«Until the past was lost in the centre»: (Neo-)Victorian Stony Estrangements

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Abstract

Starting from a very brief introduction to Shklovsky's concept in the context of English literature, this article considers two main aspects of literary estrangements in neo-Victorian fiction. The first part examines the structural use of defamiliarization and the foregrounding of innovative narrative strategies John Fowles made use of in his seminal *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. Fowles 'made strange' the Victorian novel by reinventing its form, promoting a renovation of realism and a reconsideration of the great themes of Victorian fiction through a creative use of narrative distance and of the narratorial voice.

The second part of the article focuses on the 'restoration' of the object mentioned by Shklovsky, referring to a specific material and cultural object – the fossil – connoted by a deep epistemic tension, analyzed by Foucault and Mitchell. This is examined as a catalyst of estrangement in some neo-Victorian novels of the last fifty years.

Keywords

Shklovsky; Neo-Victorian fiction; Cultural object; Fossil; Gaze

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Shklovsky's «Art as device» and English literature: a sketchy outline

Translated in English in 1965, Shklovsky's «Art as Device» earned his author a long-lasting reputation, probably and partly enhanced by the diffusion of that language. As Alexandra Berlina reminds, «today, he is perhaps better known in the Anglophone world than he ever was.» (Berlina 2017: 27-8) Evidently, Shklovsy's idea of defamiliarizing the habitual was not entirely original, drawing from a time-honoured literary tradition starting from Aristotle, including Cervantes, but particularly prominent in English literature, from Sterne's early anti-novel, *Tristram Shandy,* to the Romantics' achievement. Wordsworth's renovation of poetic language from «the film of familiarity» and Coleridge's idea of the «willing suspension of disbelief" required by poetry, with its capacity of "awakening the mind's attention from the lethargy of custom» and restore the capacity of vision obfuscated «in consequence of the film of familiarity" (Coleridge 2006:478-9), were, in fact, Romantic experiments in strategies of defamiliarization as foundational components of their revolutionary *ars poetica*. The rejection of the habitual is also to be found in Shelley's belief that poetry could «lift the veil from the hidden beauty of the world, and make(s) familiar objects be as if they were not familiar» (Shelley 2006: 844). Cursory as they may read in relation to the complexity of the inherently defamiliarizing quality of poetic language, these references to the long nineteenth century are worth mentioning, in order to outline the specific receptiveness of the English literary imagination to the question of defamiliarisation.

A great part of Shklovsy's most renowned and influential conception of *ostranenie*, as is well known, is largely to be ascribed to his monograph on Sterne (*Sterne's* Tristram Shandy: *Stylistic Commentary*, 1921), where he focusses on foregrounded metanarrativity as the chief estranging device

which identified narrative art «as technique». Sterne's formalistically rev-olutionary experimentation as it was characteristic of him to 'lay bare' his technique» (Shklovsky 2006: 32) constitutes the essence of a reception of the concept that primarily identifies with the 'violation' and 'awareness' of the (narrative) form, which Shklovsky epitomized as such: «In general, he (Sterne) accentuates the very structure of the novel. By violating the form, he forces us to attend to it; and, for him, this awareness of the form through its violation constitutes the content of the novel» (*ibid*.: 34). The foregrounding of narrative/formal violation was therefore to become one of the most iden-tifiable models and examples of «art as device» and of defamiliarization as an artistic aim and effect related to the placing of a textual object «outside the habitual sequence», in which art could restore an 'object' by replacing a void which had fostered the development of an automatic response. Such a reception of the concept[1] inevitably seems to postulate all experimental literary art as instrinsically and potentially defamiliarizing. This would be certainly the case with much modernist writing, from Conrad's delayed decoding (which valorised the protracted presentation of the perception and verbal treatment of thoughts), from Eliot's historical and mythical anachronisms to Joyce's many ruses, among which his use of montage in devising narrative simultaneity in *Ulysses* (as in «Wandering Rocks»), to Beckett's characters' alienated predicament and confinement into extreme situations, just to name some of the most conspicuous examples in what would be a far richer repertoire.

More specifically, Cannon Schmidt suggestively remarks the essential Victorianism of Viktor Shklovsky - or, alternately, the essential Russian Formalism of (some of) the Victorians (Schmidt 2018:191), providing ex-amples from Browning, Pater and Conrad, and pointing to how frequently elements of this version of *ostranenie* recur in other theorists such as Benja-min and Adorno.

