

NEO HISTORICAL FICTION: DAVID MITCHELL'S TAKE ON ADVENTURE, EMPIRE AND THE EXOTICIZATION OF THE PAST ¹

LA NOVELA NEO-HISTÓRICA: LA INCURSIÓN DE DAVID MITCHELL EN EL GÉNERO POR MEDIO DE LA AVENTURA, EL IMPERIALISMO Y LA EXOTIZACIÓN DEL PASADO.

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Abstract:

This essay is concerned with the conception of historical fiction that emerged in the British literary scene at the turn of the 21st century, and which Elodie Rousselot, among others, has termed neo-historical, having developed on premises similar to neo-Victorian fiction. This variety embraces a narrative realist mode and participates in the taste for popular engagement in public history. The analysis departs from a consideration of the implications of these critical approaches to historical fiction, in as much as they move backwards, beyond their postmodern foundations, and intersect with the genre of historical romance. This article uses David Mitchell's *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet* (2010) as a case-study in the light of Mitchell's own conceptualization of the genre of historical fiction. The novel combines a meta-realist approach with the exoticisation of the past and the exploration fictional subjectivities and an awareness of post-imperialist concerns in a globalized world.

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Keywords: Neo-historical novel; Historical Romance; David Mitchell; Exoticism; *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet*.

Resumen:

Este artículo analiza una nueva concepción de la ficción histórica que surgió en la escena literaria británica a comienzos del siglo XXI, y que Elodie Rousselot, entre otros, ha denominado neohistórica, habiéndose desarrollado según principios similares a la ficción neo-victoriana. Esta variedad utiliza el modo narrativo del realismo y participa en la afición popular por el pasado que se manifiesta en diferentes formas de “public history”. El análisis parte de una consideración de las implicaciones de este enfoque crítico y narrativo, en la medida en que trasciende sus fundamentos posmodernos y se entrecruza con el género del romance histórico. Este artículo analiza *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet* (2010) de David Mitchell como un ejemplo de este fenómeno a la luz también de la conceptualización que Mitchell hace del género de la ficción histórica. La novela combina un enfoque meta-realista con la exotización del pasado, la exploración de las subjetividades ficticias y una conciencia de preocupaciones post-imperialistas en un mundo globalizado.

Palabras clave: Novela neo-histórica; Romance histórico; David Mitchell; Exotización; *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet*.

Obscurity is Japan’s outermost defence.

The country doesn’t want to be understood

The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet, David Mitchell.

The variety of historical fiction genres that are published and have established trends since the turn of the twenty-first century creates a complex network, intricately connected with theoretical conceptions of literature and history. Owing to this intricacy and bulk—made even greater by further association with public history, film and television genres, and other forms of popular culture—the concept of historical fiction has become elusive and is subject to constant revision. This article seeks to reflect on some of the central aspects of the debate as it stands two decades into the century using David Mitchell’s 2010 novel, *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet* and its construal as a neo-historical narrative as an illustrative case in point. The main aim is to foreground the “neo-historical” way of reconfiguring the past through the present by placing this novel at the centre of the theoretical discussion on the main qualities of contemporary fictional renditions of history. The analysis of the novel departs from Elodie Rousselot’s understanding of the genre as modes of “exotization” of the past and

considers David Mitchell's own conception of historical fiction writing. The goal is to decipher the nature of his exoticising attitude to past times in *Thousand Autumns* and some of the contemporary concerns that it projects onto the represented period. The emphasis of this latter purpose will be placed on the issue of intercultural exchange with a Foucauldian view of power and knowledge perceivable, in the novel, in the interaction between the Dutch and Japanese characters and their interpreters.

The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet is David Mitchell's fifth novel. While the first three were released to great critical acclaim—with the second *Number9dream* and third, *Cloud Atlas*, shortlisted for the 2001 and 2004 Man Booker Prize respectively—the reviews of the next two were uneven. This is likely to reflect a slight disillusionment with the more realistic and less experimental approach of both the partially autobiographical *Black Swan Green* (2006) and of Mitchell's only proper historical third-person narrative, *Thousand Autumns*. His last two novels *The Bone Clocks* (2014) and, the related novella, *Slade House* (2016) return to the speculative-fiction style and the variety of scenarios and time-frames that is this author's most characteristic feature (Dillon, O'Donnell).

Thousand Autumns is set in Japan, where Mitchell lived for eight years and met his Japanese wife, but it goes backwards in time to reflect on the conflicting relations between East and West within the historical context of colonialism and Japan's seclusion at the turn of the nineteenth century. The novel is set mostly on the island of Dejima, a trading post between the Japanese Empire and the colonial Netherlands (then the Batavian Republic), as well as its only connection with Europe. The island was a man-made structure, devised as a brittle link between two cultures. Japan claimed it existed just for commercial purposes, as a concession beyond the radical self-enclosure of the "Hidden Empire," also called the "Land of a Thousand Autumns".

