

**(Post)Modernist Biofictions: The Literary
Afterlives of Henry James, Virginia Woolf,
and Sylvia Plath**

Bethany Layne

**Submitted in accordance with the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

The University of Leeds

School of English

September 2013

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Acknowledgements

With thanks to my supervisors, Dr. Tracy Hargreaves and Dr. Katherine Mullin, for four years of kindness, humour, and an attentiveness to detail that by far exceeded the call of duty. Thanks also to Dr. Richard Salmon for an encouraging and meticulous transfer review, and to the University of Leeds for the Research Scholarship that made this project possible.

Special thanks are due to my parents, Jane and Jonathan Layne, and my grandfather, Walter Bellamy, for the financial support and unending faith that propelled me to this point, and to my mum in particular for teaching me to read.

I am grateful to the people who have accompanied me on this journey, especially Amber Pouliot and Hannah Ridge. I would like to thank the new friends I made, including, but by no means limited to, Christine Chettle, Helen Kingstone, Simone Lomataire and Rachel Webster, and to the old friends who provided support from afar, particularly Josh Rodda and Liz Sunter. Finally, this thesis is dedicated to Alexander Hodgkins, with love and gratitude for the last eight years.

Abstract

This thesis addresses a new mode of contemporary writing: the biographical fictions about authors that have proliferated over the last ten-to-fifteen years. I find antecedents for this subgenre in two active areas: metafiction's troubling of the boundary between first- and second-order discourses, and Neo-Victorianism's recovery of the subject. I use the phrase '(Post)Modernist Biofiction' to describe these novels. The parenthetical '(post)' refers both to my subjects' chronological positioning pre, mid, and post Modernism, and to the genre's partial engagement with theoretical developments. This selective engagement is borne out by the compound noun 'biofiction', which raises a tension between embodied and textual subjectivity.

Critical interest has kept pace with the flourishing of biofiction, with articles and book chapters multiplying around certain novels. I contribute to this emerging field in one of the first studies to consider biofiction as a genre. I discuss three popular subjects, Henry James, Virginia Woolf, and Sylvia Plath, and their manifestation in sixteen primary texts, considering examples of the literary biopic and the lyric memoir alongside the novel, and the more popular biofictions alongside the critically overlooked.

In doing so, I adopt an intertextual approach, which places the biofictions in dialogue with their subjects' work. I have three main avenues of exploration: the first, to consider how biofiction might serve to introduce or to recall its subjects' texts; the second, to ask whether biofiction might contribute to scholarly discourse as well as borrowing from the same; and the third, to address biofiction's intervention into postmodernist debates about subjectivity. On the whole, the works of biofiction considered in this thesis do not, I argue, naïvely resurrect the Author-God rejected by Roland Barthes. Instead, their intertextuality fragments that figure, enabling a sophisticated recovery of subjectivity as it exists in the form of discourse.

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Introduction

What I have chosen to refer to as (post) modernist biofiction has its roots in two trends in contemporary literature: metafiction and the neo-Victorian novel. In ‘The Novel Now’, David Lodge describes metafiction as a product of the influence of poststructuralist theory on the humanist model of the relationship between fiction and criticism. Thus while, under the humanist model, it was understood that ‘novelists wrote novels and critics criticised them’, the ‘second-order discourse’ of criticism relying for its existence on the ‘first order discourse’ of fiction, poststructuralist theory radically troubled the boundary between the two discourses.¹ This, Lodge argues, led to the growth of metafiction, a genre which ‘transgress(es) the conventional distinction between factual and fictional narrative’ by interleaving ‘documentary sources’ with invented material.² Metafiction, of which the most famous example is, perhaps, *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* (1969), has been the subject of important work by Robert Scholes, Patricia Waugh, and Mark Currie, all three of whom situate the genre at the fault line between fiction and criticism. For Scholes, the writer of metafiction has the power to act as his own critic, by incorporating scholarly insights and perspectives ‘normally formulated externally’.³ For Waugh, this ability ‘simultaneously to create a fiction and to make a statement about the creation of that fiction’ merges the concepts of creation and criticism into the blended discourses of ‘interpretation’ and ‘deconstruction’.⁴ And for Currie, such a definition makes metafiction integral to Modernism, postmodernism, and literary theory, projects for which the critical-creative borderline is ‘a primary source of energy’.⁵

¹ David Lodge, ‘The Novel Now’, in *Metafiction*, ed. by Mark Currie (New York:

² Ibid, p.154.

³ Robert Scholes, ‘Metafiction’, in *Metafiction*, ed. by Currie, pp.21-38 (p.21).

⁴ Patricia Waugh, ‘What is Metafiction and Why are They Saying Such Awful Things About it?’, in *Metafiction*, ed. by Currie, pp.39-54 (p.43).

⁵ Mark Currie, ‘Introduction’, in *Metafiction*, ed. by Mark Currie (New York: Longman, 1995), pp.1-20 (p.2).

Such foregrounding of the mutual influence between fiction and criticism is also a defining characteristic of the comparatively new subgenre of biofiction. For Currie, metafiction's illumination of the symbiotic relationship between the two discourses is in part attributable to the way in which 'the roles of writer and critic are often fulfilled by the same person'.⁶ The same is true of the biofiction authors under consideration, several of whom are, or once were, academics: David Lodge, Cynthia Ozick, Michiel Heyns, and Susan Sellers. In the case of biofiction, as in the case of metafiction, this dual identification produces novels that demonstrate 'a high level of critical awareness'.⁷ My sample also includes a different kind of group: novelists who have accrued a popular critical authority after producing a work of fiction. Colm Tóibín, Michael Cunningham, and Kate Moses have each, respectively, become the go-to person for popular journalism on Henry James, Virginia Woolf, and Sylvia Plath. More obviously, literary biofiction partakes of what Lodge refers to as metafiction's 'foregrounding of the act of authorship within the boundaries of the text'.⁸ Although biofiction tends to invoke the historical rather than the contemporary author, the use of the proper noun similarly emphasises the 'ontological boundary' between fiction and fact.⁹ Lodge has also considered how metafiction's invocation of the author might be viewed as a form of conservative resistance to the querying of the author's existence and purpose by literary theory.¹⁰ Biofiction, as shall shortly be demonstrated, is similarly interpretable as a response to Roland Barthes's death knell for authors; like metafiction, it reinstates the author, but with an acute awareness of the theoretical status he trails.

Biofiction also has roots in another immediately identifiable trend in recent fiction: the neo-Victorian novel. As a genre, neo-Victorianism has been steadily developing over the past forty years, from the publication of Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso*

⁶ Ibid., p.3.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Lodge, 'The Novel Now', p.154.

⁹ Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1987), p.206.

¹⁰ Lodge, 'The Novel Now', p.154.

Sea and John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* in the mid to late 1960s, to contemporary writing by Peter Carey, A.S. Byatt, and Sarah Waters. Neo-Victorianism shares with biofiction a concern with restoring the subject into contemporary literature, though the subject is more often a fictional character than a historical figure. Tracy Hargreaves provides us with a constellation of novels whose characters have been the object of such fictional reimagining: *Jane Eyre*, *Great Expectations*, *North and South*, *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, *Wuthering Heights*, and the Sherlock Holmes canon amongst them.¹¹ Such novels have been considered as part of a broader 'scholarly interest in nineteenth-century continuations', by critics including Robin Gilmour, Dana Shiller, Suzanne Keen, Sally Shuttleworth, Simon Joyce, Cora Kaplan and Christian Gutleben.¹² These critics have suggested that neo-Victorian literature, like biofiction, has a liminal relationship to postmodernist theoretical developments. Shiller argues that Neo-Victorian novels such as *Possession* reveal a conflict between the desire to access a 'recoverable past', and a disbelief in the existence of 'persisting truths'.¹³ Similarly, Keen, also writing in relation to *Possession*, suggests that while the novel's version of history intersects with postmodern ideas, it romanticises the past in a manner that is not fully congruent with a postmodern theoretical framework.¹⁴ This notion of a liminal postmodernism is reiterated by Shuttleworth, who suggests that what she terms retro-Victorian novels oscillate between a self-conscious 'interrogation of the relationship between fiction and history' and a 'non-ironic fascination' with period detail.¹⁵ She adds that our attraction to the Victorian crisis of faith is motivated by

¹¹ Tracy Hargreaves, "'We Other Victorians': Literary Victorian Afterlives', *Journal of Victorian Studies*, 13 (2008), 278-86 (pp.281-2).

¹² Francis O'Gorman, 'Introduction', *Journal of Victorian Studies*, 13 (2008), 277-78 (p.277).

¹³ Dana Shiller, 'The Redemptive Past in the Neo-Victorian Novel', *Studies in the Novel*, 29 (1997), 538-60 (p.541).

¹⁴ Suzanne Keen, *Romances of the Archive in Contemporary British Fiction* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), p.34.

¹⁵ Sally Shuttleworth, 'Natural History: The Retro-Victorian Novel', in *The Third Culture: Literature and Science*, ed. by Elinor S. Shaffer (New York: de Gruyter, 1998), pp.253-68. (p.253).

nostalgia for a phenomenon that has no analogue in the postmodern age.¹⁶ Finally, Gutleben complicates this idea of nostalgia, coining the phrase ‘nostalgic postmodernism’ to describe the disjunction between an obsessive return to the Victorian period and a ‘post-modern ironical debunking of the past’.¹⁷

In his study of biographical novels about the Romantics, Martin Middeke suggests that postmodernist biofiction should be distinguished from such ‘sequels’ to classic novels, which, he argues, ‘testify to a prevalent sense of nostalgia and a retrogressive desire [...] on the part of their readers’.¹⁸ Emma Tennant, author of *Felony* and *The Ballad of Sylvia and Ted*, has written a number of these sequels, of which the best known is *Pemberley* (1993), her sequel to *Pride and Prejudice*. However, as Shiller, Keen, Shuttleworth, and Gutleben have demonstrated, such sequels are not merely nostalgic, but partake selectively of postmodernist theoretical developments. This study will argue that postmodernist biofiction, with its ambiguous blend of nostalgia for the author and recognition of the fragmentation of the subject, should rightly be considered as part of the same literary moment as Neo-Victorianism. The term (Post)Modernist, with the crucially inserted parentheses around the prefix, refers both to the subjects of this fictional recuperation, an early Modernist, a high Modernist, and a postmodernist, as well as to the novels’ generic tendency to engage selectively with theoretical developments. My adoption of the term ‘biofiction’ to describe these novels is influenced by the work of both Middeke and Cora Kaplan. The term aptly describes the ambiguous version of subjectivity the novels offer: while, as Kaplan explains, ‘the ‘bio’ in biofiction [...] references a more essentialised and embodied element of identity, a

¹⁶ Ibid., p.260.

¹⁷ Christian Gutleben, *Nostalgic Postmodernism: The Victorian Tradition and the Contemporary British Novel* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2001), p.200.

¹⁸ Martin Middeke, ‘Introduction’, in *Biofictions: The Rewriting of Romantic Lives in Contemporary Fiction and Drama* ed. by Martin Middeke and Werner Huber (Suffolk: Camden House, 1999), pp.1-26.

subject less than transcendent but more than merely discourse', the 'fiction' suggests the illusory nature of a subjectivity that exists only in the form of text.¹⁹

While biofiction is a contemporary phenomenon, its antecedents are perceptible in Modernist and pre-Modernist texts, as witnessed by the recuperation of Shelley in *The Aspern Papers* (1888), Vita Sackville-West in *Orlando* (1928), Thomas Hardy in *Cakes and Ale* (1930), and Elizabeth Barrett Browning in *Flush* (1933). However, as noted by Lodge, biofiction, or what he terms 'the biographical novel about a writer', has enjoyed a noticeable increase in popularity over the last ten-to-fifteen years.²⁰ Its attractiveness rests, perhaps, in its versatility: it enables writers to tell the same kinds of story as biographers and literary critics, while making use of modes of representation unique to fiction, namely 'the novel's techniques for representing subjectivity rather than the objective, evidence-based discourse of biography'.²¹ Writers who have been the recent subjects of this kind of recuperation include Elizabeth Barrett Browning in *Lady's Maid* (1990), Robert Browning, Emily Dickinson, and Christina Rossetti in *Possession* (1990), where they appeared under pseudonyms, Oscar Wilde in *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* (1993), George Gissing in *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* (1994), Charlotte Mew and Thomas Hardy in *His Arms Are Full of Broken Things* (1997), Dickens in *Jack Maggs* (1999), and T.S. Eliot in *The Archivist* (1999).

Naturally, certain writers exert a greater cultural fascination than others, and this study hones in on three writers of undoubted literary, critical, and biographical significance. Henry James (1843-1916), Virginia Woolf (1882-1941), and Sylvia Plath (1932-1963) have been the subjects of a sufficient number of fictional recuperations to facilitate the drawing of critical comparisons. While articles and book chapters on certain of these texts abound, with Tóibín's *The Master*, Lodge's *Author, Author*, and

¹⁹ Cora Kaplan, *Victoriana: Histories, Fictions, Criticism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), p.65.

²⁰ David Lodge, *The Year of Henry James: The Story of a Novel* (London: Penguin, 2007), p.8.

²¹ *Ibid.*

Cunningham's *The Hours* enjoying the most attention, many have been critically overlooked. Furthermore, despite the demonstrable popularity of literary biofiction in recent years, there have been surprisingly few studies to consider it as a genre. Exceptions include an essay by Middeke, who also considers biofiction as a branch of historiographic metafiction, but who concentrates solely on those novels that take the Romantics as subjects. Paul Franssen and Tom Hoenselaars, in an introduction with which I shall subsequently engage in greater detail, situate biofiction 'at the crossroads between the historical novel, biography, and the *Kunstlerroman*'.²² Lodge's autobiographical essay 'The Year of Henry James' indicates further avenues of scholarly exploration, asking whether biofiction might variously be considered as

a symptom of declining faith or loss of confidence in the power of purely fictional narratives, [...] a characteristic move of postmodernism, [...] a sign of decadence and exhaustion in contemporary writing, or as a positive and ingenious way of coping with the 'anxiety of influence'.²³

However, the further excavation of these issues is precluded by the brevity and autobiographical focus of his work.

Laura Savu's more ambitious full-length study, *Post-Mortem Post-Modernists* (2009), explores the implications of what she terms 'author fictions' with reference to ideas surrounding 'authorship, the posthumous, and rewriting'.²⁴ Her study, like mine, addresses the intersections between biofiction and postmodernism, exploring the sub-genre's engagement with 'three interrelated crises – of the subject, of the author, and of representation'.²⁵ There is also some overlap between her choice of case studies and my own; we both consider *The Master* and *The Hours*. Whereas Savu adopts a close focus, making one novel exemplary of each historical subject, I consider a broader range,

²² Paul Franssen and Tom Hoenselaars, 'Introduction: The Author as Character: Defining a Genre', in *The Author as Character: Representing Historical Writers in Western Literature*, ed. by Paul Franssen and Tom Hoenselaars (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1999), pp.11-38 (p.18).

²³ Lodge, *Year*, p.10.

²⁴ Laura E. Savu, *Postmortem Postmodernists: The Afterlife of the Author in Recent Narrative* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2009), p.10.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p.13.

facilitating the drawing of illuminating comparisons between texts. The aim of this thesis is, then, to intervene in an emerging critical and literary field, celebrating biofiction's hybridity by demonstrating how it partakes of both neo-Victorianism's recovery of the subject, and metafiction's self-conscious illumination of the boundary between fiction and criticism. My research questions include: can such novels perform the role of criticism as well as fiction? How are they influenced by, and how might they contribute to, the ongoing cultural reception of James, Woolf, and Plath? For whom are they written, and by whom are they interpretable: subject specialists, or the general reader? Do they reinstate the author naïvely or knowingly: are they intrinsically invested in a recoverable subjectivity, or might their engagement with their subjects' texts allow for the understanding of identity as a discursive construct?

Before beginning to explore biofiction's possible implications, it will be necessary to define the terminology I use to situate it within broader theoretical debates. In suggesting that the novels under consideration in this thesis are all highly intertextual, I use a term formulated by Julia Kristeva in *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (1980), distancing myself from its subsequent deployment by structuralists Gerard Genette and Michael Riffaterre.²⁶ Whereas Genette and Riffaterre 'employ intertextual theory to argue for critical certainty', more useful for my purposes is Kristeva's original deployment of the theory to disrupt, rather than crystallise literary meaning.²⁷ Kristeva's theory has its origins in Saussurean linguistics, which established 'the relational nature' of language, meaning, and texts, and in Bakhtin's emphasis on how language is situated within particular social contexts.²⁸ Saussure's understanding of the sign as arbitrary, differential and non-referential opened up the idea that each unit of language was 'shadowed by a vast number of possible relations', making his *Course in*

²⁶ Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, trans. by Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine, and Leon S. Roudiez, ed. by Leon S. Roudiez (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983).

²⁷ Graham Allen, *Intertextuality* (London: Routledge, 2000), p.4.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.2-3.