It would be interesting, therefore, at this stage, to probe into the perva-siveness of forms and versions of defamiliarization in the engagement with Victorian literature and culture of neo-Victorianism. Variously defined over the past two decades as a trend or mode that renews and revisits the modes of Victorian literature - mostly fiction - from a self-conscious contemporary

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[1]   I will use as the prevailing English translation of the original the word 'es-trangement', without excluding defamiliarisation, for its more spacious semantic field, while neglecting the nonetheless suggestive and more recent "enstrange-ment" of Benjamin Sher's translation.

perspective consistently marked by a self-critical stance, neo-Victorianism can no longer be considered a recent strain popularized by the proliferating transmedial fashion for Victoriana. It is widely accepted, for instance, that the foundational novel of neo-Victorianism, John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969), is also the seminal work of British postmodernism, which has now reached a half-century of critical reputation.

If, according to Shklovsky, in order to achieve estrangement the writer must consciously violate the conventional ways of producing meaning, then a whole line of development of British fiction appears to have intentionally (and further) pursued defamiliarization in the steps of Fowles' trailblaising novel. By foregrounding his literary and critical agenda through the voice and presence of an intrusive and almost narcissistic authorial narrator, Fowles 'made strange' the Victorian novel reworking and refunctionalising its form, promoting a renovation of realism and a reconsideration of the great themes of Victorian fiction through an inventive use of narrative distance and of the narratorial voice. A useful way to subsume Fowles' influential model of defamiliarization of the Victorian novel, and particularly his narratological 'estrangement-cum-reviving' of some fundamental realist modes, may look back to Amy J.Elias' idea of late twentieth-century British fiction as exploring the realm of a «meta-mimesis», a «paradoxical achievement» (Elias 1993: 25), which preserved realism in postmodernism «as mimesis with an ontological dominant» (*ibid.*:12).

Defamiliarization, estrangement, Postmodernism and neo-Victorianism: a continuity?

This brief contextualisation of Shklovsky's concept regarding some artistic strategies adopted in English literature from Romanticism to late Modernism aims to introduce the first section of this article, which examines the structural use of defamiliarization and the foregrounding of narrative strategies in neo-Victorian fiction, inaugurated by John Fowles' seminal novel. The second part of the article focusses on the 'restoration' of the role of the object mentioned by Shklovsky in his essay, referring to a specific case study of the estranging object in Victorian and neo-Victorian fiction, which symbolises both the remote distance of the past and its presence: the material and cultural object constituted by the fossil, which is connoted by a deep epistemic tension.

A consideration of the mimetic strategies of postmodernist British fiction would certainly exceed the limits of the present context; however, in

narrowing my focus on neo-Victorian strategies of estrangement, I would like to point out the essential role played precisely by *distance* – cultural, chronological, critical – in the process of renewing and revitalizing Victorian literary culture through a recognition that entails, in fact, a new *vision*. Ann Heilman and Mark Llewellyn, in their important 2010 study, define neo-Victorian fiction as works that re-engage with the Victorian age with a marked «self-analytic drive» (Heilman and Llewellyn 2010: 6, 5). In other words, as literary works that «must in some respect be self-consciously engaged with the act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision concerning the Victorians» (*ibid.*:5). Both the concepts of distance (distancing) and vision (re-visioning, so prominent in the original theory but all the more so in Carlo Ginzburg's fundamental reading of Shklovsky's essay (Ginzburg 1998), are at play in the neo-Victorian project. Moreover, this specific classification traces a clear distinction and distancing from twentieth or twentieth-first fiction set in the Victorian age or which simply 're-writes' Victorian texts. Neo-Victorian works are, rather, «texts about the metahistorical and metacultural ramifications of such historical engagement» (Heilman and Llewellyn 2010: 6). Of the numerous definitions of this important trend of contemporary British and Anglophone writing, none, in fact, is entirely satisfactory: earlier and less established versions like retro-Victorian, Victoriana, Victoriographies, revisionary or post-Victorian novels[2], still presume a relationship of the present with the Victorian past based on a retrospective gaze of distance that is far from being remote. What has been largely subscribed to, actually, is that «the Victorian era projected by neo-Victorian fiction and its academic commentators seem largely constructed in our own image, in its uncanny anticipation of contemporary obsessions» (Robinson 2011: 120). This ongoing achievement of cultural and literary «aftering» in Ann Humphrey's suggestive formula (Humphrey 2004: 232), highlights the crucial role played by distance: a distance that is primarily chronological and cultural, but which aims at an act of re-visioning that is also a renewed form of insight into the complexities, contradictions, and ambivalences of the literary culture of the long nineteenth century.