In the introduction to the first volume-long collection of criticism published about David Mitchell, Sarah Dillon delineates the main features of his literary style as based on two main techniques that she calls "the compounded short-story" (4) and "the macronovel" (5). The first characteristic is the configuration of each novel as a set of chained short-stories. This method elicits the narrative intensity of the short story, taking advantage of the postmodern fragmentation of story-telling for the benefit of intensity of rhythm and theme. Dillon sees traces of this technique in the three-part structure of *Thousand Autumns*. The first part is located on the island of Dejima, where Jacob de Zoet, a clerk and bookkeeper of the Dutch East India Company, based on a real historical character (Endrick Doeff), has to measure himself with the established Dutch and Japanese, overt and hidden, sources of power; the second part takes place on the mainland, trailing the rescue attempt of the Japanese midwife Orito (whom Jacob has fallen in love with) by one of the interpreters in Dejima; and the last part, on Dejima again, with the resolution of several of the subplots and the conclusion of Jacob's term in the Orient.

The second feature that Dillon foregrounds as Mitchell's trademark is the interconnected fictional system created by the whole of his work, which she describes as a "macronovel." One fictional world runs across all of his novels, with characters reappearing and motives being reused in a transdimensional re-elaboration of narrative materials. Dillon interprets this as a "house of fiction" in which each novel—those published as well as those not yet written—represents one room, and the characters can move about the house freely (6). In *Thousand Autumns*, she identifies several such characters: as e.g. Boerhaave who is also in *Cloud Atlas*, Con Twomey, a relative of a character in *Ghostwritten* and Dr. Marinus, who has lived several lives (Dillon 7) and is the protagonist of Mitchell's next novel, *The Bone Clocks* (2016).

Contemporary historical fiction, truth and the neo-historical novel

When tracing back the relationship between fiction and history in the twentieth century, it is necessary to highlight the developments that took place during the 1960s and 70s, when the efforts of postmodernism crystallized in the publication of two books: John Fowles' novel *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) and Linda Hutcheon's theoretical volume, *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988), in which she developed the concept of historiographic metafiction. These two books are frequently referred to while elucidating how the postmodern debates about narrative have reflected a political contention with the representation of history as truth. Such concerns are shown in many historiographic metafictions, such as Jeanette Winterson's *The Passion* (1987), whose first-person narrator repeats the refrain "I'm telling you stories. Trust me", and also in contemporary historical novels such as Sarah Water's neo-Victorian books; but also in non-historical ones like Julian Barnes's *The Sense of an Ending* (2011), whose narrator ponders constantly on the imperfection of memory to record one's own past.

However postmodern these features seem to be, the debate concerning the status of the historical novel with regard to authenticity and history is as old as the genre itself—even older if we consider, as some analysts do, as a basic foundation of the discussion, William Godwin's writings on historical romance as early as 1797. Jerome de Groot states:

Godwin is essentially arguing this [that historical romance offers a way to "re-experience the social and human motives which led men to think, feel and act just as they did in historical reality"] before Scott has put pen to paper, and in doing so he suggests to us a few key things. First, the writing of historical fiction, since its origins in romance, has been something which has effectively communicated narrative and character. Second, the very mode of imaginative writing about history demonstrates the innate falsity of History and the subjective ways in which we know, engage with and understand the past (*The Historical Novel* 20).

De Groot is not alone in highlighting that being suspicious of academic history is not as new or as essential to postmodernism as Hutcheon's concept of historiographical metafiction suggests; however, that does not refute her argument any more than the pre-existence of *Tristram Shandy*

refutes that pastiche, parody, rewriting and iconoclastic metafiction are preoccupations which flourished as part of postmodernist aesthetics. The link between romance and historical fiction is also important. The narrative mode of the historical romance is closely associated with the telling of—foundational, mythical or instructive—stories that, stereotypically, take place in the past. Northrop Frye emphasised its constant, inevitable return: “no matter how great a change may take place in society, romance will turn up again, as hungry as ever, looking for new hopes and desires to feed on” (*Anatomy of Criticism* 99).

Georg Lukács wrote a seminal book on historical fiction, mostly devoted to the analysis of Walter Scott’s production as the “father” of the genre. Indeed, Lukács valued greatly Scott’s capacity to fuse history with fiction in order to bring out intimate experience in a vivid way: “Scott’s ‘necessary anachronism’ consists therefore, simply in allowing his characters to express feelings and thoughts about real, historical relationships in a much clearer way than the actual men and women of the time could have done” (63). De Groot highlights the relevance of Lukács’ view of historical fiction within his whole *oeuvre* as related to his Marxist conception of history and culture:

For Lukács, the historical novel is keenly important for various reasons. It represents historical process, and in doing so gestures towards actual historical progress. The realism of the novel allows the reader to engage with and empathize with historical individuals and thence gain a sense of their own historical specificity (*The Historical Novel* 29).