General Linguistics (1916) one point of origin for Kristeva's intertextuality theory.²⁹

Kristeva used the concept of non-referentiality to suggest that the subject becomes 'lost in writing' because the 'pro-nominal signifiers' in the text cannot be connected to an external signified.³⁰

Bakhtin, conversely, developed the concept of 'relationality' to refer to language's locatedness within specific sites, 'social registers', and 'moments of utterance', avenues left unexplored by Saussure's abstract vision of language.³¹ Bakhtin emphasised that language was dialogic, dependent for its meaning upon previous utterances and anticipated responses, a concept he went on to deploy in relation to the polyphonic novel.³² Translating and introducing Bakhtin's theories to the French-speaking world, Kristeva maintained his insistence on 'the literary word' as an 'intersection of textual surfaces' rather than a locus of stable meaning, as the product of a dialogue between writer, character or addressee, and sociocultural context.³³ However, she subsumed his emphasis on human subjects into the greater abstraction of text and textuality, exploring how the 'vertical axis' of author-reader communication coexisted with the 'horizontal axis' of communication between a 'poetic word' and its prior articulation in previous texts.³⁴

Kristeva's work on Bakhtin produced the concept of intertextuality, which she defined as follows:

each word (text) is an intersection of words (texts) where at least one other word (text) can be read. (...) (A)ny text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another. The notion of intertextuality replaces that of intersubjectivity, and poetic language is read as at least double.³⁵

²⁹ Ibid., p11. Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. by Roy Harris, ed. by Charles Bally, Albert Sechehaye, and Albert Riedlinger (London: Duckworth, 1983).

³⁰ Ibid., pp.40-44.

³¹ Ibid., pp.11, 17.

³² Ibid., pp. 19, 23.

³³ Ibid., p.36.

³⁴ Ibid., p.39.

³⁵ Julia Kristeva, 'Word, Dialogue and Novel', in *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. by Toril Moi (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), pp.34-61 (p.37).

Such doubleness rests in a belief that, contra Aristotle's 'principle of non-contradiction', a word may be possessed of a meaning (A), and at the same time possessed of a different meaning (not-A) derived from its previous use in different texts or contexts.³⁶ For Kristeva, poetic language exists on a principle of 0-2: a word can never have a single, stable referent (1); as soon as it is no longer nothing, it is always already double.³⁷ In theorising the text as compilation of pre-existing discourses rather than the product of a unique mind, Kristevan intertextuality, as Graham Allen explains, 'celebrates and plays with the dissolution or abandonment of the single subject'.³⁸

In *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1984), Kristeva abandoned the term 'intertextuality' in favour of 'transposition', on the grounds that her term had been misapplied 'in the banal sense of 'study of sources''.³⁹ While I shall continue to use the more commonly-understood term intertextuality, I shall remain mindful of Kristeva's emphasis, in turning towards transposition, on the process of transformation inherent in each new re-articulation of the sign within 'a different signifying system'.⁴⁰ For the purposes of this thesis, however, I downplay Kristeva's emphasis on the role of the text within 'the cultural (or social) text', an aspect of her theory which has been criticised for 'mak(ing) literature part of general cultural discourse', thereby eliding its medium specificity or "literariness".⁴¹ Instead, I favour Gerard Genette's self-consciously 'more restrictive' definition of Kristevan intertextuality (not to be confused with his own intertextuality theory). Genette defines Kristevan intertextuality

as the actual presence of one text within another. In its most explicit and literal form, it is the traditional practice of quoting (with quotation marks, with or without specific references). In another less explicit and canonical form, it is the practice of plagiarism (...) which is an undeclared but still literal borrowing. Again, in a still less explicit and literal guise, it is the practice of allusion: that is, an enunciation whose full meaning presupposes the perception of some

³⁶ Allen, p.43.

³⁷ Ibid., p.44.

³⁸ Ibid., p.56.

³⁹ Ibid., p.53. Julia Kristeva, 'Revolution in Poetic Language', in *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. by Moi, pp.89-136 (p.111).

⁴⁰ Kristeva, 'Revolution', p.111.

⁴¹ Allen, pp.35, 57.

relationship between it and another, to which it necessarily refers by some inflections that would otherwise remain unintelligible.⁴²

This narrower understanding of Kristeva's term is helpful for my study of novels that are intertextual in the sense of containing fragments of another text within themselves; indeed, my first chapter alone furnishes examples of all three types of intertextuality discussed by Genette. In *Felony*, Emma Tennant deploys 'the traditional practice of quoting' in describing how James, in *The Aspern Papers*, 'has shown his Fenimore as – in his words... a 'ridiculous and pathetic old woman''.⁴³ In *The Open Door*, Elizabeth Maguire leaves herself open to allegations of plagiarism in having her Constance Woolson figure recall how, in the essay 'Miss Woolson', 'Harry omitted any reference to the very tales that he had told me time and again represented my greatest achievement – the tales of struggling female artists'.⁴⁴ The line is 'an undeclared but still literal borrowing' from Lyndall Gordon's biography of James, which notes how "'Miss Woolson' damns its subject with faint praise and excludes any mention of her highest achievement: her stories of artists'.⁴⁵ Finally, the opening line of Michiel Heyns's *The Typewriter's Tale*, 'She waited, Frieda Wroth [...]', alludes to the opening line of *The Wings of the Dove*, 'She waited, Kate Croy [...]'; knowledge of James's prior 'enunciation' is necessary to appreciate the 'full meaning' of Heyns's.⁴⁶ As shall be

⁴² Gerard Genette, *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*, trans. by Channa Newman and Claude Doubinsky (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), pp.1-2.

⁴³ Emma Tennant, *Felony* (London: Vintage, 2003), p.142. Hereafter referenced parenthetically. Tennant actually mis-quotes James: the line, in the New York Edition, reads 'ridiculous, provincial old woman'. See Henry James, 'The Aspern Papers', in *The Turn of the Screw and The Aspern Papers*, ed. by Anthony Curtis (London: Penguin, 1986), pp.45-142 (p.138). Hereafter referenced parenthetically as AP.

⁴⁴ Elizabeth Maguire, *The Open Door* (New York: Other Press, 2008), pp.131-2. Hereafter referenced parenthetically.

⁴⁵ Lyndall Gordon, *A Private Life of Henry James: Two Women and His Art* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1998), p.213.

⁴⁶ Michiel Heyns, *The Typewriter's Tale* (Johannesburg and Cape Town: Jonathan Ball, 2005), p.1. Hereafter referenced parenthetically. Henry James, *The Wings of the Dove*, ed. by J. Donald Crowley and Richard A. Hocks (New York and London: W.N.Norton, 2003), p.21.

seen, the practice of allusion complicates the claim of many writers of biofiction that their texts are interpretable by readers unfamiliar with their subjects' works.

The next term requiring explication is that of adaptation. Defined by Julie Sanders as 'a sub-section of the over-arching practice of intertextuality', adaptation may be distinguished from 'the more glancing act(s) of allusion or quotation' considered by Genette by virtue of its 'sustained engagement' with a single 'informing source text or original'.⁴⁷ The concept of adaptation is also synonymous with what Genette refers to as 'the sunny side of hypertextuality'.⁴⁸ If, he suggests, hypertextuality describes any relationship uniting text B, the 'hypertext', to an earlier text A, or 'hypotext', 'upon which it is grafted in a manner that is not that of commentary', then the adaptive relationship is one in which 'this shift from hypotext to hypertext is both massive (an entire work B deriving from an entire work A) and more less officially stated'.⁴⁹ I have also found the term 'textual analogue' a useful mid-point between intertextuality and adaptation. I use this term to refer to evidence of indirect engagement between 'text B' and 'text A' that is more sustained than the act of allusion, but less 'massive' than the act of adaptation, occurring, for example, on the level of a paragraph rather than a phrase or a complete work. Virginia Woolf's 'Sketch of the Past' (1939-40) is, for instance, a clear textual analogue for Michael Cunningham's description of the character Clarissa Vaughan's first memories in *The Hours*.

While all of the works of biofiction under consideration in this thesis are intertextual, not all are adaptive, or have clear textual analogues. At first glance, *The Hours* appears a paradigmatic example of an adaptive text, its relationship with its hypotext, Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), 'more or less officially stated' by Cunningham's use of Woolf's working title for the novel, and his decision to name one strand of his triptych 'Mrs. Dalloway'. This classification is, however, complicated by

⁴⁷ Julie Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation* (London: Routledge, 2006), pp.17, 4.

⁴⁸ Genette, *Palimpsests*, p.9.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

the way in which Sanders, Sarah Cardwell, and Robert Stam all define adaptation as the translation of a source text into *a new media*.⁵⁰ This caveat necessitates the adoption of a new term to describe the relationship of Cunningham's to Woolf's text, and of Tennant's *Felony* to James's *The Aspern Papers* (1888), relationships which are characterised by the sustained engagement typical of adaptation, but which do not occasion a generic shift. I have adopted Sanders's term 'appropriation' to describe these novels. Sanders uses this term to describe a mode of engagement typified not by the updating or 'cross-generic interpretation' of adaptation, but by 'a wholesale rethinking of the terms of the original'.⁵¹ While *The Hours* celebrates, even pays homage, to *Mrs. Dalloway* rather than adopting the 'position of critique, even assault' witnessed in *Felony* and judged by Sanders to be a common feature of appropriations, it nevertheless strays sufficiently far from the source text to form 'a wholly new cultural product'.⁵² Finally, I make use of Genette's concept of Paratextuality to describe 'those liminal devices and conventions, both within the book (*peritext*) and outside it (*epi text*), that mediate the book to the reader'.⁵³ While discussion of the paratext informs interpretation of the majority of the works of biofiction considered in this thesis, it is in Kate Moses's adoption, in *Wintering*, of the table of contents from Sylvia Plath's original arrangement of *Ariel* that the paratext becomes intrinsic to interpretation.

With my chosen terminology clearly defined, it is now possible to consider the wider implications of biofiction within contemporary literature. Of particular

⁵⁰ See Sanders, p.19; Sarah Cardwell, *Adaptation Revisited: Television and the Classic Novel* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), p.21: 'to call something an adaptation of another text is to highlight the conscious, complex process of implementing changes necessary to re-present the source text under new conditions (in a new medium)'; Robert Stam, 'Introduction: The Theory and Practice of Adaptation', in *Literature and Film: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Film Adaptation*, ed. by Robert Stam and Alessandra Raengo (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), pp.1-52 (p.25): 'the mutation of forms across media'; Robert Stam, *Literature through Film: Realism, Magic, and the Art of Adaptation* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), p.3: 'An adaptation is automatically different and original due to the change of medium'.

⁵¹ Sanders, p.28.

⁵² *Ibid.*, pp.4, 26.

⁵³ Gerard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, trans. by Jane E. Lewin, foreword by Richard Macksey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p.xviii.

significance is biofiction's determination to write about the author in the face of Barthes's 'radical intertextuality without origin': his insistence that the text is not a conduit for the "message" of the Author-God, but 'a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture'.⁵⁴ As Peter Lamarque explains, Barthes's theory of the Death of the Author has its origins in the clash between the Intentionalists and the New Critics, the latter of whom attacked the Romantic cult of the author.⁵⁵ Thus while Intentionalists such as E.D. Hirsh considered it vital that 'the essential meaning of the text, the very ground-work of any interpretation, has been previously established in relation to what the author intended', New Critics W.K. Wimsatt and M.C. Beardsley expounded the 'Intentional Fallacy' (1946), essentially that 'the design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of the work of literary art', which was, in itself, a 'self-sufficient literary entity'.⁵⁶ The New Critics thus undermined the status of the author, whose position was, Lawrence Lipking argues, further corroded by the Vietnam War, following which 'authority would never again command the same respect'.⁵⁷ 'This virus', Lipking continues, 'invaded all the cells of meaning, undermining the principle that some point of origin – logos, first cause, God, a transcendental signified, or merely the mind of a writer – could guarantee the interpretation of the text or world'.⁵⁸

New Criticism thereby set the stage for the radical dismissal of authorial intention of Roland Barthes's 'The Death of the Author' (1968). In this essay, Barthes defines the distinction between the author and his successor, the modern-day sriptor, as follows:

⁵⁴ Peter Lamarque, *The Philosophy of Literature* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2009), p.16; Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, trans. by Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1977), p.146.

⁵⁵ Lamarque, *The Philosophy of Literature*, pp.85-6.

⁵⁶ W.K.Wimsatt and M.C. Beardsley, 'The Intentional Fallacy', *Sewanee Review*, 54 (1946), 466-88, revised and republished in W.K. Wimsatt, *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (Kentucky: University of Kentucky Press, 1954), pp.3-18 (p.3); 'Self-sufficient [...]': Lamarque, *The Philosophy of Literature*, p.122.

⁵⁷ Lawrence Lipking, 'The Birth of the Author', in *Writing the Lives of Writers*, ed. by Warwick Gould and Thomas F. Staley (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998), pp.36-53 (p.36).

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p.147.

The Author, when believed in, is always conceived of as the past of his own book: book and author stand automatically on a single line divided into a before and an after. The Author is thought to nourish the book, which is to say that he exists before it, thinks, suffers, lives for it, is in the same relation of antecedence to his work as a father to his child. In complete contrast, the modern scriptor is born simultaneously with the text, is in no way equipped with a being preceding or exceeding the writing, is not the subject with the book as predicate; there is no other time than that of the enunciation and every text is eternally written here and now.⁵⁹

In light of Barthes's declaration, biofiction's invocation of the author appears, then, to be a futile exercise, a naïve attempt to disinter a nourishing, paternal, godlike figure, who had long since died and been succeeded by the scriptor. The scriptor would hardly be a fitting subject for biofiction, devoid as he is of 'passions, humours, feelings, impressions', equipped only with an 'immense dictionary' which his 'life' can do no more than 'imitate'.⁶⁰

However, many critics have queried whether the Death of the Author ever truly became anything more than 'a theoretician's fiction'.⁶¹ Certainly, the time Barthes envisaged in *The Pleasure of the Text* (1975), wherein 'the author function will disappear' remains a 'prescription' rather than a 'description'.⁶² The public appetite for literature remains as 'tyrannically centred on the author' as it was at the time that Barthes was writing; it continues to matter a great deal 'who is speaking'.⁶³ Such focus on the author has been taken to suggest that 'the qualities of unity, expressiveness and creative imagination' are still highly valued, demonstrating that, in the words of Middeke, 'the hunger for the mythically objective and stable (...) is more archetypically essential to human beings than post-modernists and poststructuralists would have us believe'.⁶⁴ Middeke's statement suggests the existence of a disjuncture between academic and

⁵⁹ Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, p.145.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p.147.

⁶¹ Peter Lamarque, 'The Death of the Author: An Analytical Autopsy', in *The Death and Resurrection of the Author?*, ed. by William Irwin (Connecticut and London: Greenwood, 2002), pp.79-91 (p.90).

⁶² *Ibid.*, p.83.

⁶³ Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, p.145; Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. by Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), p.22.

⁶⁴ Lamarque, 'The Death of the Author', p.84. Middeke, p.4.

popular acceptance of the author's demise, borne out by Lodge's assertion that while the theories of Wimsatt, Beardsley, and Barthes have long 'dominated academic theorizing (...), the general reading public remains inveterately curious about the human beings who create the books they read'.⁶⁵ However, it is not merely 'the reading public' who has questioned the validity of the author's demise. Belied by Lodge's homogenising statement are the important objections that were raised to the Death of the Author from inside as well as outside of the Academy.

In particular, the Death of the Author came under attack from black, postcolonial, and feminist critics, many of whom were engaged in recoveries of the same author that Barthes's theory sought to eradicate. As Andrew Bennett puts it, 'the female author', to whom we might add other marginalized minorities, was in need of construction, affirmation, and identification, rather than 'dismantling or deconstruction' as an 'oppressive authority'.⁶⁶ Such views were expressed by Nancy K. Miller, who stated that 'because women have not had the same historical relation of identity to origin, institution, production, that men have had, women have not, I think, (collectively) felt burdened by too much Self, Ego, Cogito, Etc.'. ⁶⁷ Conversely, Liz Stanley objected to the demise of the author not as the subject of recuperation, but as the object of attack, noting the irony that at the precise point when "'the author', the authoritative source of all that excludes, is named and has an accusatory finger pointed at him, the author at this very point conveniently dies'.⁶⁸ Theoretical, as well as ideological, objections to Barthes's theory were also raised by critics including Jason Holt and Brian McHale. Holt suggested that authorial intention might be acknowledged without necessarily being seen as relevant or determinant, meaning that an author could

⁶⁵ Lodge, *Year*, pp.80-1.

⁶⁶ Andrew Bennett, *The Author* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), p.85.

⁶⁷ Quoted in Cheryl Walker, 'Feminist Literary Criticism and the Author', in *Critical Enquiry*, 16 (1990), 551-71, repr. in *The Death and Resurrection of the Author?*, ed. by Irwin, pp.141-59 (p.145).