I would argue that in Neo Victorianism «the concept of *ostranenie*, of making the habitual strange in order to re-experience it» (Berlina 2015:24) is at work precisely in the re-immersions and revisitations in Victorian literature[3] which never merely reproduce the source text and the possible

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2 See Kirchknopf 2008: 59.
3 I refer to Boehm-Schnitker - Gruss 2014.

models, as in the case of numerous rewritings. Nor does this concept aim to the replica effect, but somehow deviates the way we look at the historical and cultural referent in order to 'queer' that gaze and revive it through an act and process of critical and creative engagement and interpretation. As Wolf Schmit points out, «the device of defamiliarization provides the formalist basis of the concept of deviation, which rejects the ideas of imitation, reproduction and mimesis» (Schmit 2005: 98). The neo-Victorian novel (or text, if one prefers to consider the generic variety of neo-Victorianism) should not be subjected to the reductive reading of Shklovsky's idea that a new form does not appear so as to express a new content, but to replace an older form which has already lost its artistic value. Rather, neo-Victorian fiction has been pursuing a project of reassessment and re-evaluation of Victorian writing through its forms of creative engagement with it, and even seemed to cherish canonicity[4], especially in the early decades.

In this respect, Fowles seminal novel once again serves as a paradigm of how neo-Victorianism resorted to defamiliarization as deliberate deviation and violation of the readers' expectations from the outset. It became itself a central hypotext for further neo-Victorian novels, soon to constitute a proper canon, which received critical consolidation over the past two decades. Two famous examples should suffice to illustrate this functional, strategical use of the device of defamiliarization and estrangement: the famous intrusive self-introduction of the authorial and narratorial voice in the thirteenth chapter of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and Michael Faber's *The Crimson Petal and the White*'s displacing incipit. The former inaugurates chapter thirteen and gratifies the reader's prior trial with a succession of epigraphs and dense literary and cultural allusions to the Victorian era with a puzzling, yet somehow rewarding revelation which literally de-constructs the status of text and author:

> I do not know. This story I am telling is all imagination. These characters I create never existed outside my own mind. If I have pretended until now to know my characters' minds and innermost thoughts, it is because I am writing in (just as I have assumed some of the vocabulary and 'voice' of) a convention universally accepted at the time of my story: that the novelist stands next to God. He may not know all, yet he tries to pretend he does. But I live in the age of

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[4]   As Jessica Cox remarks «The focus on the 'highbrow' in the formative years of neo-Victorian studies suggests a regressive attitude towards literary criticism: certain authors and genres are privileged over and above others» (Cox 2017: 4).

Alain Robbe-Grillet and Roland Barthes; if this is a novel, it cannot be a novel in the modern sense of the world.

So perhaps I am writing a transposed autobiography; perhaps I now live in one of the houses I have brought into the fiction; perhaps Charles is myself disguised. Perhaps it is only a game. (Fowles 1996: 97)

The second quote engages with Fowles' model through what Christian Gutleben defined «a poetics of irreverence" (Gutleben 2015: 231), and playfully and knowingly lays bare the direct involvement of the reader in the game of temporal and cultural 'distance' that has been identified as a key component of estrangement, as both reader and narrator are positioned at the twenty-first-century vantage point, «alien from another time and place»:

Watch your step. Keep your wits about you; you will need them. This city I am bringing you to is vast and intricate, and you have not been here before. You may imagine, from other stories you've read, that you know it well, but those stories flattered you, welcoming you as a friend, treating you as if you belonged. The truth is that you are an alien from another time and place altogether. When I first caught your eye and you decided to come with me, you were probably thinking you would simply arrive and make yourself at home. Now that you're actually here, the air is bitterly cold, and you find yourself being led along in complete darkness, stumbling on uneven ground, recognising nothing. Looking left and right, blinking against an icy wind, you realize you have entered an unknown street of unlit houses full of unknown people. (Faber 2003 13)

The most knowing and critically discerning reader would probably give for granted the relevant use of defamiliarization in these examples; still, my point is, rather, that the emphasis on the reiteration of defamiliarization-as-device in neo-Victorianism should be reconsidered in its relevance to the genealogy and the current significance of defamiliarization in contemporary and postmodern writing's engagement with the past, its 'presentification' and the refusal of master narratives. On the whole, then, I would argue that Fowles' neo-Victorian inaugural and seminal use of defamiliarization was to be followed and renewed by many other novelists, and that it radically changed the perception – and the appropriation – of the Victorian novel in the late twentieth and early twentieth-first century. That use of defamiliarization and estrangement – stemming from the Swiftian and Sternean tradition – was in fact to foster a new understanding and

revisitation of the artistic and cultural form of the Victorian novel. Distance and estrangement actually produced new perceptions, and a significant revitalization of this genre, which has progressively expanded through the decades into 'global' versions of neo-Victorian writing.