Lukács’s view of the rigorous but nonetheless imaginative historical novel as an effective intellectual and emotional engagement no doubt influenced the postmodern school of literary studies during the late 60s and 70s towards an iconoclastic view of history, truth and the concept of “reality”, as we have suggested above. However, it also stems from the modernist approach at fiction as a form that can reveal some truth of intimate experience epitomized, for instance, by James Joyce’s faithful rendition of location and coetaneous human types as an attempt to capture their peculiar common consciousness in his collection of short stories *Dubliners*. Elisabeth Wesseling talks about the modernist “subjectivization of history” in Virginia Woolf’s free approach at historiography through parody, fantasy and irony in her historical novel *Orlando*, which can also be seen as a precursor of the freedom of Fowles’s “pastime of past times” (Hutcheon 105-23) literary games.

The postmodern view was also a consequence of the revision of the academic study of history by the authors of “postmodern historiography”—represented, for example, by Hayden White’s construal of all historical narrative as a “literary” practice (*Metahistory*, 1973) and Keith Jenkins’ denial of the possibility of finding truth through historical discourse (*Rethinking History*, 1991). This was more or less coincidental with the conclusion from cultural studies (Linda Hutcheon, Fredric Jameson) of the possibility of rendering the past through invention (or

fictional “construction”), all of which finally relieved contemporary fiction writers of serious but non-experimental or even of “popular” historical fiction of the burden of authenticity.

Literary and theory-informed postmodern historical fiction offers a wealth of attempts at reinterpreting, remediating or filling the gaps of history by the use of irony, pastiche and parody, detective-like recreations, as well as through anachronistic perspectives on history and historical figures from racialized, feminist, gay and lesbian or postcolonial points of view². As a trend within these practices, a style of novel has been identified that has been and is still being published along the past three decades, which revises history but avoids experimentation and other radical postmodern formal features. Ina Bergman reflects on the lack of a proper name for this phenomenon (147), which she considers (within American fiction) “a second postmodernist turn”, “a change of paradigm [...] away from postmodernism, and not a straightforward renewal of or return to realism” (148). I think that this paradigm may well be encompassed by the term “neo-historical novel” as used by Elodie Rousselot (2014). This is a very wide and open category, which, no doubt, includes many possible variants. It was first clearly identified for the Victorian period when the neo-Victorian novel shied away from formal experimentation. This style, epitomized in recent years by Sarah Waters’ neo-Victorian novels, is also acknowledged by Antonia Byatt about her novella “The Conjugal Angel” when she affirmed that the original impulse for it was “revisionist and feminist” (104). It implies that the political preoccupations of the present are projected onto the fictional characters of the past, but concentrating mainly on the silenced, marginal and common people and imbued in an, apparently realist, historical fiction form.

The concept of neo-historical that Rousselot uses to refer to this style of historical fiction is, then, an evolution of the term neo-Victorian³. This has been widely theorized as a separate genre, focused on the fictional reinterpretation of the Victorian era’s social types and contexts, as well as of the aesthetic choices associated to the main narrative genres of the period (the bildungsroman, the psychological and the sentimental novel, and the more unequivocally Victorian, realist and gothic-mystery genres). This fact is highlighted by Gamble as a “double act of recollection—that is, the recollection of the historical past within a narrative framework that itself reconstitutes traces of a specifically literary past” (128). For example, in *Affinity*, *Fingersmith* and *Tipping the Velvet*, Sarah Waters deploys a kind of “realistic”

2 Jerome de Groot calls these postmodern approaches “challenging history” and includes them in the same chapter as two more speculative categories: counterfactual practices and conspiracy fiction(139-83). Ina Bergmann’s wide review of the “new historical fiction” published in the USA at the turn of the 21st century finds the following main categories: “multi-time-level historical novel, historical bio-fiction, historical crime fiction (including the historical non-fiction novel), reanimated classics, historical novel with a magic twist, and alternat(iv)e history” (145). Some of these could also be considered as mixed genres and modes, as they have literary rather than historical referents.

3 However, neo-Victorian literature is not the only early-comer underneath the neo-historical umbrella. Another trend, also defined by the prefix “neo-”, is the neo-slave narrative, which similarly uses history to record the experience of the silenced figures of the past, also appeared in the 1960s-70s, used postmodern experimental techniques in its inception, and has literary referents as well as historical ones (Rushdy 1999).

technique, somehow aiming at a “remedying” of history for which Kohlke has coined the term “new (meta)realism” (156). She describes the technique as “mimi[cking] history’s obscuration of its own narrativity, not merely critiquing but re-enacting it” (156) in order to reinsert into it the taboo themes and figures that official history repressed. In an expansion of this idea, referring to Waters’s *Affinity*, Martin Paul Eve points out that

Waters appears to be writing under the genre of what we might term a critical historiography. This is made clear through the way in which *Affinity*, alongside her earliest neo-Victorian novel *Tipping the Velvet* (1998), both overturns the repressive hypothesis and also makes sexuality a part of identity formation in the Victorian era. (115)