⁶⁸ Liz Stanley, *The Auto/Biographical I: The Theory and Practice of Feminist Auto/Biography* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), p.17.

be present without becoming the restrictive figure that Barthes resisted.⁶⁹ McHale queried the extent of the author's death in suggesting that his unity had been displaced to his oeuvre, enabling his continued existence, albeit in disguised form.⁷⁰ In short, then, biofiction's apparent rejection of the Death of the Author should not be considered a naïve rebuttal of a universally accepted theory, but the addition of another voice of dissent to those of prominent theorists, certain feminist critics, and the majority of the reading public.

Furthermore, as this thesis will demonstrate, biofiction does not, on the whole, attempt to resuscitate the historical author rejected by Barthes and poststructuralism. Rather, it enables a knowing recuperation of authorship as it exists in the form of text. In so doing, it builds upon the new self-consciousness about life-writing that developed in the 1970s and 1980s, when the genre was forced to adapt in response to poststructuralism's death sentence on subjectivity. As Stanley explains, it became apparent that biography, in staking its claim on 'a coherent and essentially unchanging unitary self that can be referentially captured by its methods', was built on 'a realist fallacy'.⁷¹ It flew in the face of concurrent theoretical thinking, which was characterised by its rejection of the referential depiction of the self, along with modernist notions of uniqueness and the original mind, in favour of an 'insistence on intertextuality and a focus on language in use'.⁷² The purpose of literary biography, which commonly had been understood as the attempt to illuminate the author's oeuvre in relation to his or her self, was, therefore, radically destabilised by critical theory's questioning 'of the idea that the text can be related to its author's life in any useful or significant way'.⁷³ Indeed, the self, having been acknowledged as a textual construct, 'an encoded subject position

⁶⁹ Jason Holt, 'The Marginal Life of the Author', in *The Death and Resurrection of the Author?*, ed. by Irwin, pp.65-78 (p.68).

⁷⁰ McHale, p.200.

⁷¹ Stanley, p.8.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p.15.

⁷³ Catherine Peters, 'Secondary Lives: Biography in Context', in *The Third Culture*, ed. by Shaffer, pp.43-56 (p.44).

situated in discourse', was no longer seen as 'the most reliable source for the truth of its life'.⁷⁴ Once again, this prompted unease on the part of some feminist biographers, particularly those engaged in the recovery of "unheard voices". Such writers were wont to feel, as Cheryl Walker explains, that 'to erase a woman poet as author of her poems in favour of an abstract indeterminacy is an act of oppression'.⁷⁵ Yet having recuperated the woman poet, novelist, or playwright, biographers were nevertheless forced to consider, in the words of Kaplan, 'the status of the subject so restored and what place she might occupy'.⁷⁶ This had two results: on the one hand, an increasing estrangement between conventional biography and writing that questioned the notion of the unified subject, and, on the other, the growth of a more theoretically informed version of biography, with an increasing emphasis on 'the indeterminacy of [...] knowledge', and the existence 'of epistemological uncertainties and blanks'.⁷⁷

Biofiction builds upon this theoretically informed attitude to postmodern biography, providing a way of re-imagining the author through his textual remains. It contrasts with the more thesis-driven biographies, which can tend to interpret the subject's entire life in light of a specific premise. For John Worthern, this is 'the very worst kind of biography: one which [...] imposes upon a life the story which it is to tell, and then fills in the details [...] with the necessary random facts which happen to come down on us'.⁷⁸ The effect of this, as Stanley explains, is to reduce the subject's complexity 'to one omnipotent view – 'the real Virginia Woolf' – rather than accepting that all these competing truths and selves may be true'.⁷⁹ Conversely, the majority of the biofictions under consideration fragment the unified subject into a multiplicity of textual

⁷⁴ Aleid Fokkema, 'The Author: Postmodernism's Stock Character', in *The Author as Character*, ed. by Franssen and Hoenselaars, pp.39-51 (p.40); Jurgen Schlaeger, 'Biography: Cult as Culture', in *The Third Culture*, ed. by Shaffer, pp.57-71 (p.61).

⁷⁵ Walker, p.157.

⁷⁶ Kaplan, *Victoriana*, p.41.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*; Middeke, p.2.

⁷⁸ John Worthern, 'Necessary Ignorance of a Biographer', in *The Third Culture*, ed. by Shaffer, pp.227-44 (p.233).

⁷⁹ Stanley, p.11.

“selves”, and place the onus upon the reader to decide which, if any, is “true”. Such writing has an openness and fluidity that can only be of benefit to its subjects. It opens up a multitude of questions surrounding subjectivity, the distinction between creative and critical discourses, life-writing, pedagogy, and adaptation, as will be indicated in the chapter summaries below.

My first chapter considers four female-focalised biofictions of Henry James: Emma Tennant’s *Felony* (2001), Elizabeth Maguire’s *The Open Door* (2008), Cynthia Ozick’s ‘Dictation’ (2008), and Michiel Heyns’s *The Typewriter's Tale* (2005). The rationale for the juxtaposition of these texts is twofold: they share an interest in feminist recuperation of Constance Woolson or Theodora Bosanquet, and have their roots in competing critical and biographical developments. I shall explore how the texts negotiate the conflict between queer formalist readings of James, which view subjectivity as an effect of the text, and biographical readings of him by Leon Edel, Fred Kaplan, Sheldon Novick, and Lyndall Gordon, which rely on the existence of a ‘Jamesian body prior to the scene of writing’ that the biographer can recover and narrate.⁸⁰ I shall suggest that this conflict produces two competing strategies by which James might be accessed: the intertextual, and the intersubjective. The conflict between queer formalism and biography, between intertextual and intersubjective recovery is, of course, a facet of the broader debate explored in the preceding pages between the textuality of the text and the recoverability of the subject. In exploring how this conflict plays itself out in the novels in question, I shall begin to explore biofiction’s potential to inhabit first- and second-order discourses simultaneously, and to thereby nuance the terms of critical debates.

My second chapter will turn to Richard Liebmann-Smith’s *The James Boys* (2008), David Lodge’s *Author, Author* (2004), Colm Tóibín’s *The Master* (2004), and

⁸⁰ Hugh Stevens, ‘Queer Henry *In the Cage*’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Henry James*, ed. by Jonathan Freedman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp.120-38 (p.122).

Edwin M. Yoder Jr's *Lions at Lamb House* (2007). While, like the texts considered in the previous chapter, these novels are steeped in 'developments in James biography and criticism', they engage with their subject on an intertextual rather than an intersubjective basis, thereby favouring the queer formalist strand of their lineage over the biographical.⁸¹ Having explored, in the previous chapter, biofiction's situation within broader theoretical debates concerning the role of the subject in contemporary literature, I will further theorise the subgenre by exploring its relationship with literary criticism. More specifically, I will draw upon critical discourse about James, revision, and the Prefaces to the New York Edition to provide a conceptual framework for discussing these novels. Indeed, to discuss the Prefaces is to discuss the role of the subject, concerned as the Prefaces often are with the possibility of recovering extra-textual essences in the form of prose. This chapter will reveal the cross-fertilisation between biofiction and literary criticism, using writing about the Prefaces to shine light on these heterogeneous novels, and asking what the novels, in turn, might reveal about the Prefaces and about James.

In turning from James to Woolf, I move on to Sigrid Nunez's *Mitz: The Marmoset of Bloomsbury* (1998) and Michael Cunningham's *The Hours* (1999). These novels will be placed in dialogue with Woolf's own theories of biography as advanced in 'The New Biography' (1927), 'The Art of Biography' (1939), and 'Sketch of the Past' (1939-40). Woolf's essays and her late memoir provide vital context for writing about her as a subject, just as the James biographies, queer formalist criticism, and scholarship on the Prefaces enabled me to situate the novels about James. In analysing *Mitz*, I shall demonstrate how Nunez uses techniques developed by the "New Biographers", Woolf, Nicolson, and Strachey, for the better transmission of the subject's personality. I shall also consider how Nunez's adoption of the biofictional form troubles Woolf's ultimate diagnosis of the incompatibility of fact and fiction in life-writing. Her novella comprises

⁸¹ Max Saunders, 'Master Narratives', *Cambridge Quarterly*, 37 (2008), 121-31 (p.123).

a poetic synthesis of multiple versions of Woolf as a subject, which contests the versions propagated by the narrower, thesis-driven biographies. Turning then to *The Hours*, I shall discuss how Cunningham's appropriation of *Mrs. Dalloway* in one strand of his triptych and his incorporation of intertextual traces from that novel throughout the other two strands enables him to rethink the biographical subject as it engages with authorship and readership. As will be seen, both novels have clear implications for rethinking Barthes's figure of the Author-God. In *Mitz*, "Virginia Woolf" is conceived as implicitly textual; in *The Hours* she is the product of a relationship between author, reader, and character.

My fourth chapter will continue my exploration of biofiction about Woolf with a discussion of Susan Sellers's *Vanessa and Virginia* (2008), tracing this novel's intersections with biographies of the sisters and Bloomsbury art criticism. I shall first consider how Sellers intervenes in narratives of life and the body by using fiction to renegotiate oppositional portrayals of Woolf and Bell. In so doing, she draws upon biographical and critical writing by Jane Dunn and Diane Gillespie, which explores the relationship between the sisters in personal and artistic terms. I shall then demonstrate how the psychological provides a route into the aesthetic, as Sellers proceeds to emphasise the dialogue between the sisters' arts in terms of their structural dynamics. *Vanessa and Virginia* poses a feminist challenge to Roger Fry and Clive Bell's ideas, by suggesting that 'Significant Form' and biographical connotations might coexist in art, and thereby offer a broader framework for interpretation. Situated at the intersection of fiction, biography, and art criticism, *Vanessa and Virginia* is a further manifestation of biofiction's potential to combine creative and nonfictional modes of address.

Chapter Five marks the turn toward my final subject, Sylvia Plath, and with it, the consideration of how biofiction merges the biographical with still another genre of writing: that of the lyric. I begin by considering the introduction to and critical appraisals of Plath's writing published by Ted Hughes between her death in 1963 and

the appearance of *Birthday Letters* in 1998. I then isolate from the narrative sequence of *Birthday Letters* poems that engage with Hughes's previously stated views on Plath, placing these in dialogue with his critical writings to form a new kind of interpretative narrative. It is my contention that *Birthday Letters*, as an interrelation between different discursive levels, is itself a kind of biofiction, rather than a mode of access to the real as it was popularly received. I then explore how Emma Tennant's prose biofiction *The Ballad of Sylvia and Ted* (2001) engages adversarially with the poetic "revision" offered by *Birthday Letters*, further contesting Hughes's claim to exclusive possession of the reality of Plath. Ultimately, I shall show how Plath's reality becomes increasingly inaccessible as she is revised into text, and shall consider the implications of this phenomenon for the control and dissemination of her work.

The last chapter explores two final literary afterlives of Sylvia Plath, John Brownlow and Christine Jeffs's biopic *Sylvia* (2003), and Kate Moses's novel *Wintering* (2003). Frieda Hughes's appraisal of these works as attempts to 'breathe life into' Plath effectively returns us to the tension between intertextual and intersubjective recovery explored in Chapter One.⁸² However, while the female-focalised biofictions of Henry James were ambiguously situated between these two interpretative approaches, Brownlow and Moses's works are unequivocally textual; they resuscitate Plath via her unpublished *Ariel* manuscript. I shall explore how both writers' decision to omit the second "wave" of *Ariel* poems contests Hughes's arrangement of the collection, severing the link fostered in *Birthday Letters* between Plath's writing and her death. In guiding readings of *Ariel*, the texts have the potential to nuance interpretations of Plath herself, emphasising over her drive toward self-destruction her optimistic pursuit of transcendence. Ultimately, these biofictions yielded significant critical implications, popularising long-standing scholarly debates concerning 'why the differences between

⁸² Frieda Hughes, 'Foreword', in *Ariel: The Restored Edition* ed. by Frieda Hughes (London: Faber, 2008), pp.ix-xvii (p.xvii).

the two versions of *Ariel* matter' and catalysing the canon-reformation that produced *Ariel: The Restored Edition*.⁸³

Taken together, these various analyses suggest new ways of re-examining the role of the author's life in the interpretation of the work. Crucially, I shall argue, the majority of texts under consideration here do not reinstate the godlike figure attacked by Roland Barthes, the authority whose critical invocation enabled the foreclosure of interpretation. Instead, biofiction examines the versions of the subject that are implicit in that subject's work, re-situating the author as a figure constructed in, and inferred from, literary discourse. Thus constituted, the relationship of authorship to interpretation is both plural and partial; the author is a multiple, unstable figure, and his life one of several avenues of exploration rather than a source of ultimate truth about the text. I shall explore how this understanding of authorship liberates, rather than constrains readerly interpretation, results in a proliferation of literary meaning.

⁸³ Janet Badia, *Sylvia Plath and the Mythology of Women Readers* (Amherst and Boston, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2011), p.162.

Chapter One: The Henry James Papers: Or, What Biofiction Knew

Let us start, then, with ‘Aspern’s Juliana’, the one-time lover of the eponymous poet in Henry James’s ‘The Aspern Papers’. How might the fissures and border tensions suggested by her name, Juliana Bordereau, provide a starting point for thinking through some of the complexities of biofiction about James? At once archivist and living relic, Juliana is a locus for two conflicting strategies of recuperation. On the one hand, she is the guardian of the titular papers, the ‘sacred relics’ vital to the narrator’s intertextual resuscitation (74). On the other, she is ‘the hand Jeffrey Aspern had pressed’, the apex of the Girardian triangle (63); she offers the contrasting allure of humanist recovery (65).⁸⁴ Though incompatible, these pathways repeatedly intersect: the narrator is haunted by the image of Juliana pressing ‘Aspern’s letters [...] to her withered lips’ (68), imprinting on textual remains the trace elements of subjectivity, while readerly and sexual desire for the absent subject seem equally to inform his intention to ‘ransack her drawers’ (60). Upon Juliana’s death, the narrator is offered the chance to combine intertextual and intersubjective recovery in a union with Miss Tina, inheritor of the Aspern papers and daughter of the ‘divine Juliana’ (92), but finds himself paralysed: ‘I couldn’t, for a bundle of tattered papers, marry a ridiculous, provincial old woman’ (138). His retreat from the field is arguably informed by his recognition of the incompatibility of the two recuperative pathways, the intertextual and the humanist, that first Juliana and then Miss Tina seem to provide. It is, then, this vacillation between conflicting paradigms that leaves Aspern’s image a fundamental enigma, a ‘loss’ that the narrator ‘can scarcely bear’ (142).

How might this aspect of ‘The Aspern Papers’, James’s ‘moral fable for historians and biographers’, provide a useful framework for conceptualising the novels

⁸⁴ William Veeder, ‘The Aspern Portrait’, *The Henry James Review*, 20 (1999), 22-42, repr. in *Tales of Henry James*, ed. by Christof Wegelin and Henry B. Wonham (New York: W.N. Norton, 2003), pp.442-53 (p.447).

written about James between 2001 and 2008?⁸⁵ Imagine the writer of biofiction in the role of the vexed narrator, John Singer Sargent's 1913 painting of James 'hang[ing] above [his] writing-table' in place of the Aspern portrait (142). As supported by Max Saunders's commonsensical assumption that 'the way for these novels was prepared for by very specific developments in James biography and criticism', the writer is situated at the intersection of two conflicting modes of scholarship.⁸⁶ First, there is the biographical mode, inaugurated by Leon Edel's 'heroically totalised' *Henry James: A Life*, and continued in gay-affirmative or feminist biographies by Fred Kaplan, Sheldon Novick and Lyndall Gordon.⁸⁷ Yet emerging in parallel, indeed in opposition, to the biographical strand is the queer formalist approach to the subject favoured by critics including Hugh Stevens, Eric Savoy, and Christopher Lane.⁸⁸ Queer formalism's discussion of subjectivity as an effect of the text is anathema to the 'biographical imperative' that Savoy judges to dominative 'gay-affirmative historical reconstruction'.⁸⁹ He defines this 'biographical imperative' as 'the overarching project of establishing a coherent argument for what Wendy Graham calls James's "homosexual identity"'.⁹⁰ Thus while queer formalism 'tends to locate the erotic in the discursive field of writing', the biographical 'understands the erotic as essential to the author's self-identification, [...] which plays itself out demonstrably in the author's work'.⁹¹ As discussed in the

⁸⁵ Leon Edel, *Henry James: A Life* (London: Flamingo, 1997), p.338.

⁸⁶ Saunders, p.123.

⁸⁷ David Bruce McWhirter, 'Henry James, (Post)Modernist?', *The Henry James Review*, 25 (2004), 168-94 (p.174).