The estranging object: a 'stony' case study

If defamiliarization/estrangement asserted the idea of art «as device» and was also famously aimed at restoring the intensity of perception as a way of 'seeing' life and the world, (Shklovsky 2015: 162), in the essay the focus on the text also originally lies in the attribution of some transformative power to an 'object' in the narrative.

> this thing we call art exists in order to restore the sensation of life, in order to make us feel things, in order to make a stone stony. The goal of art is to create the sensation of seeing, and not merely recognizing, things; the device of art is the "enstrangement" of things and the complication of the form, which increases the duration and complexity of perception, as the process of perception is, in art, an end in itself and must be prolonged. Art is the means to live through the making of a thing; what has been made does not matter in art. (*Ibid*.)

The object, the object as 'thing', and the 'cultural object' often appear centre stage in the dynamics of narrative and fictional estrangement, as they are invested with an essential epistemological and aesthetic relevance. It would be impossible to insert even a cursory list of the most important objects of estrangement of nineteenth and twentieth-century English literary imagination, from Keats' urn to *Jane Eyre*'s cheval glass to Jagger's coffin-like chair in *Great Expectations*, to Stevenson and Wilde's portraits, Woolf's «Solid Objects», Joyce's Bloom's bar of soap and potato, without expanding way beyond the allotted space of this context. Still, considering that for Shklovsky art 'restores' the object, filling that void created by the automatism of perception, it is to this 'restoration' of the object that the second part of this article will then turn, with the aim of considering the relevance of a specific material and cultural object as a catalyst of estrangement in some (postmodern) neo-Victorian novels of the last fifty years.

As Louisa Hadley resumes, «a common concern in neo-Victorian fiction is the way in which the Victorian past is mediated to the present through its textual remains» (Hadley 2010:117), as well as by other material traces: it would be interesting, then, to relate Shklovsky's original

idea of art as an experience of the artistry of the object as one that underscores that conspicuous interest of neo-Victorian fiction (and postmodern fiction at large) for the material trace of the past as a potential chronotope, an embodiment of time which comes alive in the spatial entity of a text. British fiction of the last fifty years or so has constantly been relying on that «archival dimension» that defines modern memory, in which the "materiality of the trace" (Nora 1989:13) is paramount. As early as 1984, David Leon Higdon was noticing the increasing number of British novels featuring professional researchers of the past as protagonists, whose «restorations, excavations, journeys, and research into a culture's past parallel their search for individual identities and utilize the culture's artefacts as complex metaphors for complex inner processes» (Higdon 1984:12). This trend was to gain further momentum and increasing complexity in the following decades, to the extent that a whole fictional genre of contemporary English fiction was classified by Suzanne Keen as «romances of the archive» (2001). In fact, material artefacts and documentary traces, mostly textual, have always inhabited literary works, and increasingly so since the mid-Victorian novel, as signifiers of a preoccupation with history and cultural memory that has further expanded to the production of memory-culture in neo-Victorianism[5]. In their diversity, even when fictive, or spectral, these material relics and testimonies embody both the power exerted by the sense of the past – the desire for a recovered historical past - and its morphing, elusive, 'estranging' nature. More specifically, after the paradigmatic pattern of the dual chronological level conceived by Fowles, the semantics of estrangement has remained central to neo-Victorian fiction and has been further extended to other narrative features, among which the object features prominently.

As a consideration of these 'literary' objects in neo-Victorian novels would be too extensive, a narrower focus will be aimed at what is perhaps the most 'natural' and ancient of these non-human material entities endowed with the power of estrangement: the fossil. This choice may, in fact, seem a sort of paradoxical tribute to Shklovsky's own words, as it is not casual that he should mention, of all the non-human objects, the stone

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[5]   «Cultural» (or, if you will, «collective», «social») memory is certainly a multifarious notion, a term often used in an ambiguous and vague way. Media, practices, and structures as diverse as myth, monuments, historiography, ritual, conversational remembering, configurations of cultural knowledge, and neuronal networks are nowadays subsumed under this wide umbrella term» (Erll 2008: 41).

- and art as being capable of making «the stone stony» - as a synecdoche of the material world and the world at large. The case of the fossil as both a natural and a cultural object[6], the significance and impact of which became even more resonant in the course of the Victorian age, further to Charles Lyell's foundation of modern geology, appears as an interesting example of that imagery, that, in Shklovsky's words, «is intended to bring together heterogonous acts and objects, explaining the unknown via the known» (Shklovsky 2015: 173).