Evolving from this neo-Victorian enquiry, Elodie Rousselot, among others (Harris) has called for its expansion of the critical term to fictional works set in other historical periods in which she has identified similar features. “As with the neo-Victorian”, she states “these works are not solely set in the past but perform an active interrogation of that past” (2). It is, therefore, a vehicle for the problematizing of historical representation, but not in the radical or experimental way of the historiographic metafiction; and not necessarily, as in the case of neo-Victorianism, to redress the imperative of social propriety but more usually to include in the traces of history the subjective experience of the common people. In the words of Milda Danyte: “Representatives of long marginalized social groups, from the working class to women and ethnic minorities, have demanded a new kind of historical research and writing, ones in which the central figures are not members of the governing classes but are ordinary men and women” (36). This is in line with other practices of popular and public history, like local and family history, ethnographic recreations of every-day life and film or television faithful setting reconstructions (de Groot, *Consuming History*)⁴. The “popular”, “unofficial memory” is what captures the writers’ attention now, its emphasis being on “personal experience” rather than collective identities. I would also highlight as an aspect of these novels that they show a sort of *post*-postmodern awareness in their capacity to acknowledge political positions that were problematized by postmodernist approaches to history, but which are now—or should be—fully acknowledged by writers and readers including, for instance, postcolonial views of globalization, or the legitimacy of diverse gender and sexual identities.

4 De Groot offers a summary of what this concept amounts to in contemporary culture: “The historical as a cultural trope developed largely unchecked and unconsidered during the late 1990s and early twenty-first century. As a nation, across a bewildering amount of media, the past seems incredibly interesting. Britain is a society fascinated, continually reading, rereading, plotting and conspiring different versions and different timelines” (*Consuming History*, 2). His book *Consuming History* contains chapters about the different ways popular culture offers to “experience history” including film and television, popular historical accounts, museum installations, history games, local and family history, collecting and memorabilia.

In formal terms, the neo-historical novel's combination of historical facts and personal experience develops, as Rousselot indicates, from its use of "verisimilitude" as a narrative mode, which "confirms the novel's simultaneous attempt *and* refusal to render the past accurately" (4, emphasis in the original). For Rousselot, "in seeking to represent the past so faithfully—at least on the surface—the neo-historical critical engagement with that past may appear to be absent, while it is in fact seamlessly embedded into the fabric of the text"(5). She is aware of the risk that this approach implies, which includes the already highly discussed (for Neo-Victorianism) threat of a nostalgic, and thus reactionary, representation, and contrasts this with her own contention, which is that the effect is the "exotization" of the past. However, she does not elaborate on how this exotization may take shape in formal terms. My analysis of Mitchell's *Thousand Autumns* points at one of its possible formal features in the creation of fictional subjectivities which develop a simultaneously constructed-historical and present-day consciousness.

It is important to highlight that the genre of "historical romance" as analyzed by Helen Hughes also uses a realistic representation of a historical/fictional past which is "both convincing and estranging" (1); however, the romance includes an element of fantasy which makes the realistic past "a suitably exotic context for the *romantic motifs* which reflect—sometimes by contraries—the concerns of the readers" (1, emphasis added). Both Hughes and de Groot acknowledge the existence of two main strands of historical romance: one which is women-centred and focuses on love and relationships; and another one, which is male-centred and develops through adventure, cloak-and-dagger or swashbuckling story-telling. While the "female" kind has been continuously popular since the development of the genre by Georgette Heyer in the 1920s, De Groot points to a revival of variations of the male-centred kind in recent years (*The historical novel*, 79-88). While the neo-historical fiction may touch on the fantasy of romance at times, it tends to stay away from it, as well as from the "romantic motifs" that accompany it. In *Thousand Autumns* these are associated with the "male-centred" romance, where the love story is secondary and subordinate to the main plot, which revolves around quests, politics and adventure.

As an aesthetic mode, exoticism consists in the "commodification of cultural difference" (Huggan 13) which thus "renders people, objects and places strange" and "effectively manufactures otherness" (Huggan 13). Rousselot relates this with the conditions of living of globalization and the commodification of "exotic others" through travel and tourism, and I would add, through the museologic and didactic practices of public history.

At a time when [...] national borders—and the definitions of national identity they used to signify—have all but been erased, the uncertainty caused by our increasingly globalized present exacerbates our nostalgic obsession with appropriating and re-imagining the past. In addition, with the development of mass tourism, the rise of new technologies, and the radical disappearance of "unexplored geographical dark areas" [...] the neo-historical novel

affords a travel experience of the reader-cum-explorer in which the retrieval of these vanishing “dark areas”—like the retrieval of vanishing values and modes of being—is still a possibility (Rousselot 7).