⁸⁸ See Hugh Stevens, *Henry James and Sexuality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Eric Savoy, 'Entre Chien et Loup: Henry James, Queer Theory, and the Biographical Imperative', in *Palgrave Advances in Henry James Studies*, ed. by Peter Rawlings (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2007), pp.100-25; Christopher Lane, 'Jamesian Inscrutability', *The Henry James Review*, 20 (1999), 244-54. Sheila Teahan writes that 'the 2004 conference "Henry James and New Formalisms", organised by Eric Savoy and myself, revealed a renewed and growing theoretical interest in close reading, formalism, and their complex imbrications, especially in relation to deconstruction and to what Savoy terms "queer formalism"'. See Sheila Teahan, 'Mastering Critical Theory', in *Palgrave Advances in Henry James Studies*, ed. by Rawlings, pp.11-34 (p.28).

⁸⁹ Savoy, 'Entre Chien et Loup', p.109.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid., p.106.

introduction, some critics have found it ‘highly suspicious that [...] at the precise moment when so many groups have been engaged in ‘nationalisms’ which involved redefinitions of the marginalised others [...] suspicions emerge about the nature of the ‘subject’’, and a project devoted to reconstructing James’s homosexual identity is understandably reluctant to ‘give up the author on theoretical terms’.⁹² However, as Stevens indicates, there are inherent methodological problems in reading James’s works with a view to their revelatory transparency, namely that such an approach ‘confus[es] cause (the biographical James who writes) with effect (the James who is an effect of our reading)’.⁹³

Such problems are immediately apparent in Leon Edel’s definition of the writer’s oeuvre as ‘the autobiography of the psyche’, and the biographical mission as the analysis of that oeuvre for ‘the lies and delusions by which all men and women defend themselves against the ordinary indignities of life’.⁹⁴ The work of a post-Freudian analytical biographer, *Henry James: A Life* (1953-1972) is a case study in repression. In Edel’s one-volume digest (1985), the eddying of James’s repressed material around his ‘homeroetic and quasi-incestuous feelings towards William’ is interpretable as an early attempt to restore to James a homosexual subjectivity; however, the sexualising of fraternal attachment means that the affirmative note is all but entirely subsumed into the pathological.⁹⁵ Edel’s analysis benefits from the nineteenth-century alignment of biography with the investigative sciences, as discussed by Richard Salmon: ‘it was through the resistance of his material that the biographer was able to gauge the measure

⁹² Nancy Harstock, ‘Foucault on Power: A Theory for Women’, in *Feminism/Postmodernism*, ed. by Linda Nicholson (New York and London: Routledge, 1990), pp.157-75 (p.163), quoted in Chris Weedon, *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1997), p.176; Julie Rivkin, ‘Henry James, C’est Moi: Jamesian Afterlives’, *The Henry James Review*, 31 (2010), 1-6 (p.4)

⁹³ Stevens, ‘Queer Henry’, p.121.

⁹⁴ Leon Edel, *Literary Biography* (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1973), p.88; Leon Edel, ‘Biography: A Manifesto’, *Biography*, 1 (1978), 1-3 (p.2).

⁹⁵ Sheila Teahan, ‘Autobiographies and Biographies’, in *Henry James in Context*, ed. by David McWhirter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp.58-67 (p.64).

of his own search for ‘truth’, since knowledge was always presumed to lie within a penetrable, interior, psychologized space’.⁹⁶ Thus the merely ‘superficial resemblance’ between the figure of Edgar in ‘A Light Man’ and William James serves only to bolster Edel’s confidence in his interpretation: that ‘the fraternal struggle described in this tale offers vivid illustration of Henry’s submerged feelings’.⁹⁷ The greater the resistance of the material, the deeper the repression, and the greater the need for the biographer’s analytical excavation; thus the process both safeguards itself against criticism and becomes admirably self-perpetuating. The result, as biting summarised in a review by Martha Banta, is to convert ‘every stroke of James’s pen [...] into projections of a man recumbent upon a couch’.⁹⁸ And just as the turned back of the analyst shields the case notes from the analysand, Edel’s James rests safe in his ‘unawareness that he was using vivid libidinal language’.⁹⁹ Readers who might, under the aegis of queer formalism, have their attention directed to the playful erotics of ‘A Light Man’’s textual surface, instead become ‘eavesdroppers on a sexual narrative hidden from [James’s] [...] self’.¹⁰⁰

There is, of course, a point at which it becomes irrelevantly ahistorical to criticise a failure to engage with queer formalism in ‘a scholar/writer whose basic literary and cultural values were formed between 1920 and 1940’.¹⁰¹ However, I question Fred Kaplan’s assertion that Edel’s James can now be confined to ‘a glass slide’.¹⁰² *The New Yorker*’s 1971 epithet ‘Chairman of the Board’ may have lost some of its applicability to Edel by the late eighties, when the completion of *Henry James: A Life* marked the relaxation of his stranglehold on the Houghton Library archive and the start

⁹⁶ Richard Salmon, *Henry James and the Culture of Publicity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p.86.

⁹⁷ Edel, *Henry James: A Life*, p.124.

⁹⁸ Quoted in Linda Simon, *The Critical Reception of Henry James: Creating a Master* (New York and Rochester: Camden House, 2007), pp.69-70.

⁹⁹ Edel, *Henry James: A Life*, p.83.

¹⁰⁰ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, ‘Shame and Performativity: Henry James’s New York Edition Prefaces’, in *Henry James’s New York Edition: The Construction of Authorship*, ed. by David McWhirter (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995), pp.206-39 (p.229).

¹⁰¹ Fred Kaplan, quoted in Simon, *The Critical Reception of Henry James*, p.72.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

of ‘a new era in James studies’.¹⁰³ Nevertheless, his version of James still loomed large in the public eye, as evinced by his ubiquity as a citation in each of the fully-referenced biofictions. His presence was similarly felt in the next major biography, Fred Kaplan’s *Henry James: The Imagination of Genius* (1992), which, while methodologically grounded in the New Historicist rather than the psychoanalytic approach, ‘uncovered substantially little to modify Edel’s basic factual account of James’s life’.¹⁰⁴ The ‘glass slide’ in which Kaplan’s James exists bears traces of the intervening ‘advances in British gay historiography’ that allowed Kaplan to ‘situate [...] James deftly in what he calls the “sexually volatile world” (299) of the fin de siècle’.¹⁰⁵ Yet surprisingly, given the degree of narrative overlap, *Henry James: The Imagination of Genius* contains no explicit reference to Edel, suggesting perhaps that the ‘biographical imperative’ of redefining James’s homosexual identity demanded a perceived return to his historical essence, precluding easy acknowledgement of his previous textual incarnations.

Sheldon Novick’s *Henry James: The Young Master* (1996) strives similarly for narrative autonomy, making no reference to Kaplan and pausing on *Henry James: A Life* just long enough to assert that Edel ‘was most certainly aware’ of James’s homosexuality but that he ‘did not care to be explicit’.¹⁰⁶ The cause of much furore in Jamesian circles, the crux of *The Young Master*’s notoriety is located in Chapter Six of the volume, in which Novick reads James’s notebook descriptions of ‘*l’initiation premiere*’ in ‘the “epoch-making” weeks of the spring of 1865’ as transparent references to ‘his first acts of love’ with Oliver Wendell Holmes.¹⁰⁷ Referring to this passage in his review of the second volume of Novick’s biography, Colm Tóibín queries Novick’s interpretation: ‘it seems to me that [James] is talking about writing, about discovering a

¹⁰³ Michael Anesko, *Monopolizing the Master: Henry James and the Politics of Modern Literary Scholarship* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012), pp.185, 194.

¹⁰⁴ Fred Kaplan, *Henry James: The Imagination of Genius: A Biography* (New York: William Morrow, 1992); Adeline Tintner, *Henry James’s Legacy: The Afterlife of His Figure and Fiction* (Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 1998), p.439.

¹⁰⁵ Savoy, ‘*Entre Chien et Loup*’, p.111.

¹⁰⁶ Sheldon Novick, *The Young Master* (New York: Random House, 1996), p.xiii.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p.109.

style and its attendant pleasures and remembering this discovery more than forty years later as pure sensuality'.¹⁰⁸ While Tóibín and Novick part company over just what, exactly, James was writing about, they share the assumption that James's sensual prose must necessarily have a referent, must express rather than perform identity. Yet it is precisely this unproblematised assumption of referentiality that leads to *The Young Master's* interpretative unravelling, when Novick cites Merton Densher's masturbatory 'hallucination [...] of intimacy' with Kate Croy in *The Wings of the Dove* as a straightforward description of James's own 'intensely vivid memory [...] renewed each time that he returned to his bedroom afterward'.¹⁰⁹ The allure of resistant material that stimulated Edel's analysis of 'A Light Man' once again becomes apparent, as a fictional character's memories of heterosexual intercourse are mined for trace elements of a lived homosexual encounter deemed to have occurred almost half a century previously. Novick's biography thus presents a great gift to the queer formalist school in demonstrating the precise limitations of a 'gay-affirmative historical reconstruction' that is insufficiently attentive to the textual surface.¹¹⁰ Yet however persuasively formalists such as Lane might contest Novick's 'rash suggestion that [James's] complex aesthetic formulations are reducible to buried sexual secrets', the 'controversy' surrounding *The Young Master* effectively 'consolidat[ed] an idea of James's 'queerness', however fantasmatic or ambivalent'.¹¹¹ Tóibín numbers the volume among works which 'changed how we saw James', making his personality 'more complicated and interesting, more open to dramatisation and interpretation'.¹¹² In short, James's presumed homosexuality became an issue with which writers of biofiction were compelled to engage. This is evinced by the "epoch-making" summer' in *The Master*, in which James and Holmes

¹⁰⁸ Colm Tóibín, 'Reflective Biography', *The Henry James Review*, 30 (2009), 266-71, repr. in *All A Novelist Needs: Colm Tóibín on Henry James*, ed. by Susan M. Griffin (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), pp.80-8 (p.81).

¹⁰⁹ Novick, *The Young Master*, p.109.

¹¹⁰ Savoy, 'Entre Chien et Loup', p.109.

¹¹¹ Lane, p.247; Saunders, p.2.

¹¹² Tóibín, 'Reflective Biography', p.83.

share an erotically charged night in the same bed, and in the framing narrative of *Author*, *Author* in which Lodge insists that James ‘never experienced sexual intercourse’.¹¹³

A final common intertext for the majority of the James biofictions was Lyndall Gordon’s *A Private Life of Henry James: Two Women and His Art* (1998). A project of feminist recovery which reinterpreted James not ‘as a gay man in search of his destiny but as a selfish and determined artist feeding on the very experiences from which he was in flight’, Gordon’s sparse reference to previous biographies is again suggestive of a desire to establish hers as the “definitive” life of James.¹¹⁴ Reading his novels in dialogue with ‘the vast trove of unpublished James letters’, and with understudied work by Constance Fenimore Woolson, Gordon saw James’s career as defined by ‘two high waves of creativity, the first derived from Minny Temple, culminating in *The Portrait of a Lady*; the second derived from Fenimore, culminating in *The Ambassadors* and ‘The Beast in the Jungle’, and sweeping again round Minny Temple in *The Wings of the Dove*’.¹¹⁵ Just as Kaplan and Novick’s ‘gay-affirmative historical reconstruction’ of James precluded the discussion of his subjectivity as an effect of the text, Gordon is similarly unwilling ‘to give up the author on theoretical terms’ while she herself is ‘actively engaged in resurrecting women authors from the archives’.¹¹⁶ She does, however, devote greater attention to the dynamics of the textual surface than Edel, Kaplan, or Novick. She attributes a performative sexuality to James’s revising of Temple’s correspondence: ‘now and then, he smooths out the jump in her voice, the young edge in her emphasis, drawing her toward the smooth, immense surges of his late

¹¹³ Colm Tóibín, *The Master* (London: Picador, 2004), pp.98-101; David Lodge, *Author*, *Author* (London: Penguin, 2004), p.3. Both hereafter referenced parenthetically.

¹¹⁴ Tóibín, ‘Reflective Biography’, p.268. In the 372 pages of *A Private Life of Henry James*, there are five references to Kaplan, all of which are in the notes section and two of which serve merely to correct his dates, three references to Novick, and just one to Edel.

¹¹⁵ Linda Simon, ‘Art and the Risks of Intimacy’, *The New England Quarterly*, 72 (1999), 617-24 (p.622); Gordon, p.298.

¹¹⁶ Savoy, ‘*Entre Chien et Loup*’, p.109; Rivkin, ‘Henry James: C’est Moi’, p.4.

style'.¹¹⁷ Yet just as Savoy argues that 'in truth, [...] queer critical practice arises from the sense that something is "up" in James's language', Gordon's readings similarly demand a prior sense of subjectivity, in this case James-the-editor who sought to establish with Temple 'a union beyond the fever of human lives'.¹¹⁸ Indeed, *A Private Life of Henry James* was received as an attempt to restore to Temple a 'real existence', and closes with an affirmation that subjective recuperation is precisely what is at stake: 'but see, they return, and they bring him with them'.¹¹⁹

The final sentence of the text is also ideologically rather conservative, suggesting that the ostensible subjects of Gordon's recovery are the conduits, rather than the objects of biographical interest.¹²⁰ In this sense they occupy Juliana Bordereau's position at the apex of the Girardian triangle, as 'intermediary female bodies' who offer the biographer a route back to Jeffrey Aspern/Henry James.¹²¹ This distinction between conduit and object is integral to an understanding of the role played by Woolson in Emma Tennant's *Felony* and Elizabeth Maguire's *The Open Door*, and by Theodora Bosanquet in Michiel Heyns's *The Typewriter's Tale* and Cynthia Ozick's 'Dictation'.¹²² Though apparently the foci of intersubjective recovery, Woolson and Bosanquet may also be viewed as prisms refracting biographical desire back to the "real" subject, James. These texts share two important characteristics that provide a rationale for their juxtaposition: agendas which may, without too gross a simplification, be described as "feminist", and the bifurcated bio-formalist lineage detailed in the preceding pages. This chapter will trace the intricate network of connections between these texts, and illuminate the cross-pollination between biofiction and critical theory. It will consider

¹¹⁷ Gordon, p.353.

¹¹⁸ Savoy, 'Entre Chien et Loup', p.119; Gordon, p.353.

¹¹⁹ Simon, 'Art and the Risks of Intimacy', p.4; Gordon, p.372. Norman Page also notes that 'the reader is given a sense of closeness to the living original' in his review, 'A Life of James', *English Literature in Transition (1880-1920)*, 44 (2001), 104-6 (p.104).

¹²⁰ See Veeder, p.447 for an analysis of Girardian triangles in 'The Aspern Papers'.

¹²¹ Eric Haralson and Kendall Johnson, eds., *Critical Companion to Henry James: A Literary Reference to His Life and Work* (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2009), p.203.

¹²² Cynthia Ozick, 'Dictation', in *Dictation: A Quartet* (Boston and New York: Mariner Books, 2009), pp.1-50. Hereafter referenced parenthetically.

biofiction's implications for debates opposing the naïve faith that the sign may be traced back to a recuperable extra-textual author, to the acknowledgment of identity as something discursively produced. By demonstrating how biofiction nuances the terms of these debates, it will theoretically inflect the genre as a new means of negotiating subjectivity.

***Felony* (2001)**

Subtitled 'The Private History of the Aspern Papers', Emma Tennant's *Felony* is situated ambiguously between humanist and intertextual modes of recovery. In alternate chapters, Tennant purports to reveal 'what really went on in Claire Clairmont's household in Florence in the 1870s', framing Clairmont and her niece, Paula Hanghegyi, as the recoverable "originals" behind James's Juliana and Miss Tina (v). Yet the origin of the subtitle, which is in James's Preface to the New York Edition of 'The Aspern Papers', promises an engagement that is intertextual as well as historically reconstructive. Accordingly, the interleaving chapters offer a different facet to the 'Private History' by recreating scenes in James's own life at the time he was writing the novella.¹²³ These chapters are interpretable as an alternate Preface to 'The Aspern Papers', one that offers a different version of the novella's influences, and in which Tennant engages with James by inhabiting his signature form. Tennant's bifurcated narrative structure provides a means of negotiating the issues of temporality that vex James's Prefaces, which 'often assume a prior understanding of the text they stand before even as they attempt to orient the reader's attitude toward it'.¹²⁴ By providing an appropriation of 'The Aspern Papers' in alternate chapters, Tennant enables readers unfamiliar with James's work to appreciate its resonances in her segmented Preface.

¹²³ Henry James, 'Preface', in *The Turn of the Screw and The Aspern Papers*, ed. by Curtis, pp.27-42. James described the question of an American Byron as 'the passage in the private history of The Aspern Papers that I now find, I confess, most interesting' (p.33).

¹²⁴ Paul B. Armstrong, 'Reading James's Prefaces and Reading James', in *Henry James's New York Edition*, ed. by McWhirter, pp.125-37 (p.125).