In the history of human sciences, the fossil, «with its mixed animal and mineral nature, is the privileged locus of a resemblance required by the historian of the continuum» (Foucault 2005: 171) and holds a crucial role, as Foucault argued in *The Order of Things*, in relation to the notion of identity: «The fossil is what permits resemblances to subsist throughout all the deviations traversed by nature; it functions as a distant and approximative form of identity; it marks a quasi-character in the shift of time» (*ibid.*) Drawing from Foucault, W.J.T Mitchell identifies fossils and 'totems'- both 'discovered' in the 1790s - as the two most ground-breaking material traces of the past (a «deep time» and a «dream time» respectively) which would bring about an epistemic revolution in which natural history became truly historical for the first time (Mitchell 1999: 178).

Ruins, fossils and archaeologic findings, all figure in the complex cluster of cultural objects which had been invested with epistemic anxieties and imaginative projections across centuries. More specifically, English writers responded to the *fin de siècle* anxieties about pessimistic readings of Darwinism, the fear of atavism and invasion with what Stephen Arata defined as «fictions of loss», as well as with an increasing fascination for the uncanny and often destructive power of objects, troves, collections and monsters. The collectible thus became connoted with a disturbing power, especially in those fictions which combined the theme of collecting with

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[6] I refer to the definition of cultural object by Wendy Griswold, as what «may be defined as shared significance embodied in form. It is a socially meaningful expression that is audible, visible, or tangible or that can be articulated. A cultural object, moreover, tells a story, and that story may be sung, told, set in stone, enacted, or painted on the body. Examples range widely» (Griswold 1986: 11). Of paramount importance in Griswold's definition, however, is not so much the 'expansive' quality of the notion of 'cultural' object, as its narrative potential: this is, *après* Griswold, my conception of the cultural object as something that tells a story.

'post-Darwinian Nature'[7]. Among these, the fossil, as remarked, in pre-serving traces of life in the inert matter of the stone, unfolds the extraor-dinary combination of a unique wonder and what of would progressively become a scientific (cultural) commodity. If Foucault «makes the fossil the centrepiece of his history of epistemic transformations», W.J.T Mitchell considers it the principal example of this new «historicity of things» that is independent of human history (W.T. Mitchell 1999: 176), and asserts the physical as a thoroughly metaphysical concept (*ibid*.: 171). The fossil thus became an object the new meaning of which quickly provided a metaphor for human as well as natural history, and specifically for the human relics left behind by the French Revolution. For Mitchell, «fossilism is a way, in short, of revolutionizing natural history and naturalizing revolutionary human history» (*ibid*.: 176).

It is upon this conceptual grounding that neo-Victorian fiction in par-ticular has made use of the fossil as a specific kind of embodied trace of the past, which, connoted by a deep epistemic tension, is also endowed with a strong power of estrangement.

Shklovsky's conception of the image as a gateway to a proper vision of the object interestingly illuminates the semantic import of the fossil as a cultural and epistemic object, when he states that the goal of an image is not to bring its meaning closer to our understanding, but to create a special way of experiencing an object, to make one not «recognize» but «see» it (Shklovsky 2015: 88),

This specific aspect of the literary representation of the fossil in the Victorian novel, which has Thomas Hardy's famous page in *A Pair of Blue Eye*s (1873) as its matrix (Glendening 2013), and which will be repeatedly revived by neo-Victorian novels, entails the question of the gaze of the ob-ject and the role of the visual in the aesthetic and conceptual engagement of estrangement, as will be illustrated. In a climactic page, the protagonist, an amateur geologist, literally finds himself cliff-hanging after slipping from a rocky Dorset slope, staring into a trilobite, suspended into the void, both spatially and inwardly, face to face with the sense of his irrelevant nothing-ness in the mystery of the vast and indifferent Hardyesque universe:

> By one of those familiar conjunctions in which the inanimate world baits the mind of man when he pauses in moments of suspense, opposite Knight's eyes was an imbedded fossil, standing forth in low

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[7] See Daly 1999, Goetsch 2007, Parlati 2012.

relief from the rock. It was a creature with eyes. The eyes, dead and turned to stone, were even now regarding him. It was one of the early crustaceans called Trilobites. Separated by millions of years in their lives, Knight and this underling seemed to have met in their death. It was the single instance within reach of his vision of anything that had ever been alive and had had a body to save, as he himself had now.