Jerome de Groot (2016) sees these features also operating in the historical novel's participation in public history: “the historical novelist similarly explores the dissonance between then and now, making the past both recognisable and simultaneously unfamiliar. Historical novelists concentrate on the gaps between known factual history and that which is lived” (*Consuming History*, 263-64). In this sense, this type of historical fiction operates by a distancing of observation of the context as seen through the protagonists' fictional subjectivities, which are closer to our time. These subjectivities function as a bridge between the “othered” fictional past and its contemporary writing/reading. While historiographic metafiction realizes this bridge by means of formal experimental techniques, the neo-historical novel chooses verisimilitude, but does not worry if the bridge constructed is visible at times, as it is part of the intended engagement of temporalities. A contemporary author writing about the past cannot avoid a self-referential awareness of his/her position in between past and present. Historical fiction is metafictional and metahistorical even if it does not use postmodern or overtly metafictional strategies (Boccardi 8).

Mitchell's neo-historical approach to the represented past

In the light of the implications advanced above we can now analyze how Mitchell's neo-historical approach operates in the two main directions identified: on the one hand, how it constructs the exotization of past experience; and on the other hand, how he elaborates a political position regarding the European imperialistic efforts in Japan through the modern lenses of postcolonialism and of a Foucauldian understanding of the structures of power and knowledge.

Patrick O'Donnell points out to the values of Mitchell's approach to history: “Like *Cloud Atlas*, *The Thousand Autumns* offers a counter to a totalized view of history, with a capital H, in the myriad minor histories and microcultures it depicts” (126). The Sceptre paperback edition of this novel contains two revealing addenda: one is a chronological list of the historical events that serve as the novel's historical referents (551-54) and the other one is a short reflection by the author on the writing of historical fiction (555-60). The first of these texts identifies the actual historical facts that contextualize the story⁵. They revolve around four main issues: firstly, the fate of the Europeans in Japan's Shogunate (Edo period 1603 - 1868), from the first Portuguese expedition and Francis Xavier's Jesuit mission in the 1540s to the expulsion of all the foreigners and Christians from Japan (1638) after many of them joined the Shimabara revolt (Beasley 150). This sparked the prohibition for Japanese subjects from leaving the country and of the entrance of foreign knowledge (*Sakoku*, closure). This went on for a period of roughly

5 For a monography on the history of the Dutch in Japan see, for instance, Goodman.

200 years, with the exception of Dejima in the early eighteenth century, when some of the restrictions were lifted and the exchange of books and scholarship (*Rangaku* or “Western Studies”) began, (Stanlaw 47). This was a tightly-controlled source of scientific, medical and technical information that allowed Japan to be in touch with European knowledge, through the translation of books from Dutch and the direct contact with a handful of European scholars⁶.

The second kind of data collected by Mitchell in his chronology are facts about the trade of the Dutch East India company in Dejima, together with related events, like wars with other European powers, that take place elsewhere but affect the trading officials and the prosperity, or otherwise, of the Company. The third type is information about the exchange of knowledge between the Dutch and the Japanese in Dejima. And finally, a number of attempts by other European nations, particularly England and Russia, to expel the Dutch and take their place in monopolizing trade with the Japanese.

Among the people and events listed some stand out as direct inspiration for characters and events in the novel. The most important one is Hendrick Doeff, on whom Jacob de Zoet is based. Doeff wrote a book of memoirs which Mitchell acknowledges as a primary source, titled *Recollections of Japan* (Haarlem, 1833) in which he described his life in Japan. Like Mitchell’s Jacob, he arrived in Japan in 1799 as a junior clerk of the Dutch East India Company. Also like him, he eventually became the chief of the Dutch on Dejima and was stranded there for eighteen years as the different wars in Europe changed the status of the metropolis, its controlling powers varied (in the hands of France as the Republic of Batavia after the French Revolution and becoming the Kingdom of Holland during the Napoleonic period), and it came under frequent threat by the English, both in Europe and in its overseas dominions. Other important historical figures mentioned in Mitchell’s chronology are Dr. Siebold, a doctor and scientist who may be the inspiration for Dr. Marinus (Larsonneur, “Revisiting Dejima” 137), although he could also be based on Carl Peter Thunberg, who did the research for his *Flora Japonica* (1775) in Dejima—or maybe, he is a combination of both. According to Doeff’s narration, Siebold had a half-Japanese daughter called Oine, who might have been the source of Mitchell’s Orito, as she became the first female Japanese doctor (Larsonneur, “Revisiting Dejima” 137)⁷.

Condensed in the epigraphic quote at the beginning of this article, David Mitchell puts forward the idea that the main purpose of Japan’s seclusion was to protect the country against the imminent European colonization of Asia. The Japanese always preserved supremacy in these bilateral exchanges, as is well reflected in Mitchell’s fictional reconstruction of the interplay of control and authority, which, in the dynamics of the novel, is maintained by threat and politics, rather than actual force. But the novel contains its share of daring ventures as

6 In his chronological list, Mitchell mentions: Engelbert Kaempfer (physician, *History of Japan* 1690-2); Carl Peter Thunberg (*Flora Japonica* 1775); and Isaac Titsingh (*Illustrations of Japan*, 1822).