This ultimately allows her to claim for her “Private History” an autonomous rather than parasitic relation to ‘The Aspern Papers’; her text is, in the words of Linda Hutcheon, ‘second without being secondary’.¹²⁵

Freed from the expectation that it should occupy a secondary relationship to the Jamesian original, *Felony* goes on to offer a reading strategy for the prefatory genre that it ventriloquises. James’s Prefaces to the New York Edition were initially marketed for their ‘rather intimate, personal character’, and, as Linda Simon writes, ‘we see early critics, such as Percy Lubbock and Richard Blackmur, trusting James’s self-knowledge and candor, and assuming that an author’s identity is monolithic, stable, and consistent’.¹²⁶ However, as Michael Millgate explains, ‘the difficulty remains that of determining – or even reasonably guessing – just which of his initial conceptions James managed to recapture, which he wrongly believed himself to have recaptured, and to which in either category he remained at all consistently faithful’.¹²⁷ Tennant queries the fullness of the disclosure offered by James’s prefatory ‘Private History of the Aspern Papers’, highlighting the need ‘to read through and against James’s reading of himself’.¹²⁸ In essence, Tennant’s view of the Prefaces is that of Lyndall Gordon, to whose biography she claims to be ‘deeply indebted’: ‘a brilliant aesthetic blind to true sources and great predecessors’.¹²⁹ While Gordon is right not to assume transparency, the assumption of opacity amounts to the same thing: the assertion of a prior subjectivity revealed or obscured by the ‘aesthetic blind’. Tennant’s allegiance to this view of the Prefaces as a curtain to be hoisted by the determined analyst restricts her own interpretation to the revelation of ‘true sources and great predecessors’, where she might

¹²⁵ Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* (London: Routledge, 2006), p.9.

¹²⁶ James Brand Pinker to Edward L. Burlingame, 3 August 1904. Quoted in *The Tales of Henry James*, ed. by Maqbool Aziz, 3 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973-84), II (1978), pp.liv-lv; Simon, *The Critical Reception of Henry James*, p.31.

¹²⁷ Michael Millgate, *Testamentary Acts: Browning, Tennyson, James, Hardy* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992), p.85.

¹²⁸ Armstrong, p.130.

¹²⁹ Gordon, p.341.

more usefully consider the Prefaces as identity performances, open-ended in their interpretations.

In the Preface to ‘The Aspern Papers’, James located the “germ” for his story in the revelation that

Jane Clairmont, the half-sister of Mary Godwin, Shelley’s second wife, and for a while the intimate friend of Byron and the mother of his daughter Allegra, should have been living on in Florence, where she had long lived, up to our own day, and that in fact, if I had happened to hear of her but a little sooner, I might have seen her in the flesh.¹³⁰

The first detail that Tennant chooses to dispute is James’s purported relief at his near miss, his assertion that ‘these things gave me all I wanted’ and that ‘I positively [...] oughtn’t to have wanted more’.¹³¹ James invokes Edward Silsbee, ‘a person who *had* waked up in time’, as a cautionary rather than an enviable figure, demonstrating how, according to John Attridge, ‘what emerges in the prefaces as the most exacting requirement of the artist’s existence is not vigilance *for* impressions, but vigilance *against* them: a kind of ascetic disposition to abstain from authorial gluttony’.¹³²

Tennant’s alternative Preface emphasises James’s unsatisfied authorial hunger. Her James frequently ‘finds himself wishing it was all true, and not a story after all. If it had been he, and not Silsbee, who had ingratiated himself into the little household at Via Romana, would it not have been grand?’ (27). Indeed, the bifurcated structure of the novel, in which James’s and Clairmont’s narratives are woven around each other, serves to taunt James with the scenes he too might have witnessed had he only ‘waked up in time’. By framing ‘The Aspern Papers’ as James’s thwarted attempt at subjective recovery, Tennant deliberately ignores ‘the point of these anecdotes [...] that the germ would be nothing without the transformative power of James’s imagination’.¹³³ In place of the Preface’s vision of a James in complete mastery of his art, knowing precisely

¹³⁰ James, Preface to ‘The Aspern Papers’, p.29.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Ibid.; John Attridge, ‘“Human Expertness”: Professionalism, Training, and the Prefaces to the New York Edition’, *The Henry James Review*, 32 (2011), 29-44 (p.35).

¹³³ Armstrong, p.134.

when to stop his ears, Tennant gives us a James figuratively beating his head against the high wall of Clairmont's palazzo, tormented by what he might have seen 'if only he had known it!' (15)

In *Felony*, the impossibility of writing 'the true story of the woman who had lived with two of the greatest poets of the Romantic age' while her descendants are still living leads to the creation of 'the unreal but unfortunately necessary Jeffrey Aspern' (150; 48), recasting James's experimental projection of 'the Byronic age and the afternoon light across the great sea' as a grudging concession to necessity.¹³⁴ The perceived incongruity of this projection allows Tennant to reprise the opprobrium of James's 'highly critical friend' who, in the Preface, is said to have questioned the validity of an American Byron and Miss Clairmont:

My friend's argument bore, then – at the time and afterward – on my vicious practice, as he maintained, of postulating for the purpose of my fable celebrities who not only hadn't existed in the conditions I imputed to them, but who for the most part (and in no case more markedly than in that of Jeffrey Aspern) couldn't possibly have done so.¹³⁵

Weaving a narrative in the gaps and silences of the Preface, Tennant suggests that the 'true source' of this critique was Constance Fenimore Woolson, who

begins her review of *The Aspern Papers* with an attack on one of Henry's self-confessed vulnerable areas, in this recently published tale. Jeffrey Aspern, the 'American Byron' conjured by the author, is quite simply an impossibility. At the time of Byron and Shelley, there were no great lyric poets in America, and to place Aspern then is a pure and obvious nonsense [...] (161)

By attributing these criticisms to Woolson, Tennant numbers among James's prefatory dissimulations the gender of his anonymous 'friend'. She stakes her claim on the existence of a recoverable female subject concealed between the lines of the Preface, and allows that subject to "write back" to James.

By suggesting that these criticisms were motivated by Woolson's realisation that 'Henry had stolen her character' for the figure of Miss Tina, Tennant similarly reinstates

¹³⁴ James, Preface to 'The Aspern Papers', p.32.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, p.33.

a biographical subject behind ‘The Aspern Papers’ itself (152). This further complication of the Preface’s version of origin builds on Gordon’s assertion that

‘Fenimore’, and a renewed promise James made in August to visit her when she was settled, mark the first hint, perhaps, of a tale: a classic American writer who had lived in Italy earlier in the century, and a middle-aged woman in the same place, living out her existence through a rather tenuous connection with that illustrious past. Perhaps the idea for *The Aspern Papers* had its earliest source in that August plan to visit ‘Fenimore’, rather than a later anecdote of Claire Clairmont and Byron which provided a plot.¹³⁶

Implicit in Gordon’s identification of Jeffrey Aspern with James Fenimore Cooper and Miss Tina with Cooper’s niece is the association of the narrator with James himself; James’s plans to visit Fenimore in Italy are shown to anticipate the narrator’s sojourn in Juliana and Miss Tina’s crumbling palazzo. Having reinstated Woolson as the “original” for Miss Tina, Tennant constructs a similar biographical parallel between James and Silsbee. Tennant’s James

remembers the letters they have exchanged, and Fenimore’s certain retention of them. What, after all, will be Miss Woolson’s price, as it was in Venice with Miss Tina – as, horribly, it was said to be in Florence with Miss Hanghegyi, niece of Claire Clairmont? The price, as always, was marriage. (96)

While serving a biographical premise that Gordon warns against, a ‘premise for which there is no evidence, that Fenimore hunted a husband’, Tennant’s association of James with Silsbee makes for intriguing critical commentary on the ethical dimensions of ‘*The Aspern Papers*’.¹³⁷ James’s realisation that his letters to Woolson ‘make up for him a treasure as vital to obtain as those of the great poet Jeffrey Aspern had been for his ardent scholar’ enacts an interesting division in his projected persona (69). He is one part Jeffrey Aspern, author of the archive, one part ‘publishing scoundrel’, willing to make any sacrifice short of marriage in order to recover that archive (69). Like the ‘internal division’ Denis Flannery detects in the narrator of ‘*The Aspern Papers*’, this split persona allows Tennant to ‘register an unease on James’s own part about his own

¹³⁶ Gordon, p.205.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, p.219.

potential implication in the critical procedures he criticises'.¹³⁸ This implication stems, historically, from James's pursuit of biographical knowledge for his 1879 study of Hawthorne; despite famously suggesting that authors 'empty their table-drawers and level the approaches to their privacy', James made the journey to Hastings to seek the assistance of Hawthorne's son Julian and 'glean among the stubble'.¹³⁹ Whether or not the echo of 'Julian' and 'Juliana' was intentional, as Gary Scharnhorst suspects, it is intriguing to read 'The Aspern Papers' in light of James's own investigatory pursuit of 'so reserved and shade-seeking a genius'.¹⁴⁰ By framing the character of Miss Tina as a comparably biographical study, Tennant forces James to recognise the ideological parallels between himself and Silsbee, 'the narrator of the Aspern papers, the publishing scoundrel, the very man he has spent so agonisingly long attempting not to be' (68). Like Silsbee, he has used a woman 'in order to acquire a valuable manuscript'; Woolson 'had modelled for him [...] and on completing the portrait, the artist had thrown his sitter in the street' (88). Tennant's prioritising of James's use of biographical sources persuasively demonstrates how, as Richard Salmon argues, 'James's troubled relationship to his narrator may well have been derived from a sense of guilt'.¹⁴¹ This permits *Felony*, a work of fiction, to incorporate moments of literary criticism.

Obscured, however, by Tennant's alliance of James with Silsbee, Woolson with Miss Tina, is the possibility that the elisions of the Preface may have included textual as well as biographical sources. Gordon, while suggesting that the 'germ' of 'The Aspern Papers' may indeed have been biographical, goes on to prioritise textual influences, an interpretative twist with which Tennant engages and which she ultimately denies.

Gordon writes that "'Jeffrey' sounds too close to the first initials of J.F. Cooper to be

¹³⁸ Denis Flannery, *Henry James: A Certain Illusion* (Hampshire: Ashgate, 2000), p.142.

¹³⁹ Henry James, 'Hawthorne's French and Italian Journals', in *The American Essays of Henry James*, ed. by Leon Edel (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), pp.3-11 (p.3). See Gary Scharnhorst, 'James, "The Aspern Papers," and the Ethics of Literary Biography', *MFS: Modern Fiction Studies*, 36 (1990), 211-17 (p.213).

¹⁴⁰ Scharnhorst, p.213; James, 'Hawthorne's French and Italian Journals', p.3.

¹⁴¹ Salmon, p.104.

entirely an accident; so too Miss Tita, the name (until the final draft) of the padrona's niece. The name comes from Tita Douglas, a passionate woman in Woolson's bestseller, *Anne*.¹⁴² Tennant's James paraphrases his future biographer in asking 'is not Jeffrey simply J.F. lengthened but not disguised', but omits to refer to Woolson's *Anne*, instead asking, 'will poor Fenimore recognise herself in Miss Tina, after all?' (38). Similarly, while Gordon concludes that the source of 'The Aspern Papers' 'is not Fenimore herself but her portrait of Miss Grief and her aunt, two faded expatriates in Italy', Tennant continues to reiterate that Miss Tina 'is, of course, based on his dear friend' (49).¹⁴³ One effect of Tennant's decision to recast 'The Aspern Papers' as the product of biographical appropriation rather than intertextual exchange is to underemphasise Woolson as a writer, abandoning her work to the archive even as she resurrects her figure. Tennant's prioritising of biographical influences also has problematic implications for readings of 'The Aspern Papers' itself. While, as Paul Armstrong writes, a successful James Preface 'create[s] an indirect relation between the prefatory document and the main text which suggests kinds of interpretative attitudes', Tennant's pervasive favouring of (auto)biographical influences effectively closes down other avenues of interpretation.¹⁴⁴ Staking its claim on the recoverability of the totalised subjects of James and Woolson behind the text of 'The Aspern Papers', Tennant's alternative Preface offers a "solution" to James's novella, but makes few concessions to the textuality of the text or the transformative power of James's imagination.

Tennant is, however, more successful when telling us not how to read James, but how to read the Prefaces, or how to read James reading James. If Tennant's interpretative attitude to her chosen Preface were summarised in a single word, then that word would have to be 'scepticism'; rather than naïvely accepting its transparency and candour, she illuminates its almost limitless capacity for dissimulation. Tennant's

¹⁴² Gordon, p.340.

¹⁴³ Ibid., p.219.

¹⁴⁴ Armstrong, p.127.

adherence to Gordon's view of the form as a 'brilliant aesthetic blind' admittedly imposes a limit on her interpretation; rather than viewing the Preface as a discursive field in which identity is performed, she maintains that it is a space in which identity is expressed, albeit with multiple layers of dissembling. *Felony* nevertheless has significant implications for studying the textuality of the self, in problematising the very form of writing in which James most conclusively asserted his mastery. As John Carlos Rowe writes, 'James transforms the author's impotence before the monuments of his previous production into a psychic power: the capacity of his reading to turn the divided persona expressed in these divergent works into the grand image of the Author, the Master, for whom every reader yearns'.¹⁴⁵ By fragmenting and problematising her chosen Preface, Tennant resists this vision of the totalised subject. She thereby substitutes a diffuse and less easily recoverable persona for 'the grand image of the Author', the godlike figure rejected by Barthes.

***The Open Door* (2008)**

Elizabeth Maguire's *The Open Door* provides a little-known companion to Tennant's novella. Another joint biofiction of James and Woolson, Maguire's narrative is considerably imbricated with that of *Felony*, due in large part to the authors' shared affinity with Lyndall Gordon. Yet while Tennant's engagement with the Preface to 'The Aspern Papers' implied an ambiguous relationship with the totalised biographical subject, a desire to query as well as to reinstate, the narrative bias and publication circumstances of *The Open Door* suggest a more straightforward investment in humanist recovery.

A posthumous publication, *The Open Door* generated only one piece of criticism, a *Publishers Weekly* obituary for the author. In this short piece, Betsey Lerner

¹⁴⁵ John Carlos Rowe, *The Theoretical Dimensions of Henry James* (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984), p.244.

details how Maguire began writing the novel at an undesignated point pre-2004, but temporarily abandoned the project following the publication of Tóibín's *The Master* on the grounds that 'the shadow she would be working under was too vast'.¹⁴⁶ Maguire then resumed writing the novel in 2006 before being diagnosed with cancer, managing to complete a first draft of the manuscript in the two months before her death.¹⁴⁷ One of Maguire's most significant amendments to the existing record is her invention of a corresponding terminal illness for Woolson; the historical writer's recurrent hearing problems are shown to result from a brain tumour, which in turn leads her to favour the 'open door' of suicide. Lerner misinterprets this invention as fact: 'Woolson, too, died an untimely death from a disease that ravaged her'.¹⁴⁸ By marshalling the shared details of Maguire and Woolson's lives, the premature death, the way in which 'both were aligned with powerful men with whom they competed mightily in the publishing realm', Lerner identifies the author of *The Open Door* with its central character.¹⁴⁹ This frames the novel's eventual publication as an act of dual recovery, rescuing Maguire from under the shadow of Tóibín and *The Master* just as Maguire attempts to recover Woolson from the shadow of James.

As well as being a work of dual recovery, *The Open Door* is a work of dual authorship. Lerner describes how 'within the pages, Liz had written notes to herself to fill in details: a quote from X, a missing date', and how, following her acquisition of the novel for Other Press, editor Rosemary Ahern 'filled in every TK using Liz's research library and some additional research of her own'.¹⁵⁰ Readers of the novel experience an unusual uncertainty regarding which of the details originated with Maguire, and which with Ahern, an interpretative peculiarity that resonates intriguingly with *The Open Door*'s subject matter. Maguire emphasises Woolson's participation in the construction

¹⁴⁶ Betsey Lerner, 'TK: Remembering Liz Maguire', *Publishers Weekly*, 255 (2008), 62 (p.62).

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

of James's novels, crediting her with the *donnée* for *The Bostonians* (1886; 90), and the inspiration for Isabel Archer's fireside vigil in *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881): 'if you don't give her happiness, you have to give her understanding, insight, some inner rather than outer change' (61). Readers swayed by such details may find themselves questioning James's claim to be the sole originator of any number of his novels, and the publication circumstances of *The Open Door* serve only to bolster this narrative investment in collaborative writing.

