text exists within the text itself, often in the form of “figures of hope” that contribute to “the open space of opposition” (Baccolini and Moylan 14). In effect, this transforms the narrative into a kind of utopia—one “motivated out of a utopian pessimism in that [it forces] us to confront the dystopian
elements of postmodern culture so that we can work through them and begin again” (Miller 337). In the novel, Sachs comments that “Like Utopia, the actual future + the actual past exist only in the hazy distance, where they are no good to anyone” (D. Mitchell 409), but throughout the rest of Cloud Atlas we see that the hazy nature of the past and future are exactly what makes them useful, as it allows them to be appropriated and deployed to guide the present. In an interview in The Paris Review, Mitchell posits that “to do something about a problem it must be named, discussed, and thought about” (Begley). This working through of problems is certainly what Cloud Atlas attempts in the way it addresses the deep questions of monstrosity, predation, history, and literariness.

Cloud Atlas, like many other works of postmodernist fiction, is paradoxical. It both explores and parodies the merits of linear history and cyclical history, predation and cooperation, offering many questions but few answers. “Human hunger birthed the Civ’lize,” says Zachry with his characteristic shrewdness, “but human hunger killed it too” (286). By indirectly placing the ‘blame’ of the narrative’s apocalyptic end on the 19th century characters in the novel’s frame, Cloud Atlas invites us to find a new way forward through them. It shows the 19th century as equally conflicted and traumatised as our own. As Wallhead and Kohlke state: “From Adam to Zachry, the pair form the A-Z of (post)modern subjectivity, the beginnings of which Mitchell’s neo-Victorian frame specifically locates in the nineteenth century as the ‘birth’ of our own present-day trauma culture” (245). Rather than lamenting the birth of contemporary trauma and loss, however, the narrative embraces the power of not-knowing, of fabrication, as equal to that of historical fact and foresight. In his book Lost Causes, Jason B. Jones argues that the Victorians’ most interesting perspective on history places emphasis on “enigma, and the limits of our ability to find meaning in our lives [...]. [T]his enigma is a resource for psychic and political change, a guarantor that the symptoms, social or otherwise, afflicting us today are alterable, possibly even for the better” (Lost Causes: Historical Consciousness in Victorian Literature 102). This sense of enigma fuels the same belief we see in Ewing, for whom belief is “both prize & battlefield, within the mind & in the mind’s mirror, the world” (D. Mitchell 528).

Conclusion

For works of historiographic metafiction that emphasise otherness like Anno Dracula, Soulless, Poor Things, and Cloud Atlas, what ultimately matters is not whether we view time as cyclical or linear, and how that affects our view of history. What matters is that we always remain conscious of how we view these things, and that we responsibly monitor our chosen viewpoint so that it
allows us to remain open to otherness. Rather than seeking comfort in the completeness of a Victorian past, these texts find comfort in its illusory nature.

If the self has always been 'monstrous' and fragmentary, there is nothing for the postmodern self to worry about—further, if we can laugh about the so-called 'loss of self' in postmodernism, it means there is no need to mourn it. In short, monstrous Neo-Victorian fiction problematises our love of problematising, and makes light of our attempts to claim Victorian trauma as our own (or hints that there is such a thing as Victorian trauma) in the first place. “Are we not the other Victorians,” ask Gutleben and Wolfreys in the second chapter of Neo-Victorian Tropes of Trauma, “all the more Victorian for seeking to announce separation and loss, rupture from a previous generation?” (38). The answer is yes and no. Each of the texts outlined in this thesis announces a rupture from the previous generation, but also a vital continuity. I would argue that rather than giving "historical non-subjects a future by restoring their traumatic pasts to cultural memory" (Kohlke and Gutleben 31), monstrous Neo-Victorian fiction instead gives traumatised postmodern selves in the present a past by writing their traumatic presents into the past (and future).
Works Cited


Gutleben, Christian, and Julian Wolfreys. “Postmodernism Revisited: The Ethical Drive of Postmodern Trauma in Neo-Victorian Fiction.” *Neo-Victorian Tropes of Trauma: The