7 See Larsonneur, “Revisiting Dejima” and “Weaving myth and history together” for more details on Japanese sources for *Thousand Autumns*, including both visual and written texts.

a response both to the menace of foreign rivals and to the powerfully mystical Japanese social hierarchy (based on feudal social structures and a tyrannical use of power and control over the population), represented by Lord Enomoto. In its more traditional features *Thousand Autumns* is linked with the adventurous, “male-centred” romance identified by Hughes.

One of the modern preoccupations that Mitchell's *Thousand Autumns* raises is a postcolonial concern with Eurocentrism and the threat of Orientalism. The novel is set in a colonial location, but one in which the European characters lack the emblematic power and supremacy of the colonial metropolis. Besides, the novel cannot be said to be altogether Eurocentric also because its central part has Japanese characters as focalizers and features no Europeans at all. However, the emphasis put on the arrival of Western knowledge as a sign of the opening of the Hidden Empire to science and progress cannot deny an Orientalist underpinning. The tension between this conceptualization of East-West relations is present, if nothing else, as an awareness that Mitchell constantly bypasses. Chikako Nihei (2009) identifies some of the strategies he uses to achieve this bypassing in his two other Japanese novels, *Ghostwritten* and *Number9dream*. The main ones are: contributing to the presentation of Japan from multiple perspectives inside and outside it; using Japanese subjectivities as well as western ones; and exploiting the Japanese interiorized sense of their own uniqueness, as well as of their imperialistic ventures in different historical moments.

All of these strategies are also present in *Thousand Autumns*. The Hidden Empire is thus presented both as a metropolis exerting control on territories around it—of which readers are reminded by the presence of Malay slaves as servants—and one which does not want to be known, and for which the trope of enigma inevitably constructs an othered status. Another strategy by which *Thousand Autumns* bypasses the threat of Orientalism is by focusing on individual experience and highlighting the multicultural nature of the human group that gathers on Dejima. Even though the Dutch East India Company is the administrative authority, it employs clerks from other countries and the list of nationalities includes Irish, English, an American captain, a veteran of the Revolutionary War; there is a man from Prussia, an assistant from Ceylon, another one described as half-caste Dutch, as well as an Australian and a Quebecois, etc. This is obviously consistent with the historical circumstances and ultimately suggests that the colonial and trading endeavors in the past created, as they do today, areas of cosmopolitan encounter.

On the other hand, Mitchell's novel offers a less than idyllic portrait of the Europeans, who also use force, deceit and overt exploitation in their imperialistic ventures, with constant evidence of corrupted morality and unfair use of authority. In this self-enclosed boundary-space every man is alone while in shared incarceration, facing on his own the political and human complexities of this peculiar site of intercultural exchange.

Mitchell's reflections on historical fiction writing show awareness of what he calls a “stereo narrative” constructing the narrative voice, but not formed by simultaneous past and present perspectives but by the words of one “speaker” developing “the novel's own plot”

while a synchronized second voice plays “the bass of history’s plot” (558). This is how the historical events in his chronology get embedded into the fiction. As, for instance, de Zoet’s responsibility in defending Dejima from the attempt of English control by the warship Phaeton, which Hendrik Doeff describes as having taken place under his rule in 1808 (Larsonneur, “Revisiting Dejima” 138). He also highlights the distinct power of literature, identified by Lukács as the possibility of incorporating subjective experience to the narrative as “the novel’s ace of spades”. Particularly, as it allows us to see that

while the needs of the human heart and body stay much the same, the societies humans live in vary dramatically between centuries and cultures, and to watch people live—people whom we might have been, had we been born then—under different regimes and rules is fascinating for its own sake (558).

The combination of this and of a sense of the chronological development of the present from the past through historical events makes him affirm that “a historical novel may illuminate the contemporary world in ways that straight history may not”. Mitchell also identifies as one of a writer’s greatest (“perverse”) pleasures the “painstaking reconstruction of a lost world” (558). The combination of these ideas provides the basis for the verisimilitude mode, which is a form of realism but not of historical authenticity.

The historical novelist must learn how the vast gamut of human needs was met in the “destination period”: how were rooms lit and heated? How were meals prepared, clothes made, bodies bathed (or not), feet shod, distances covered, transgressions punished, illnesses explained, courtships conducted, contraception considered, divinities worshipped, and corpses disposed of? (558)

The realist mode requires the constant naming of all sorts of instruments, furniture and other realia the characters interact with. Some of them are exotically Japanese, like “the palanquins” that “pass over an embanked river” (44). Others are exotically period-specific: “Through the door is the Sick Room, with three vacant beds. Jacob is tempted by and earthenware jar of water: he drinks from the ladle—it is cool and sweet” (29). Therefore, the tale constructs the lining of subjective experience in such a way that materials, customs and practical cares in the performance of daily tasks are simultaneously familiar and bizarre. This is a most important aspect of the Mitchell’s skilful exotization of the past. And the novel conforms a rich collage, made up of the train of thought of the three focalizers’ fictional subjectivities, loaded with the unmistakably human combination of fugitive images captured on the go, different kinds of thought—from strategic to reminiscing—feeling, and bodily sensation: “Jacob’s armpits, groin and knees are itchy with sweat; he fans himself with his clerk’s portfolio. [...] A hairy beggar kneeling over a puddle of vomit turns out to be a dog. A minute later, the retinue stops by a gate of iron and oak” (44).

