The Ship and the Gun: The Perversity of Neo-Victorian Belfast in Glenn Patterson’s *The Mill for Grinding Old People Young*

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Abstract:
In his 2012 novel *The Mill for Grinding Old People Young*, Glenn Patterson portrays a Victorian Ireland not of famished, disruptive, proto-modernist Heathcliffs or Count Draculas, but of benign Belfast patriarchs exemplified in the voice of his narrator, Sir Gilbert Rice. However, Gilbert’s prominent references to *Studies on Hysteria* by Josef Breuer and Sigmund Freud sanction the reader’s interpretations beyond the frame of a simple elegy for an hitherto underappreciated liberal moment in Irish history (Patterson 2012: 17). Two textual figures stand out in this regard: the ship and the gun. The modernisation of Belfast’s port is the abiding backdrop to Gilbert’s amorous formation; and, fittingly, the final act of his love affair with Maria, a Polish refugee, takes place aboard a beached ship. The vanishing point of this metaphor for catastrophic modernity is the ‘unsinkable’, Belfast-built Titanic. Likewise, the gun circulates through the text as an uncanny signal for Gilbert’s deathly desire. It is, I argue, through the operation of these two figures of the city that the novel provides a psychoanalytic explanation for its own perverse investment in the voice of Victorian progress, which further reflects an important affinity between the critical reading practices of Irish literary studies and neo-Victorian studies.

Keywords: Belfast, Sigmund Freud, the Irish Question, Irish Studies, Glenn Patterson, Psychoanalysis, *Studies on Hysteria*, Slavoj Žižek, the Titanic.

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In his 1919 paper ‘A Child is Being Beaten’, Sigmund Freud allows a controversial inference to stand, namely that a contemporary adolescent reading Harriet Beecher Stowe’s novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) was likely giving vent to her unconscious masochistic fantasies (Freud 1919: 180). That this famous anti-slavery novel, once reputed to have precipitated the moral outrage that caused the American Civil
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War, might have been circulating through the private libraries and bedrooms of early twentieth-century Vienna as a spur to masturbation is certainly a provocative thought. However, it is also a thought which directs us to a fundamental truth about the affective and temporal character of reading: that the reader cannot – indeed must not – promise to suspend her readerly pleasure, even when a book represents the grossest scenes of violation, abuse, or inequality. In this chapter, I would like to consider how this general perversity of reading, psychoanalytically defined, applies to redemptive re-readings of the past as we might find in neo-Victorian fiction, as much as to the anti-slavery novel of Freud’s example. To do this, I shall offer a reading of Glenn Patterson’s neo-Victorian Belfast novel *The Mill for Grinding Old People Young* (2012).

Patterson’s novel takes the form of its protagonist Sir Gilbert Rice’s memoir significantly framed by a short journal entry, a coroner’s report, an obituary and a time capsule buried beneath a church. Rice is introduced in 1897 as a retired manufacturer whose memories of Belfast in the 1830s disperse anachronistically backwards and forwards across two centuries. As well as being shuttled from 1897 to 1830 by the main action of the story, which involves Gilbert’s foreshortened love affair with a Polish refugee called Maria, the reader is spun into a broader oscillation between the revolutionary rumours of the 1790s which haunted Gilbert’s childhood and intimations of twentieth-century modernity which, wedded to the fate of the city, predict catastrophic violence. The novel is noteworthy in two respects. First, as a relatively rare example of Irish neo-Victorianism, and more specifically Irish neo-Victorian urban representation, it directs us towards an under-appreciated affinity between the political question of Ireland and the modes of reading and writing at work in the neo-Victorian paradigm. Second, as a novel...

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1 Neo-Victorian fiction more commonly employs Ireland as an anti-urban symbol of rural life, taking place both in the Great Houses of the often absentee landlords and in the crofter cottages, as in the case of Nuala O’Faolain’s *My Dream of You* (2001). Or else Ireland functions merely as a point of departure to elsewhere, either to English cities or those across the Atlantic, for example in Margaret Atwood’s *Alias Grace* (1996). Most often, these novels are set at the time of the Great Famine and, not infrequently, both tropes coincide in representations of desperate flights from the devastated countryside, as found in Joseph O’Connor’s *Star of the Sea* (2002) and Peter Behrens’s *The Law of Dreams* (2006).