A rather more ironic resonance between narrative and context emerges from the way in which *The Open Door* wears its research silently, omitting the appended list of sources common to the majority of the James biofictions. While the plot's major catalyst owes much to the insights of Novick, many of the novel's details originate with Gordon, whose work is used in a manner similar to James's suggested "borrowing" of Woolson's. Like Tennant, Maguire frames appropriation as an act of theft, having Woolson bitterly perceive that '[w]henver Harry left he always took something from me, a little piece of my own imagination. The danger of sharing, perhaps? My heart, I was willing to give. But not my stories' (66). Yet *The Open Door* is itself peppered with pieces of Gordon's imagination, even, at times, her images or turns of phrase. While *Felony* and *A Private Life of Henry James* were also closely affiliated, Tennant's acknowledgement of Gordon's influence provided interpretative transparency, enabling interested readers to return to the source text for clarification. Indeed, those troubling to do so would uncover moments wherein Tennant extended or challenged Gordon's insights, rewriting the scene in which James 'is likely' to have burned Woolson's papers into an unequivocal destruction of her personal effects, and arguing, contra Gordon, that Woolson did indeed seek marriage to James.¹⁵¹ Whereas *Felony* demonstrates biofiction's potential for critical engagement by treating biography as text rather than as

¹⁵¹ Gordon, p.286.

essence, *The Open Door* misinterprets biography as, to borrow a conveniently Jamesian formulation, ‘the real thing’.

The Woolson-identified narrator of *The Open Door* frames her story as ‘the tale of a friendship made, and lost’, written with the aim of ‘getting at the truth of what really happened’ (10). The ‘truth’ of Woolson’s story pivots around the vexed issue of James’s “outing”, demonstrating how, in the words of Savoy, ‘sexuality [...] still endures as the proper pot of gold at the end of the biographical rainbow, [...] the site of explanatory plenitude’.¹⁵² As previously suggested, James’s sexuality forms a subtext to the majority of the biofictions, whether as the source of Tóibín and Heyns’s sensitive interest, or Ozick and Liebmann-Smith’s satire. Though published after Kathryn Kramer’s assessment, *The Open Door* is coherent with her distinction between the way in which ‘female and male writers’ handle James’s ‘sexual confusion’: ‘the former focus on the results for others [...], the latter on the consequences for James’.¹⁵³ *The Open Door* explores the consequences for Woolson of her happening upon James in a moment of sexual intimacy: ‘it was not an admirer of fiction sitting at Henry’s feet. No, it was my cook’s teenage son, Giorgio, who was on his knees before the master. And he seemed to be generating a different kind of heat in Harry’s lap’ (119). This scene seems to allude to the work of Novick, for whom James was experientially homosexual rather than merely identifying himself as such. While Stevens maintains that ‘in homophobic turn-of-the-century Britain, verbal expressions of affection and erotic endearment between men required more courage than acts of physical gratification’, Maguire, like Novick, frames the latter as the ‘litmus test’ of James’s sexuality.¹⁵⁴ By catching James quite literally with his trousers down, Maguire uncovers a recognisably gay subject, a subject who, as Tóibín wrote of Novick’s James, ‘took his pleasures when they offered

¹⁵² Eric Savoy, ‘Subjunctive Biography’, *The Henry James Review*, 27 (2006), 248-55 (p.251).

¹⁵³ Kathryn Kramer, ‘The Secrets of the Master’, *The Henry James Review*, 29 (2008), 197-207 (p.201).

¹⁵⁴ Stevens, *Henry James and Sexuality*, p.167.

themselves'.¹⁵⁵ This claim to personal knowledge is emphasised by the shift in nomenclature as Woolson processes her revelation, from the legal name 'Henry', to the projected persona of 'the Master', to the intimate address of 'Harry', which suggestively disentangles James's "private" persona from his public image.

Just as Novick created a sensation by maintaining that James 'underwent the ordinary experiences of life', Maguire similarly reclaims Woolson as a sexually active woman.¹⁵⁶ She has a lover, of whom James is fiercely jealous, and refers to other, less clearly defined, 'men who occasionally wandered in and out of my bed' (54). These experiences seem conjured to imbue Woolson with a certain worldliness, leading her to treat James's *dishabille* emergence from the closet with understanding rather than censure: 'to know that Harry was human after all' (120). James, however, contrives to punish Woolson for confronting him with her revelation. Firstly, as in *Felony*, he represents her as 'a lonely spinster' in 'The Aspern Papers' (122), and secondly, he pens 'a nasty little article' in *Harper's* magazine (132). The section of *The Open Door* pertaining to 'Miss Woolson' marks the transition from 'a friendship made' to a friendship lost, and with it, the nadir of the novel's derivative relationship to Gordon's *Private Life*. Both Gordon and Maguire accuse James of three major crimes in publishing 'Miss Woolson': imposing the image of the author on her art, misrepresenting the extent of her achievements, and placing the article in the magazine in which it would do the most damage. Just as Gordon writes that 'Fenimore had a horror of publicity, much as James himself, yet 'Miss Woolson' exposed her life', Maguire writes that 'he had created a cunning portrait not of a body of work, but of the character of their creator' (130).¹⁵⁷ Gordon's observation that the essay 'excludes any mention of her highest achievements: her stories of women artists' is similarly paraphrased by Maguire: 'Harry omitted any reference to the very tales that he had told

¹⁵⁵ Tóibín, 'Reflective Biography', p.82.

¹⁵⁶ Novick, *The Young Master*, p.xiii.

¹⁵⁷ Gordon, p.213.

me time and again represented my greatest achievement – the tales of struggling female artists’ (131-2).¹⁵⁸ And Gordon’s comment that ‘James sent this piece to *Harper’s*, her own magazine: his attack was directed at the heart of her readership’ is once again echoed by Maguire: ‘It was no accident that you published this essay in the same magazine that had provided such a welcome home for my own writing’ (132).¹⁵⁹ Along with many other such instances, these passages uncritically repackage Gordon’s insights for a different readership. They translate Gordon’s ideas from biography to fiction without subjecting them to creative reinterpretation, a mode of engagement that is more plagiaristic than appropriative. This restricts *The Open Door*’s achievement to that of a digest of Gordon’s biography, its lack of referential transparency precluding more rigorous engagement with the criticism it invokes.

In *The Open Door*, as in *Felony*, Woolson’s next strategic move in the ‘battle of the stories’ is to publish her long-withheld critique of James, ‘At the Chateau of Corinne’ (134). The probable source for both Tennant and Maguire is, again, Lyndall Gordon, who first implied that the story might be ‘read as a reply to ‘Miss Woolson’’ and as ‘another round in the battles’.¹⁶⁰ Though Maguire’s direct echoing of the word ‘battle’ suggests that *A Private Life*, rather than *Felony*, was her source in this instance, other resonances support the necessarily speculative notion that she might also have been familiar with Tennant’s novella. As previously noted, *The Open Door* shares with *Felony* the suggestion that Miss Tina in ‘The Aspern Papers’ was a portrait of Woolson, a notion refuted by Gordon, who prefers to interpret the character as an appropriation of Woolson’s Aaronna Crief. The novellas also part company from Gordon in allowing Woolson to write back to ‘The Aspern Papers’. Tennant’s Woolson pens the ‘anonymous (and barbed) review’ previously cited, in which she ridicules James’s American Romantics and goes on to highlight ‘the impotence of Mr James – a word not

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., p.216.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., p.222.

lightly chosen – when it comes to understanding the nature of womanhood’ (161). Maguire’s Woolson, though confessing herself to have been the ‘anonymous reviewer of *The Europeans*’ (32), responds to ‘The Aspern Papers’ more directly: ‘I laughed out loud and scribbled a note to Harry, “Dear Master, only a confirmed bachelor would cling to the notion that every unmarried woman is desperate to wed. After all, your lodger is hardly such a catch!”’ (136).

Felony and *The Open Door*’s shared suggestion that James’s lack of experience with women limited his understanding of their perspective is a noted contrast to Woolson’s glowing praise of *The Portrait of a Lady*, cited in Gordon’s *A Private Life*.¹⁶¹ Their common suggestion that Woolson penned anonymous reviews also has no foundation in Gordon’s biography, which instead credits Woolson with a signed critique of *The Europeans*. Nor does Gordon make mention of Woolson’s published or epistolary response to ‘The Aspern Papers’, which, given her investment in recovery, would suggest than none is extant.¹⁶² Perhaps, then, this is evidence for an intertextual engagement between *The Open Door* and *Felony*. The anonymous review also provides an interesting link between these novellas and ‘Dictation’, in which the amanuenses of James and Conrad exchange unspecified passages in their employers’ works. Anonymity allows Ozick, Tennant and Maguire to claim for their subjects a presence that is diffuse and ultimately pervasive; any incongruent sentence or unsigned piece of criticism becomes a symbolic pathway to subjective recovery.

While *The Open Door*’s own anonymity of reference hampers full substantiation, I have contended that the basic structure of the plot stitches together insights gleaned from Novick, Gordon, and, potentially, Emma Tennant. The pivotal importance of these details to the narrative frames Maguire’s James as among the most textual in biofiction, a palimpsest of her triptych of sources. Her lack of

¹⁶¹ ‘How well you know her! [...] Most men are so stupid about some women’. Constance Fenimore Woolson to Henry James, 12 February 1882. Quoted in Gordon, p.167.

¹⁶² Gordon, p.157.

acknowledgements has necessitated a critically reconstructive reading that highlights the discursive nature of this figure. However, notwithstanding the circumstances of composition and publication, Maguire's own opacity about her use of sources suggests an uncritical engagement with biography as essence, rather than as text. It is ironic, then, given that Maguire and Ahern's "collaboration" renders the author of *The Open Door* such an unstable figure, that the version of the Master constructed by Lyndall Gordon should occupy a position of such centrality.

'Dictation' (2008)

Maguire's situating of the biographical subject as an essence rather than a discursive construct provides an immediate point of contrast with the image of the author suggested by Cynthia Ozick's short story. 'Dictation' opens with the visit of Joseph Conrad and his family to Lamb House in the summer of 1901, but immediately recalls James and Conrad's first meeting at De Vere Gardens four years earlier. The year 1897 was a pivotal one for James, marking the publication of *What Maisie Knew*, the first of his novels to be dictated in part to an amanuensis. The mistrust inspired in Conrad at the sight of the Remington typewriter, 'the totem of a foreign civilisation to which [...] James had uncannily acclimatized', stimulates an ongoing dialogue between the writers in which the themes of the story are dialectically advanced, namely the impact of mechanisation on literary style, and the potential of that style to confess the man (5). Conrad is initially appalled at what he perceives as the 'inconceivable separation of hand from paper, inner voice leading into outer, immemorial sacred solitude shattered by a breathing creature always in sight, a tenacious go-between, a constantly vibrating interloper, the human operator!' (6). Immovable in his belief that 'the artist stands confessed in his works' (12), yet tempted towards new technologies by the vicissitudes of gout, Conrad cannot escape the fear that his own adoption of the Remington might, in

the words of Christopher Keep, end up ‘distancing his thoughts from their signifiers’.¹⁶³ James’s view is the ‘mirror opposite’: he harbours no such belief that identity is enacted in an artist’s work.¹⁶⁴ For him, conversely, ‘the artist multiplies his confessions, thereby concealing his inmost self’ (12). Viewing writing as a performance rather than an expression of identity, James is unfazed by the presence of an audience, instead perceiving the shift to dictation to have exerted a positive influence on his style: ‘he believes it has enriched his tone – he feels his very breathing has gone into it’ (12).

James and Conrad’s differences are arguably informed by the different interpretations they bring to bear on the word ‘typewriter’. Conrad fixates upon the typewriter as human subject, mistrustfully viewing James’s ‘MacAlpines and Welds’ as ‘sharers and intercessors’ with the potential to exert their own ‘intervening influence, a contamination or a crippling’ (12). For James, on the other hand, the typewriter is a Machine (respectfully capitalised); he persists in his belief that he is able to ‘speak directly to the thing itself, with MacAlpine at the keys’ (6). The writers thus adopt opposing sides in a broader cultural debate concerning the projected function of the person ‘at the keys’. This is concisely summarised by Pamela Thurschwell: ‘On the one hand, secretaries are tools – ideally meant to function as unmediating recorders of another’s thought, like the dictating machines they themselves employ. On the other hand, secretaries are, as mediums, never themselves unmediating’.¹⁶⁵ ‘Dictation’ validates Conrad’s scepticism regarding the unmediating medium, unravelling a plot in which his amanuensis Lilian Hallowes collaborates with James’s Theodora Bosanquet to exchange excerpts from ‘The Secret Sharer’ and ‘The Jolly Corner’. Yet the way in which Conrad and James remain oblivious to the presence of such ‘kidnapped diamonds’ in their finished stories in turn refutes Conrad’s belief that ‘the novelist

¹⁶³ Christopher Keep, ‘Blinded by the Type: Gender and Information Technology at the Turn of the Century’, *Nineteenth-Century Contexts*, 23 (2001), 149-73 (p.161).

¹⁶⁴ Pamela Thurschwell, ‘The Typist’s Remains: Theodora Bosanquet in Recent Fiction’, *The Henry James Review*, 32 (2001), 1-11, (p.6).

¹⁶⁵ Pamela Thurschwell, *Literature, Technology and Magical Thinking, 1880-1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p.90.

stands confessed in his work' (45). Both details serve to dispute a simplistically one-directional relationship between the writer and the (dictated) text, ultimately confirming a view of subjectivity that is diffuse, textual, and mediated.

By attributing to James the belief that 'his very breathing has gone into' his writing, Ozick first explores the connection between a dictated text and a prior subjectivity that is somehow bodied forth in the act of composition. This "speaks" to a critical tendency to look for traces of James's embodiment in texts that are known to have been dictated, exemplified by Edel's assertion that, following the shift to the Remington, 'the spoken voice was to be heard henceforth in James's prose'.¹⁶⁶ This belief is explored in 'Dictation' through the resemblance of James's speech to his "late" written style, defined by Stevens as possessing a 'camp decorativeness [...] draw[ing] attention to its own beauty'.¹⁶⁷ Thus Ozick's James exiles Conrad's wife and screaming child to the garden with the direction that 'Mrs. Conrad and this very delightful young man will be pleased to be escorted to the floral precincts beyond the premises' (9), prompting Mrs. Conrad to marvel that he 'was undoubtedly an unearthly intelligence – had he actually uttered "floral precincts"?' (10). Thurschwell attends more suggestively than Edel to the presence of an embodied person behind James's ejaculations, implying that the shift to dictation introduced a partner to what was formerly a self-contained, masturbatory act: 'one's own hand hinders writing, but somebody else's hand attached to a typewriter enhances it, makes for what amounts to an unstoppable flow for James'.¹⁶⁸ Ozick extends this insight by exploring the possibility that the typist might act as a repository as well as a conduit for these bodily outpourings, with 'proofs', as Thurschwell writes of the historical Lilian Hallows, 'imprinted suggestively upon her body'.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁶ Edel, *Henry James: A Life*, p.456.

¹⁶⁷ Stevens, *Henry James and Sexuality*, p.169.

¹⁶⁸ Pamela Thurschwell, 'Henry James and Theodora Bosanquet: On the typewriter, In the Cage, at the Ouija board', *Textual Practice*, 13 (1999), 5-23 (p.13).

¹⁶⁹ Thurschwell, 'The Typist's Remains', p.2.

By sexualising the relationship of the writer to his ‘true vessel, the sole brain to receive the force of creation in its first flooding’ (39), Ozick concretises the nebulous terms of their arrangement, crediting the typist with the potential for similar revelations regarding her “partner” as, say, Aspern’s Juliana. Indeed, such revelations are precisely the thing that Conrad most fears: ‘these two, Miss Hallowes and Miss Bosanquet, brought together even momentarily, could only mean exposure’ (15). For Bosanquet does not permit James’s ‘hallowed words’ to ‘dance [...] through her hallowed fingertips’ without first being ‘registered indelibly in her brain’ (18), while Hallowes internalises Conrad’s words to the extent that they are perceived to alter her genetic makeup: ‘the voices were in her ears, in her throat, in the whorls of her fingers’ (28). The typist’s symbolic potential to accrue physical traces of her employer might go some way towards explaining her fascination as an intermediary subject for writers seeking after James’s embodiment (she also figures prominently in *The Typewriter’s Tale*, *Author, Author*, and *Lions at Lamb House*). Yet as the metaphor of the fingerprint suggests, the nature of such interest relies on a uni-directional imprinting of the author’s subjectivity on the typist’s, to the extent that she becomes a mere ‘container’ for his ‘most concealed truths’.¹⁷⁰ Conversely, the details of Bosanquet’s plan enable the typists to leave a corresponding physical trace on the authors’ texts, ‘an everlasting sign that they lived, they felt, they acted!’ (50).

Bosanquet’s proposed scheme is, on the face of it, absurd: Hallowes ‘will carefully embed Mr James’s fragment into some hospitable part of Mr Conrad’s final copy’ and she ‘will insert Mr Conrad’s into a suitable cleft in Mr James’s manuscript’ (45). The plan may, however, be read as a logical extension of the ‘tricky disappearing act’ required of the ‘ideal secretary’: ‘to make herself look like an unmarking medium, a straightforward conduit for the words and thoughts of her employer, while in reality

¹⁷⁰ Thurschwell, ‘The Typist’s Remains’, p.6.

functioning to edit and improve those words and thoughts'.¹⁷¹ Thus Lilian confesses to 'silently correct[ing]' Conrad's occasional mangled idioms, adding that 'often I must retype a day's work several times in order to have a fair copy' (44). Though loyally claiming that her own employer is 'beyond correction', Bosanquet states evasively that 'all that is similar to my own experience' (44). Implicitly, the daily typescripts which James and Conrad trust to be a faithful recording of their spoken words have already undergone several stages of mediation, the potential distance of thought from signifier increasing exponentially with each act of retyping. Bosanquet's plan thus responds obliquely to Conrad's symptomatic cultural fears regarding the typist's potential to elide, omit, and generally contaminate, rather than being dismissible as a ghost in the machine.