Mitchell identifies language as the source of potential blunders, phoniness and pastiche lurking in the corners of the writing task. The issue of language had also been acknowledged by John Fowles as one of the most problematic hitches to be solved in the writing of historical fiction. In an essay on *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, he reflects: "Because the genuine language of 1867 (in so far as it can be heard in books of the time) is far too close to our own to sound convincingly old," it fails to agree with our psychological picture of the Victorians; "it is not stiff enough, not euphemistic enough and so on" (139). David Mitchell's solution to this problem is similar to Fowles's. He creates a "dialect" that he calls "Bygonese", which is "inaccurate but plausible. Like a coat of antique-effect varnish on a pine new dresser, it is both synthetic and the least-worst solution" (559).

The result of all of this conscious combination of second-hand knowledge and imagination contributes to the construction of Jacob de Zoet, the main focalizer of the story, a pastiche of a late-eighteenth century man and an *alter ego* of the implied author who unabashedly applies his twenty-first century knowledge and moral consciousness to the interpretation of the fictional-and-historical facts. Jacob becomes, simultaneously, the *alter ego* or secondary consciousness for the reader to interpret the plot. He stands for propriety, honesty, kindness (even—perhaps anachronistically—to inferiors), nobility of character and feelings and a considerable unprejudiced desire for knowledge and openness of mind. At times he takes the role of the performer playing bass of history to establish a bridge between past and present.

Contemporary concerns: power and knowledge in *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet*

Intercultural exchange and the confrontation of West and East in transnational, (postcolonial) world fiction, as well as the complex concepts of orientalism, hybridism and racial discrimination are contemporary concerns of the globalized world. This novel, in its fictional portrayal of early-nineteenth-century intercultural experience, shows that such issues cannot be looked at a-historically and indeed, can be approached trans-historically in fiction. One of the main themes of Mitchell's novel is the complexity of multiculturalism within the constraints of Dejima, where everybody is aware of everybody else's nationality as one criterion to measure their intentions. Being able to judge intentions accurately becomes essential in a system organized around institutional hierarchised authority and hidden or corrupt interests. The main interests being individual wealth (all of the agents use every opportunity to make deals that can complement their meagre salaries) and power, the whole interaction that takes place in Dejima revolves around a Foucauldian understanding of power as articulated through knowledge and discourse.

Japan's protection against foreigners wittily includes the fact that the latter cannot learn or be taught the language. That leaves the power to control meanings to a great extent in the hands of the Japanese interpreters. The translators are the first to receive the messages and, in

exchanging them, they have the capacity to change them (“Yonekizu perhaps adds this on his own initiative” (87), thinks Jacob when he is negotiating the sale of his mercury with Enomoto); they sometimes have the duty to deliver delicate messages, like Vorstenbosch’s defiance when he issues an ultimatum on a deal on copper and “Jacob squirms with sympathy for Ogawa”, (49) or when “Interpreter Sekita recognises trouble and creeps away” (23); finally, they can actually hide or manipulate information (like Ogawa Uzaemon’s decision not to denounce Jacob’s Psalter⁸, and Kobayashi’s manipulation of the figures in the copper-peacock fan deal) or they can be spies for the powerful, like Hanzaburo is revealed to have been by Enomoto (511).

All of these forms of exchange demonstrate the intricate workings of power in discourse:

But, as a multiplicity of discursive elements can come into play in various strategies; it is this distribution that we must reconstruct, with the things said and those concealed, the enunciations required and those forbidden, that it comprises, with the variants and different effects—according to who is speaking, his position of power, the institutional context in which he happens to be situated—that it implies; and with the shifts and reutilizations of identical formulas for contrary objectives that it also includes (Foucault 100).

The other essential aspect of this distribution of power through discourse is the negotiation of knowledge, which provides also for a fair amount of resistance and of realignments of power. Foucault emphasized the fact that often “the most immediate, the most local power relations at work” can modify the forces “with effects of resistance and counterinvestments” (97). Some of these realignments of power are the consequence of the manipulation of the lack of enough knowledge by the interpreters, ignorance of the cultural background, or prejudiced assumptions of different kinds. Some amusing and insightful examples of cultural miscomprehension come when the words are explained in such a way that traditions are contrasted and prejudice is exposed to reveal the hypocrisy behind. This is the case, for example, when the word “polygamy” is discussed by the interpreter Hori, Captain Lacy, de Zoet and van Cleef:

“In all countries, same,” says Hori. “In Japan, Holland, China; all same. I say why. All mans marry first wife. He”—leering, Hori makes an obscene gesture with his fist and finger—“until she”—he mimes a pregnant belly—“yes? After this, all mans keep number wives his purse says he may” (59 emphasis added).