Time closed up like a fan before him. He saw himself at one extremity of the years, face to face with the beginning and all the intermediate centuries simultaneously […] and so, till the life-time scenes of the fossil confronting him were a present and modern condition of things. (Hardy 1998: 213-4)

With Hardy's paradigm, the fossils, Tennyson's «cunning casts in clay» (Tennyson 1991: 213), became a recognizable 'cultural' object and an enigma at the same time in the imagination of the Victorian novel. An opaque, resisting object that impacts on human consciousness in its non-human, inert agency, addressing the present though the trace of its unfathomable past, the 'deep time' conceived by James Hutton at the end of the eighteenth century.

This literary referent emphasizes the semantics of the visual and the gaze as quite central to any consideration of the estrangement of the object. It is significant, in this context, that the 'literary' fossil should actually have eyes, stony eyes that arrest and petrify, transfix consciousness, as the following textual examples will show. Eyes that recall Carlo Ginzburg's idea of the disturbing, perturbing power of Pinocchio's «wooden eyes», that enact estrangement (Ginzburg 2001). The fossil could thus be considered as a Victorian and neo-Victorian estranging object which signals both the remote distance of the past and its presence. This «double signification» can also be related to the idea to "use the past without being fossilized by it», as several novels show, notably *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (Glendening 2013: 51). The problematic specularity between the unfathomable deep time and the uncertain present embodied by the fossil recurs, after Hardy, in John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969), Peter Carey's *Oscar and Lucinda* (1988), A.S.Byatt's *Possession* (1990), Penelope Lively's *City of the Mind* (1991), Graham Swift's *Ever After* (1992), Tracy Chevalier's *Remarkable Creatures* (2010), Joan Thomas' *Curiosity* (2010).

Dinosaur fossils, particularly, played a key role in the scientific and epistemological imagination of the Victorian age before and after the shattering impact of Darwinism, and thus provide to neo-Victorian writing a highly functional trope, figuring out both the irretrievable pastness of

the past and its abiding presence in the context of the dramatic nexus that joined the discourses of science and religion in the Victorian age.

In *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, for example, fossils and fossil hunting are introduced through a defamiliarizing effect of irony as a commodified reality of mid-nineteenth century Dorset coast, only to take on a more poignant significance in relation to the protagonist:

> But Lyme is situated in the center of one of the rare outcrops of a stone known as blue lias. (…) It is also treacherous, since its strata are brittle and have a tendency to slide, with the consequence that this little stretch of twelve miles or so of blue lias coast has lost more land to the sea in the course of history than almost any other in England. But its highly fossiliferous nature and its mobility make it a Mecca for the British paleontologist. These last hundred years or more the commonest animal on its shores has been man—wielding a geologist's hammer. (Fowles 1996: 50)

Charles Smithson, a gentleman who is an amateur geologist, realizes his own sense of loss and displacement and his epistemic doubts as they are reverberated through the agency of the non-human, estranging fossils he is contemplating:

> There was no doubt. He was one of life's victims, one more ammonite caught in the vast movements of history, stranded now for eternity, a potential turned to a fossil.
> That was the vicious circle that haunted him; that was the failure, the weakness, the cancer, the vital flaw that had brought him to what he was: more an indecision than a reality, more a dream than a man, more a silence than a word, a bone than an action. And fossils! He had become, while still alive, as if dead. It was like coming to a bottomless brink. (*Ibid*.: 321)

The protagonist is dubbed "poor living fossil» by the omniscient narrator, since the fossil turns out to represent a sense of lifeless opacity, and provides a graphic picture of the man's deterministic fragility, rather than the embodied trace of life that connects the present with the living past. The annihilating power of the fossil's gaze, so openly dramatized by Hardy, was then weaved by Fowles into the sophisticated intertextual fabric of the novel, providing an ironic, nuanced continuity of imagery with its Victorian model that would become a recognizable and recurrent trope, as will be evident from the following examples.

I would now like to dwell further on a key question that defines the relevance of this object to the aesthetics of estrangement, that is, the question of the gaze, central to the appreciation not only of this novel but of the literary treatment of the fossil as both word-image and cultural object. Quite simply, as from Hardy's archetype onwards, the fossil stares into the human, the gaze is reciprocated and 'tamed', it estranges, disorients, with a defamiliarizing, disturbing effect that questions both individual self-identity and a vaster sense of the natural and human past. The radical otherness of the fossil as estranging object and 'thing' that is seen ultimately masters the eye that sees it, inducing the self-awareness of being just another object in the world of 'reality', an awareness that determines a state of radical defamiliarization. This implication of the gaze recalls two examples from Seminar IV of Jacques Lacan's *The Four Fundamental Concept of Psychoanalysis*[8], which «reflect our own nothingness» (Lacan 1998: 92): Holbein's "The Ambassadors"' anamorphic skull, which hauls the subject into the picture, and the can of sardines which the young Lacan saw floating on the waves in Brittany, and which he was made to realise - much to his shock - would not 'see' him (Lacan 1998). The unseeing eyes of the formerly organic, then inanimate canned sardines are thus mementoes of that "nothingness" which is similarly released by the fossil's gaze, staring into the subject's eyes and mind.