This interpretation resonates with Thurschwell's assessment of the story as demonstrating

the ways in which, in Kittler's terms, language is exterior to us, recalcitrant to internalization, substitutable. Language and the subjectivities that are formed within it (through Conrad's sacred, authentic style) are doubled and determined by the manuscript proofs that cannot finally serve as proof that a single author, a writing "I" was here.¹⁷²

Proof of this 'writing "I"' is precisely what is at stake in the successful execution of Bosanquet's plan; the excerpt is to provide 'her fingerprint', evidence for her existence as an embodied person independent of language (50). Yet as the ending to the story confirms, the irrecoverable nature of the excerpts means that the typists' subjectivities dissolve into the discursive fields of their employers' stories; of their own existence as living persons there is 'no significant record extant' (50). However, if Bosanquet's plan might be deemed to fail in its intended particulars, it achieves a striking degree of success as a moment of literary criticism, functioning to similarly disallow a straightforward association of James and Conrad's language with their historical essences. Impressing on Hallows the need for caution in the selection of the

¹⁷¹ Pamela Thurschwell, 'Supple Minds and Automatic Hands: Secretarial Agency in Early Twentieth-Century Literature', *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, 37 (2001), 155-68 (p.158).

¹⁷² Thurschwell, 'The Typist's Remains', p.7.

interchangeable extracts, for fear of ‘Mr. James’s indoor characters [...] wandering over Mr. Conrad’s watery world’ or ‘a chimney-piece abutting a mast’, Bosanquet exhorts her to locate ‘the heart, the lung, the blood and the brain’, to ‘tease out of your man the root of his fertility’, to ‘squeeze out the very semen of the thing’ (47-8). Through the accumulation of physical details, the respiratory, circulatory and reproductive systems, the excerpt becomes a synecdoche for ‘your man’, the identifiable and recoverable peak of identity enactment. Bosanquet then severs the link between text and referent by embedding the extract in another’s prose, a place where it may neither be identified nor recovered.

Having unburdened the extract from the weight of expressing a prior identity, ‘Dictation’ is able to attend instead to the performative textual surface. The extracts are credited with a dynamic agency that is independent of authorial or even secretarial intention:

In Henry James’s London rooms a small dazzling fragment of “The Secret Sharer” flows, as if ordained, into the unsuspecting veins of “The Jolly Corner”, and in Joseph Conrad’s study in Kent the hot fluids of “The Jolly Corner” run, uninhibited, into a sutured crevice in “The Secret Sharer” (49).

Though couched in the language of penetration and ejaculation, we attach homosexual subjects to this intertextual exchange at our own interpretative peril. The temptation to *cherchez les hommes* which this dissimulating extract invites, to postulate, say, a covert affair between a gay-identified James and a gay-identified Conrad is, of course, rendered ridiculous by our knowledge of how the exchange was enacted. How then are we to interpret Ozick’s determined queering of ‘The Secret Sharer’ and ‘The Jolly Corner’s ‘undetected coupling’ (49)? With the ‘biographical imperative’ so thoroughly frustrated, the relevance of the queer formalist perspective becomes increasingly apparent:

If we consider that “identity” might be up for grabs, might be worked out (rather than expressed) within a text, then James’s writing itself can be thought of as the

scene of erotic exploration: it is not necessary to conceive of a Jamesian body prior to the scene of writing.¹⁷³

Ozick's act of queering succeeds in renewing our attentiveness to the discursive eroticism of James's writing, while circumventing the interpretative pitfall of extrapolating from that writing a gay-identified James. When combined with her emphasis on the mediating medium, capable of affecting as well as being affected by the words which pass through her body, and with the playful intertextuality of Bosanquet's plot, it problematises both directions of the relationship between the author and the text. In other words, if the author cannot pretend to 'stand confessed in his works' – and surely he cannot, with mediums such as these – then the text may not legitimately be read for straightforward revelations concerning the subject (12). It should, rather, be read as a place wherein identities are tried out, confirming James in his attributed belief that 'one's essential self, one's ostensibly immutable character was, in fine, mutable' (14).

The Typewriter's Tale (2005)

The spirit, if not the letter, of Bosanquet's plot is also discernable in the secretarial habits of Frieda Wroth, the central character of Michiel Heyns's *The Typewriter's Tale*. Bosanquet is a common source to both Ozick and Heyns; while Heyns asserts that 'the thoughts and actions I attribute to Frieda are entirely fictional, indeed unthinkable as applied to Miss Bosanquet', Frieda 'has in common with her model an interest in thought transference' (235), as well as ambitions toward independent authorship. These literary ambitions inspire Frieda's habitual attempts to 'amuse herself by attempting to predict the outcome of [James's] rumination' (2); just as, in 'Dictation', Bosanquet contrived to insert 'Mr. Conrad's [fragment] into a suitable cleft in Mr. James's manuscript' (45), Frieda introduces her own foreign matter into the gaps and silences of

¹⁷³ Stevens, 'Queer Henry', p.122.

James's work. The effect, in *The Typewriter's Tale*, is to emphasise the provisional beginnings of texts that now appear impregnably definitive, highlighting those moments wherein the architect of the House of Fiction risked 'knocking down a wall or two' (75). Thus the oft-quoted image of 'a certain young woman affronting her destiny' in the Preface to *The Portrait of a Lady* is revealed as the product of a sequence of choices:

a certain young...'
 Person? Girl?
...woman affronting her...'
 Past? Future? Fortune? Family?
'... destiny, comma, had begun with being all my outfit for the large...building of
"The Portrait of a Lady" quotation marks, full stop. (75)

Whereas Ozick refused to locate the fissure in 'The Jolly Corner' into which Conrad's fragment was inserted, Heyns creates a multitude of fault lines in the surface of James's Preface, allowing Frieda the illusion of collaborating with her employer in the construction of meaning.

However illusory, such participation is at odds with the dominant perception of Frieda's role, given voice by the instructress Miss Petherbridge: 'A typewriter's consciousness should never impede the flow of words; she is merely the medium of transmission' (58).¹⁷⁴ This view, with which both typists had to contend in 'Dictation', is shared by Heyns's James, who impresses upon Frieda 'the non-participatory nature of your function, other, of course, than rendering my spoken words in typewritten form as accurately as possible. You will be, as it were, the medium between my thoughts and the paper' (16). Starting with a literal definition of the act of taking dictation, 'rendering my spoken words in typewritten form', James goes on to redefine Frieda's role as that of a 'medium' for thought transference. While perhaps indicating the way in which, when 'operated by a capable woman, the typewriter [...] seemed to approach the speed of consciousness itself', this also suggestively elides the typist with the spirit medium, and

¹⁷⁴ Miss Petherbridge is based on a historical subject: she was an instructress at the secretarial bureau that trained Mary Weld, James's typist prior to Bosanquet. See Thurschwell, 'Henry James and Theodora Bosanquet', p.6.

the office with the séance.¹⁷⁵ The comparison is made explicit by James's niece, who assures Frieda that 'you'd make a good medium, you're so used to, you know, transmitting somebody else's words without perhaps even understanding them – I mean, not many people do understand Uncle Henry's novels' (121). The novel has at its heart these complex imbrications between typewriting and mediumship, and, as evinced by the following epigraph, mediumship and creativity:

what I want to try to capture is an impression of the elusive moment when these people who haunt my brain actually begin to speak within me with their own voices. ... as soon as the dialogue begins, I become merely a recording instrument [...]
Edith Wharton, *A Backward Glance* (vi)

By choosing this particular epigraph, Heyns invites us to question the legitimacy of the incidences of 'technologically aided thought transference' in which Frieda partakes (93), and to consider whether, instead, 'what she is doing is writing'.¹⁷⁶ These acts take the form of apparently telepathic communications with the spirit of Alice James, and with the considerably more substantial Morton Fullerton, who seduces Frieda at the beginning of the narrative in the hopes of convincing her to 'retrieve' his potentially indicting letters to James (46). There is much at stake in determining 'the status of these communications', which may be read as efforts to prove or disprove the validity of Bosanquet's own attempts to "take dictation" from James after his death.¹⁷⁷ *The Typewriter's Tale* contains hints of this aspect of Frieda's "future", namely the moment wherein James exhorts her to 'prevent my ashes from being shipped to America after my death, otherwise I shall certainly importune you from beyond the grave' (82). What could be easily dismissed as implausible plot details are thereby recast as test cases for the validity of Bosanquet's intersubjective recuperation.

Drawing on Bosanquet's rich archive of diaries and automatic writing scripts, Thurschwell reconstructs the events of February 15th 1933, when Bosanquet

¹⁷⁵ Keep, p.162.

¹⁷⁶ Thurschwell, 'The Typist's Remains', p.5.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p.4.

anonymously attended a sitting with Mrs Hester Dowden, a medium who was known for her ability to contact literary figures. Mrs. Dowden's spirit guide Johannes relayed a message through a Ouija board, spelling out the name of Henry James, and then proceeded to answer correctly various questions about the gardener's name at Rye, etc. James, it turned out, wanted to re-engage Bosanquet as his secretary, saying through the Ouija board, 'I have come because I, with many others, have felt that a literary circle should endeavour to add to the evidence you have of our world. It has been discussed here and it is felt that we should try to give something to the world that is at least in a sense literary work.'¹⁷⁸

While the spiritual James's fondness for passive constructions, qualifications, and subordination comprises an uncanny echo of his stylistic peculiarities in life, his cited realization that the 'very uninteresting young woman' at the typewriter was 'all the time [...] observing his style and taking mental notes' raises the question of whether these apparent transcripts were in fact the work of a skillful parodist, Bosanquet herself.¹⁷⁹ The difficulty of distinguishing between 'the intersubjective séance — in which an out-of-body, post-death James really does speak — and an intra-subjective one' is compounded by the recognition Bosanquet won as a parodist of James for the *Saturday Westminster Gazette*, and by her suturing of a potentially libellous passage in James's preface to Rupert Brooke's *Letters to America*.¹⁸⁰ Mrs William James, in what now reads as an uncanny echo of 'Dictation', judged this to be so close an approximation of the Master's voice that 'Henry would never know he hadn't written it himself'.¹⁸¹ Bosanquet's practiced appropriation of James's style encourages the conclusion that hers was an intra-subjective séance, that, as in Heyns's epithet from Wharton, she became the 'recording device' for a thoroughly internalized character, making her one of the earliest writers of biofiction about James (vi).

Vital context for Bosanquet's spiritual experimentation, and that of her fictional counterpart, is provided by Michael Anesko's recent uncovering of the extent to which

¹⁷⁸ Thurschwell, 'Henry James and Theodora Bosanquet', p.11.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., p.17.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid. p.15; See, for instance, Theodora Bosanquet, 'Afterwards', in *Henry James at Work*, ed. by Lyall H. Powers (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2006), pp.6-8 (first published in the *Saturday Westminster Gazette*, 23 Jan 1915, p.10).

¹⁸¹ Quoted in Lyall H. Powers, 'The Handprinted Hogarth Essay', in *Henry James at Work*, ed. by Powers, pp.11-28 (p.18).

James's family conspired to marginalize his amanuensis following his death. In Anesko's sympathetic assessment, Bosanquet's experimentations provided a means of 'rehabilitating the privileged status that his relatives [...] had begrudged and progressively stripped from her'.¹⁸² A similar dynamic is rehearsed in *The Typewriter's Tale*, in which Frieda interprets the previously cited description of her role, 'transmitting other people's words without perhaps even understanding them', as evidence that 'in their different ways all the members of the James family saw her only as an extension of the Remington' (121). Just as, for Anesko, Bosanquet's 'odd communications' provided a means of self-rehabilitation, Frieda seizes upon the request that she establish spiritual contact with Alice James as a chance to prove that she is 'no longer merely an obedient conduit of other people's creations' (121).¹⁸³ While this would suggest that the séance is an intra-subjective one, a performance calculated to prove her own value to the sceptical Jameses, this is countered by the implied inter-subjectivity of the resulting communication. Alice James speaks to her niece at considerable length, requesting her assistance in 'getting my diary published' (132), and the exchange is duly recorded by Frieda with 'numb', 'disembodied' hands (129). The validity of this incident is then itself queried by Frieda's comparison of 'these spirits that rose in response to her summons and offered their testimony' to 'the characters Mr James called forth and set in motion', framing Alice as a subject of her own invention (134).

Matters are complicated still further by the narrative positioning of the séance, following almost directly from Frieda and Peggy's attendance at a women's suffrage meeting. Frieda's perceptions of this event are inflected with the imagery of mediumship and thought transference: the leader, Mrs Tuke, 'was as if possessed by another presence – presumably that of the redoubtable Mrs Pankhurst' (115), while Mrs Pankhurst 'was, through that medium, entering the consciousness of the young American' (116). While superficially implying that Alice James could similarly 'enter the consciousness' of

¹⁸² Anesko, *Monopolizing the Master*, p.69.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*

Peggy James through the medium of Frieda herself, the staging of a speaker ‘possessed’ of a feminist agenda cannot help but recall the figure of Verena Tarrant in *The Bostonians*. As evidenced by the above qualifications and reversals, Frieda, like Verena, repeatedly frustrates the attempt to distinguish between possession and performance. The intertextual engagement with *The Bostonians* provides an undercurrent to Frieda’s subsequent communications, an ongoing reminder of the need for interpretative caution.

Similar intertextual resonances direct interpretation of Frieda’s communications with Morton Fullerton, some of which ‘were almost purely physical in nature, a heightened awareness and increased sensitivity in some parts of her body’ (92). Hers is, she confesses, ‘not exactly a mental awareness: it was as if, entering her mind, he recalled to her whole body the very feel of his skin and smell of his hair’ (79). The implication that Frieda is describing an erotic reverie rather than a genuine visitation strongly recalls the ambiguity surrounding the status of the ghosts in *The Turn of the Screw* (1898). Specifically, it alludes to the seminal psychoanalytic theory of Edmund Wilson: that ‘the governess who is made to tell the story is a neurotic case of sex repression, and [...] the ghosts are not real ghosts, but hallucinations of the governess’.¹⁸⁴ The relevance of ‘sex repression’ to Frieda’s ‘case’ is evidenced by the way in which the imagery used to describe her apparent telepathy comes to a head in the resumption of the affair: ‘possessed, she was possessing; taking, she was being taken; entered, she was entering: unmediated, direct, naked’ (194). And suspiciously, ‘the idea of telepathic communication with Mr Fullerton’ exerts little fascination the morning after: ‘it was now too vivid to her what such contact had always been a poor substitute for’ (209). Extrapolating from this experience, Frieda concludes that ‘all the theories that sought to turn absence into presence broke down here’, for ‘life, if it meant anything, meant the presence of a living body’ (212). Placing these conclusions in the context of Bosanquet’s own postulated contact with James, it would appear that this is to be

¹⁸⁴ Edmund Wilson, *The Triple Thinkers* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1938), p.88.

similarly dismissed as a self-deluding fantasy, thwarted by its inability to summon an embodied person.

Symbolically rejecting the possibility of James's survival as the object of intersubjective recovery, *The Typewriter's Tale* asserts his continuing presence as a textual trace, in both his own work and in that of later writers. Though the most obvious agent of James's ongoing perpetuation is Heyns himself, he has an analogue in the person of Frieda Wroth, making the typist an alter ego for the biofiction author. Having embarked upon the immense work of typing and retyping the New York Edition, Frieda judges herself to be 'the person on earth most closely acquainted with the novels and tales of Henry James' (105). This is an uneasy accolade for one aspiring to independent authorship, leaving Frieda 'doomed to Mr James's influence': 'she could as little escape him in her own writing as she could disregard his looming presence' (25). Indeed, the excerpts from Frieda's own work-in-progress interleaved between the pages of *The Typewriter's Tale* manifest an anxiety of influence so great as to appear insurmountable. Concerning an elderly hero, Spencer, who has 'lately received emissaries from that luminary city across the watery divide' (85), the novel is interpretable as an anaemic homage to *The Ambassadors* (1903), the preface to which we witness Frieda dictating, and from which James borrows in enjoining his amanuensis to visit Paris and 'live all you can' (87). While initially cherishing hopes that her novel might perform a pedagogical function, might act as 'a corrective to Mr. James's methods and assumptions' (25), Frieda ultimately abandons the project as 'insipid, imitative of Mr. James's style and subject matter, self-conscious' (232). She thus judges her work to have contravened the anti-fidelity dictum governing appropriations: that 'while filmic rewritings of novels are judged in terms of fidelity, literary rewritings of classical texts [...] are not so judged – change is presumed to be the point'.¹⁸⁵ Frieda's novel is more adaptation than appropriation; although it does not subject *The Ambassadors* to the

¹⁸⁵ Stam, 'Introduction', p.16.

change in medium characteristic of adaptive texts, it conspicuously does *not* constitute the ‘wholesale rethinking of the terms of the original’ typical of appropriations.¹⁸⁶

Having dismissed her rewriting of *The Ambassadors* for exerting an insufficient degree of change upon the source text, the novel ends with Frieda vowing to ‘start anew, write her own tale, not his’, and typing the opening line of *The Typewriter’s Tale* itself: ‘the worst part of taking dictation was the waiting’ (232-3).