Language and knowledge can be a source of quiet resistance to the exertion of power; as in the episode in which the all-powerful Lord Abbot Enomoto kills a snake apparently by charming it in the Dejima warehouse and the interpreter Yonekizu tries to translate Enomoto’s explanation:

8 All religious books were specifically forbidden from entering Japan.

“It is Chinese philosophy, who scholars of Europe is too clever to understand” He says... excuse, very difficult: he says... all life *is* life because possess force of *ki*”.

“Force of *key*?” Arie Grote mimes turning a key. “What is that?”

Yonekizu shakes his head. “Not key: *ki, ki*. Lord Abbot explain that his studies, his Order, teach how to... what is word? How to manipulate force of *ki*, to heal sickness, et cetera.”

“Oh, I’d say Mr Snakey”, mutters Grote, “got his fair share of *et cetera*” (86).

In using this mildly offensive irony Grote is protected by the fact that the Lord Abbot does not understand Dutch, and the interpreter fails to notice or to transmit the effect of his words. This episode and his comment also darkly hint at Enomoto’s Order’s real nature, at this stage, quite early in the book, when his power and obscure practices have not yet been revealed to the reader.

Another level of the issue of discourse and knowledge is the actual manipulative use of language to lie, hide information or otherwise deliberately put obstacles to communication; and this, not necessarily across languages. The dialogues are often loaded with explorations of meanings and intentions, especially so at instances in which the characters have been tricked into one trap or another, or have perceived an evil-meaning verbal twist, or otherwise corrupt behaviour. Language *has* power and is used to serve noble or dishonest purposes: “Vorstenbosch’s metaphors had changed from ‘excising the cancer of corruption’ to ‘best employing what tools we have to hand’” (159). Towards the end of the novel Jacob has become a master of language. He has learnt some Japanese and his kind behaviour has gained him allies on both sides.

Another essential aspect of language is the fact that it is also a channel for knowledge. All the most developed Japanese characters are avid for the science coming from Western countries, including the cruel Enomoto, who senses a special affinity with Jacob as soon as he meets him—he tells him that he “has translated Lavoisier” as if to make himself agreeable to him (85). The same sort of link is established with interpreter Ogawa, Aibagawa Orito and with Dr Martinus. Ogawa describes himself as “a bibliophile” (24) when he is first introduced. And when inspecting Jacob’s chest, he finds no less than 50 books! Ability to read Dutch provides the door into scientific discovery (medicine and obstetrics, Adam Smith’s economic theories, etc). And, as Dr Martinus is quoted saying, “knowledge exists only when it is given” (536) and “the printed word is food” (165). Learning some Japanese and Malayan has facilitated Dr. Martinus his privileged relation with the country (and his *Flora Japonica*) and will eventually prove of paramount importance for Jacob’s resolution of the secret hidden in the scroll, the real nature of Enomoto’s Mount Shirosi Shrine, by which he finally terminates the Lord Abbot’s cruel power, and solves the book’s central plot.

Despite spending half of his life on Dejima, Jacob de Zoet remains, inevitably, an outsider to Japan. And he does not die there, but goes back to Holland to start a new family and a political career. As an outsider, he too has remained in-between the two cultures, never

fully fitting in, mostly still alone as a human being. His final conversation with Orito at Dr. Martinus' burial is the final curtain to his "thousand Autumns". But he leaves two things behind, a son, who can speak Dutch and Japanese, and has learned some of his father's skills, and a Japanese-Dutch dictionary, the *Dazûto*, as a symbolic link between both cultures.

Conclusions

Amongst the great variety of historical fiction written and published in Britain since the turn of the twenty-first century a trend has been identified under the name of neo-historical fiction. It develops from the assimilation of the main tenets of postmodernism in relation to historical fiction and a liberation from attempts at authenticity or claims to truth attained after the debates on legitimacy with postmodern historiography. The main features of this trend are the use of verisimilitude as a narrative mode and the creation of fictional subjectivities which do not hesitate to combine plausible past and modern mindsets. It is related to the genre of historical romance, except for the element of fantasy which is characteristic of the latter. According to Elodie Rousselot, it incorporates a sort of exotization or estrangement of the past which is in line with other practices of public history in contemporary popular culture. The past, thus, becomes simultaneously othered and distanced for contemplation, but also familiar, by virtue of the constructed subjectivity that bridges it for the reader.

The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet has been presented here as a case study of a neo-historical novel which uses a realist style and constructs complex subjectivities to translate real historical episodes as historical fiction. The novel skilfully constructs the exotization of the past while rendering the experiences of a common person as the protagonist of history. It situates its story at the chore of imperialistic practices in Asia at the turn of the nineteenth century only to explore the investment, not of nations, but of the individual under the forces of history. The novel has elements of traditional adventure romance and allows an ironical play around the pitfalls of Orientalism as an effect of its post-postmodern onlook on a globalized world.

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