The fossil as a cultural and epistemic object is thus endowed with the gaze, in all these novels, regardless of how central their role may appear in their narrative economy: this component greatly enhances its significance in the aesthetics of estrangement through the teasing power that evades the controlling aim of the subject's vision, and remains fundamentally and irreducibly other, the thing, «the thing itself», as we read in Graham Swift's *Ever After*.

The fossils of the texts I refer to in these pages, in other words, respond to the idea of an object that «remains irrevocably other than that which attempts to think it» (Schwenger 2002: 56), like pictures of nature that have a relation to the gaze and involve its taming, its laying down, in Lacanian terms[9].

While A.S.Byatt's 1990 neo-Victorian masterpiece *Possession* features the fossil as a typical Victorian vestige of the past, Graham Swift's *Ever*

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[8]   I am indebted to Sergia Adamo for reminding me this Lacanian reference when discussing this paper in its earliest stage.
[9]   See Lacan about the painting, 1998: 101.

After (1992) foregrounds the question of the 'estranging' gaze of the fossil as the entity which triggers an irreversible progress of disorientation and an epistemological, religious and existential crisis in Matthew Pearce, the Victorian protagonist. Pearce, the contemporary narrator Bill Unwin's ancestor - himself emotionally in pain and struggling with a broken sense of identity, who reads and edits the man's retrieved notebooks - whose faith wavers painfully after the loss of a two-year-old son, has a life-changing encounter «face-to-face with an ichthyosaur, on the cliffs of Dorset in the summer of 1844» (Swift 1992: 89). The predicament in which he finds himself when he sees it, when simultaneously a young woman has slipped off the path, in Lyme, and he does not run to her aid, but rather chooses «to stare into the eye of a monster», is so unlike the artificial safety of a museum, where he might have first seen a fossil specimen, as the narrator speculates (*ibid.*: 100). His contemplation of the ichthyosaur in that natural and unexpected context brings forth an experience of existential estrangement bound to change his life 'ever after': it is the encounter with «the thing itself» in its utter, ineradicable alterity:

> [t]he long, toothed jaw; the massive eye that stares through millions of years. He is the creature; the creature in him. He feels something open up inside him, so that he is vaster and emptier than he ever imagined, and feels himself starting to fall, and fall, through himself". (*Ibid.*: 112)

The gaze of the ichthyosaur engenders a ghastly estrangement and displacement from his own sense of self, of reality, of faith and control of the real. It produces a negative epiphany that will reveal the protagonist his «personal inauthenticity» *(*Glendening 2013: 66*),* as it constitutes what he calls in his journal «the moment of my unbelief» and «the beginning of my make-belief» (Swift 1992: 112). The revelation of the irreversibility of his crisis of faith mirrors the creeping doubt brought by the new science that after the middle of the century had begun to affect the self-confidence of the Victorian age.

The sense of annihilation related to the crisis of faith induced by the new scientific discoveries that affected the Victorians is, instead, less relevant in what is the most important and successful novel to recently focus on the fossil as a cultural object, Tracy Chevalier's *Remarkable Creatures* (2009), a biofiction on the life of Mary Anning, the famous English fossil-hunter and amateur palaeontologist whose findings were essential to the development of palaeontology and Georges Cuvier's theory. The novel privileges the exploration of the protagonist's gendered identity and masterly depicts her sense of belonging to the natural environment of Lyme Regis. The fos-

sil is the centrepiece of that «revised story of earth and human history that Anning helped produce» (Glendening 2013: 55); the semantics of sight, vision and the question of gaze are given prominence from the beginning, and sustain some of the most climactic scenes from, through the narration of the older co-protagonist, the Austenian character of Elizabeth Philpot.

> Mary Anning leads with her eyes. That was clear even the first time we met, when she was but a girl. Her eyes are button brown, and bright, and she has a fossil hunter's tendency always to be looking for something, even when on the street or in a house where there is no possibility of finding anything of interest. It makes her appear vigorous, even when she is still. (Chevalier 2014:13)

> I have always admired most those who lead with their eyes, like Mary Anning, for they seem more aware of the world and its workings. (*Ibid.*:14)

The fossil in *Remarkable Creatures*, then, is an epistemic object of desire and knowledge, the focus of an obsession that will guide the naïve but extraordinary young woman to her own understanding of reality. It is the estranging revelation of mortality and permanence, purpose and orientation, in the midst of the great mystery of life, investigated by the innocent, ignorant but knowing and searching eyes of a woman who made history, though long unacknowledged. The eyes of the dinosaur fossil stare back and displace, and the unmeasurable distance of time, once more, comes alive and makes everything «strange»:

> Were we going to die out too? Looking at that skull with its huge, ringed eyes, I felt as if I were standing on the edge of a cliff. (*Ibid.*: 98)

> I felt for a moment that I was being sucked into its spiral, farther and farther back in time, until the past was lost in the center (*Ibid.*: 107).

Here, the spatial imagery recalls both the hypotext of Hardy's cliff-hanging scene, the fear of annihilation of Fowles' character («the croc eye watched us both. Captain Curry and I are going to be like the croc, I thought. We will become fossils, trapped upon beach forever», *ibid.*: 144), as well as the entropic displacement dramatized in *Ever After*. What is all the more significant, though, is Mary's *naïvet*é, the 'natural' drive of her searching eyes and her marginality as a poor, uneducated women of early

nineteenth-century England, all of which make her a figure capable of seeing reality 'for the first time', aware of the infinite mystery of creation and life, and still confident in her faith.

> I stared at that socket and got the feeling it was staring back[...] I shuddered, one of them shivers that come over you when you're not even cold but you can't stop yourself[...] It made me feel odd looking at that eye[...] Sometimes I got that hollowed-out feeling too when looking at a sky full of stars or into the deep water[...] It was as if the world were too strange for me ever to understand it. (*Ibid.*: 72)

The eye of the dinosaur fossil, the ichtyosaur first and the plesiosaur then, once again looks back and arrests, as in the climactic scene where a landslide of shale occurs and nearly kills the protagonist:

> my eyes flicked over the stones near to me and come to rest on a familiar shape about four feet from me: a ring of overlapping bony scales the size of my fist. A croc's eye. It were like it was staring straight at me. I cried out with the surprise of seeing it. [...] Then, several feet past the eye, there was a movement. (*Ibid.*)

The centrality of the fossil to this last novel clearly draws from its historical grounding[10], but also offers further suggestions for a final consideration of this 'estranging' object as a facet of what Peter Schwenger calls «the uncanny agency of solid objects» (2005:84). Albeit primordial and originally uncompromised by human social and economic dynamics (though soon to become a curiosity, a collectible, hence a sort of commodity), the fossils of the literary imagination are far from inert, but rather seem to respond to the features of Jane Bennett's «vibrant matter»: «so-called inanimate things have a life of their own, [...] deep within them is an inexplicable vitality or energy, a moment of independence from and resistance to us and to other things. A kind of thing-power» (Bennett 2004: 358). The conjunction of organic and inorganic, of non-human and aesthetic apprehension, of existential angst and epistemic value that are all inscribed in this fascinating, 'gazing' cultural object may thus be illuminated by the enduring of resonance of Shklovsky's original concept.

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[10] Athough the main narrative is set during Regency time, the novel can be broadly considered as neo-Victorian, given the critical extension of Victorianism to early 19th century that has become quite customary.

A tentative closing reflection – though necessarily inconclusive, given the otherness of the object - on what Ginzburg defines the «cognitive implications of defamiliarization» (Ginzburg 2001:22) examined through these literary fictions could thus engage with an expanded notion of Shklovsky's (and Ginzburg's) critical distance that challenges the ideological assumptions and discursive formations that have defined and shaped notions of the inanimate and the material. The potential of this notion could well be related to Rosi Braidotti's idea of a renewed critical 'distance' from the self-centredness of the anthropocentric vision:

> the post-anthropocentric shift away from the hierarchical relations that had privileged 'Man' requires a form of estrangement and a radical repositioning on the part of the subject. The best method to accomplish this is through the strategy of de-familiarization or critical distance from the dominant vision of the subject. (Braidotti 2013:88)

The importance of defamiliarisation has, for Braidotti, a key methodological role in posthuman theory for the Humanities, as it «shifts the relationship to the nonhuman others and requires dis-identification from century-old habits of anthropocentric thought and humanist arrogance, which is likely to test the ability and willingness of the Humanities» (*ibid*.: 168).

Thus, in these literary fossils, the gaze of the pre-human reaches out from the deep past to interrogate the present, the future and its posts, with stony eyes that absorb and displace our own, who have never really possessed its centre.

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