Thus framed as Frieda’s Harold Bloom-esque attempt to overthrow her literary “father”, it is surprising that *The Typewriter’s Tale* is itself ‘deeply influenced by James’s style’.¹⁸⁷ While Thurschwell criticises the novel for being ‘not entirely up to [James’s stylistic] demands’, it might alternatively be interpreted as foregrounding Frieda’s developing mediation of that style and subject matter.¹⁸⁸ Having worked through a straightforward and unidirectional model of literary influence, culminating in the production and subsequent abandonment of her derivative adaptation of *The Ambassadors*, Frieda then engages in a similarly intimate yet far more critical engagement with ‘In the Cage’ (1898). Heyns foregrounds the relevance of this story by citing lines from it in an epigraph: ‘she found her ladies, in short, almost always in communication with her gentlemen, and her gentlemen with her ladies, and she read into the immensity of their intercourse stories and meanings without end’ (v). Heyns thus directs readers to the parallels between the telegraphist’s vicarious participation in the assignations of Captain Everard and Lady Bradeen, and Frieda’s own embroilment in the complicated relational dynamics of James, Fullerton, and Edith Wharton. Sections of *The Typewriter’s Tale* are interpretable as Frieda’s appropriation of James’s story, an approach defined by Sanders as typified by ‘a position of critique’.¹⁸⁹ Stevens detects a queer subtext to ‘In the Cage’, constituted of trace elements of the Cleveland Street

¹⁸⁶ Sanders, p.28.

¹⁸⁷ Thurschwell, ‘The Typist’s Remains’, p.5.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

¹⁸⁹ Sanders, p.4.

Scandal, the ‘sordid act of blackmail’, and ‘ghostly echoes of Wilde’.¹⁹⁰ *The Typewriter’s Tale* reconstructs this subtext in both explicit and more coded references, thereby offering a queer appropriation of its source text.

The telegraph boys of Cleveland Street, summoned into the frame of ‘In the Cage’ through James’s ‘spectacle of a young telegraphist possessing too much knowledge of the aristocracy’, are obliquely echoed in *The Typewriter’s Tale* through the reference to James being ‘collided with from behind by a butcher’s boy on a delivery bicycle’ (22).¹⁹¹ This can be read as a tongue-in-cheek reference to the public revelation of the liaisons between the telegraph boys and their aristocratic customers; though the carrier of meat rather than information, the butcher’s boy suggestively obtains “carnal knowledge” of James in highly public fashion. The potential for blackmail, ‘rich in queer associations’ since the Labouchere Amendment, is also an ongoing threat in both texts.¹⁹² Just as the telegraphist tells Everard that ‘it’s quite worth your while to buy me off’, Fullerton is blackmailed by his landlady, and enlists Frieda’s help in stealing his correspondence with James for fear of ‘what can be made of any fairly expressive letter from one man to another in such an age as ours’ (44).¹⁹³ Finally, the ‘ghostly echoes of Wilde’ that haunted ‘In the Cage’ are made substantial in Fullerton’s insistence that ‘there was between me and Mr James [...] [nothing] like Wilde’s relations with his various correspondents’ (44).¹⁹⁴ By demonstrating how, in Stevens’s words, James’s ‘tale of a heterosexual adulterous liaison [...] can pass commentary on the fraught secrecy and knowledge characterizing the meeting of Victorian queer subcultures within the public sphere’, this strand of the novel exploits the potential of appropriation to

¹⁹⁰ Stevens, ‘Queer Henry’, pp.122, 129, 131. See also Thurschwell, ‘Henry James and Theodora Bosanquet’, pp.6, 10.

¹⁹¹ Stevens, ‘Queer Henry’, p.128.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, p.130.

¹⁹³ Henry James, ‘In the Cage’, in *In the Cage and Other Stories* (London: Penguin, 1972), pp.1-102 (p.42); quoted in Stevens, ‘Queer Henry’, p.130.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.131.

provide ‘a “reading” of the source’ text, without thereby becoming ‘subordinate to or parasitic on’ that source.¹⁹⁵

While the engagement of *The Typewriter’s Tale* and ‘In the Cage’ demonstrably runs far deeper than that of Frieda’s abandoned typescript with *The Ambassadors*, placing these texts in exclusive dialogue is ultimately problematic in privileging ‘a dyadic source/adaptation model which excludes [...] all sorts of supplementary texts’.¹⁹⁶ For instance, in spelling out the relevance to his situation of ‘the infamous trials of the unfortunate Oscar Wilde’, Fullerton complains to Frieda that ‘you do make a man cross his t’s and dot his i’s, don’t you?’ (43). The ‘source/adaptation model’ makes no allowance for this passage’s uncanny echo of the Countess Gemini’s revelation of Pansy Osmond’s parentage in *The Portrait of a Lady*: ‘‘Ah, my good Isabel,’ cried the Countess, ‘with you one must dot one’s i’s’’.¹⁹⁷ Elided along with the manifold echoes of *The Portrait of a Lady* are those of ‘The Aspern Papers’, notably the way in which Frieda’s decision to burn Fullerton’s letters ‘one by one’ reprises Miss Tina’s burning of the titular papers ‘one by one’ in the stove (232).¹⁹⁸ Nor does the exclusive pairing of ‘source’ and ‘adaptation’ account for the allusions to *The Wings of the Dove* (1902) on the opening page of *The Typewriter’s Tale* and to *Washington Square* (1880) on the last: ‘she waited, Frieda Wroth’ (1) directly echoes ‘she waited, Kate Croy’, while Frieda’s typing is, like Catherine Sloper’s embroidery, ‘for life, as it were’ (233).¹⁹⁹ But crucially, it is in the multiplication of these textual traces that Frieda’s mediation of her Jamesian inheritance reaches its zenith. From the anxiety of influence, resulting in her derivative adaptation of *The Ambassadors*, Frieda revised the Jamesian text into the discursive

¹⁹⁵ Ibid; Stam, *Literature through Film*, p.4; Stam, ‘Introduction’, p.8.

¹⁹⁶ Stam, *Literature through Film*, p.27.

¹⁹⁷ Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady* (New York Edition text), ed. by Nicola Bradbury (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p.576.

¹⁹⁸ James, ‘The Aspern Papers’, p.142. Thurschwell notes that ‘Burning letters (sometimes unread) is a repeated Jamesian act we find in “The Aspern Papers,” “The Jolly Corner,” and *The Wings of the Dove*, as well as in James’s own life’. See ‘The Typist’s Remains’, p.5.

¹⁹⁹ Henry James, *Wings*, p.21; Henry James, *Washington Square*, ed. by Martha Banta (London: Penguin, 2007), p.199.

framework of her own via her appropriation of 'In the Cage'. This was, however, a relationship of exclusivity which necessarily elided other textual traces, situating *The Typewriter's Tale* alongside such overt appropriations as A.N. Wilson's *A Jealous Ghost* (2005; a rewriting of *The Turn of the Screw*), Wendy Lesser's *The Pagoda in the Garden* (2005; a rewriting of *The Golden Bowl*), and Cynthia Ozick's *Foreign Bodies* (2010; a rewriting of *The Ambassadors*). Yet it is through the multiplication of unacknowledged textual traces that Frieda transcends both influence and direct appropriation to arrive at something approaching Kristevan intertextuality. In this view, the author is less an originator than an 'orchestrator of pre-existing discourses', and her text a collage in which 'complete originality is neither possible nor even desirable'.²⁰⁰ Rather than being 'doomed to Mr James's influence' at the perceived expense of her own authorial innovation (25), Frieda ultimately emerges as the prototypical postmodernist author, her text a tissue of quotations.

In the 'Author's Note' to *The Typewriter's Tale*, Heyns acknowledges this 'appropriating [of] phrases from the writings of Henry James', adding that 'I have retained these borrowings, not as plagiarism, but as homage to the works to which this novel is above all indebted' (237). Heyns's equation of borrowing with homage resonates with Robert Stam's suggestion that 'hypertextuality itself becomes a sign of canonical status, the "copies", within the logic elaborated by Jacques Derrida, create the prestige of the original'.²⁰¹ Whereas a straightforward appropriation of 'In the Cage' would contribute to the prestige of a single tale, Heyns orchestrates quotations drawn from the breadth of the New York Edition, thereby paying 'homage' to an entire oeuvre. And since it is from that oeuvre that the figure of the author emerges, then such intertextual engagement offers a strategy for James's ongoing recovery and perpetuation.²⁰² *The Typewriter's Tale* thus proposes a means by which James might

²⁰⁰ Stam, *Literature through Film*, p.4; Stam, 'Introduction', p.9.

²⁰¹ Stam, 'Introduction', p.31.

²⁰² See McHale, p.200: the oeuvre, he argues, 'is only the author in disguise'.

endure beyond the grave, not as a spectral manifestation in a ‘darkened parlour’, but as a textual trace in the work of later writers (8). By revising James into their contemporary texts, the writers of biofiction ensure his ongoing survival in discourse, answering his question ‘Is there a Life After Death?’ with a resounding affirmative.

Conclusion

Returning now to my opening thesis statement regarding the fraught inheritance of biofiction about James, it is possible to assess how far the writers considered in the preceding pages succeed in negotiating their mixed legacy. This legacy was comprised of biography’s investment in recuperating the subject, and of the textual engagement of formalism. Fundamental to Gordon’s attempt to ‘challenge the myth of the solitary artist with a truer story of [...] collaboration’, or to Novick’s assumption that ‘Henry James underwent the ordinary experiences of life’ and that these provided ‘the raw materials of his fiction’, was the assumption of what Stevens called ‘a Jamesian body prior to the scene of writing’, a unique, extra-textual subjectivity that was presumed to be both recoverable and narratable by the biographer.²⁰³ Yet the queer formalist strand emerging in parallel to the biographical approach ‘entails a shift in the ontological status of the writing. Rather than expressing the prior identity of its creator, it might be seen as a site where, within given historical constraints, identity itself is constituted; hence identity might be performed rather than expressed in a literary text’.²⁰⁴ In other words, the historical subject or ‘Jamesian body’ on which biography staked its claim was no longer deemed integral to an informed appreciation of the work.²⁰⁵ These concurrent ‘developments in James biography and criticism’ provided biofiction with “parents” as

²⁰³ Gordon, *Private Life*, pp.7-9; Novick, pp.xii-xiii; Stevens, ‘Queer Henry’, p.123.

²⁰⁴ Stevens, ‘Queer Henry’, p.122.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p.123.

incompatible as *What Maisie Knew*'s Ida and Beale Farange.²⁰⁶ Jamesian 'biofiction' therefore juxtaposed two competing strategies by which James might be recovered: the intersubjective, which seeks to recapture the essence of the historical writer, and the intertextual, which engages with the performance of identity in the writer's oeuvre.

Given the authors' interest in Bosanquet and Woolson, we might expect them to favour subjective rather than textual recuperation, to be understandably reluctant to 'give up the author on theoretical terms, even as they [are] actively engaged in resurrecting women authors from the archives'.²⁰⁷ Yet while the way in Tennant and Maguire enabled Woolson to 'clamber out of the footnotes and write your own story' presented subjectivity as centralised and recoverable, *Felony* and *The Open Door* also engaged directly with James's previous biographical incarnations in a way that the biographies themselves did not.²⁰⁸ While attempting to reinstate James and Woolson behind the pages of 'The Aspern Papers', they also engaged intertextually with *A Private Life*, and in doing so, revealed as much about Gordon as they did about James.

Of the texts considered here, Maguire's *The Open Door* was the most heavily invested in humanist recovery. *The Open Door*'s intrinsic narrative investment in recuperating Woolson was thrown into higher relief by its status as a posthumous publication, credited with the potential to simultaneously recover both author and subject. Despite borrowing from biography more freely than the other texts considered here, *The Open Door* problematically assumed that its sources were transparent, treating Novick and Gordon's biographies as intermediaries through which the embodied James might be reaccessed, rather than as intertexts to be creatively re-evaluated. *The Open Door* thus favoured the biographical component of its lineage, but was limited by its understanding of biography as essence rather than as text.

²⁰⁶ Saunders, 'Master Narratives', p.123.

²⁰⁷ Rivkin, 'Henry James: C'est Moi', p.4.

²⁰⁸ Heyns, *Typewriter's Tale*, p.131.

Felony was situated more ambiguously between humanist and intertextual modes of recovery. Tennant engaged with a textual James by inhabiting the Preface form, and by refusing to interpret that form as a transparent expression of identity. Yet her adherence to Gordon's view of the Preface as 'a brilliant aesthetic blind to true sources' still insisted on a Jamesian body behind the text, albeit one that was concealed rather than straightforwardly disclosed. This was compounded by Tennant's insistence on reinstating the biographical subjects of James and Woolson behind 'The Aspern Papers' itself, a reading that underemphasised the performativity of the text and elided its textual sources in favour of biographical ones. 'Dictation' explored a similar relationship between the (dictated) text and a prior subjectivity, asking whether the typist might act as a repository for the trace elements of James's embodiment. The interchangeable excerpts were to provide further evidence for that embodiment, representing the 'root' of James and Conrad's 'fertility' (47). Yet by insisting on the irrecoverable nature of those excerpts, Ozick decisively severed the link between text and referent, freeing her to attend to the discursive queerness of the texts in question without demanding a correspondingly gay James. 'Dictation' was thereby allied with the formalist strand of its inheritance, foregrounding the text as a space in which identities are tried out.

The Typewriter's Tale explored the potential for intersubjective recuperation via Frieda Wroth's experiments in 'technologically aided thought transference', which were themselves interpretable as test cases for Bosanquet's postulated contact with a spiritual James (93). While ambiguous, these appeared to dissolve into textuality, summoning uncanny echoes of *The Bostonians* and *The Turn of the Screw* as much as the suggested interlocutor. These echoes were numbered among a multitude of allusions that, taken together, provided the key to James's endurance, not as an embodied person but as an object of intertextual engagement. Allowing James to directly question whether it 'can [...] be said to constitute life, producing oneself at [a spirit medium's] behest' (126), *The*

Typewriter's Tale framed his continued existence as a textual trace as the only form of immortality worth having.

A dichotomy thus emerges between, on the one hand, Tennant and Maguire's texts, which appear to favour intersubjective recovery, and, on the other, Ozick and Heyns's, which prefer the intertextual approach. While extrapolations from so small a sample must be made with caution, it seems that Tennant and Maguire's investment in recuperating the marginalized Woolson is to some degree implicated in their reluctance to restrict subjectivity to an effect of the text. Conversely, Ozick and Heyns appear to be less interested in recuperating Bosanquet than in exploring what the figure of the typist might be able to tell us about James. This leaves them free to confront 'what biofiction knew' – what, I suggest, it has always already known: that the only recoverable subjectivity is that which is played out in the discursive field of James's prose. This dichotomy between humanist and textual recovery continues to inform the differences in approach between David Lodge's *Author, Author* and Colm Tóibín's *The Master*, and to invigorate the parodies of Richard Liebmann-Smith's *The James Boys* and Edwin M. Yoder Jr.'s *Lions at Lamb House*.

Chapter Two: In the House of (Bio)Fiction: James, the Prefaces, and Revision

In the previous chapter, ‘The Henry James Papers’, I argued that the writers of biofiction about James were ambiguously situated between intersubjective and intertextual recovery. This was attributed largely to the emergent developments in James biography and queer formalism in the latter years of the twentieth century. Writers of James’s life, namely Edel, Gordon, Kaplan, and Novick, were largely occupied with what Savoy called the ‘biographical imperative’: ‘the overarching project of establishing a coherent argument for [...] James’s “homosexual identity”’.²⁰⁹ This imperative staked its claim on the existence of a Jamesian body prior to the scene of writing, and frequently viewed James’s writing as the expression of that prior identity rather than as a consciously performative act. Conversely, queer formalists including Savoy, Stevens, and Lane demanded no such sense of a prior identity, viewing James’s writing as ‘the scene of erotic exploration’ and subjectivity as an effect of the text.²¹⁰ The fissures and border tensions in the four works of biofiction under consideration were connected to this divided heritage. The novels also shared a recuperative impulse, a desire, variously expressed, to recover Constance Fenimore Woolson or Theodora Bosanquet, and to establish a more intimate connection between “James’s women” and his texts. In the case of Tennant and Maguire, this led to the favouring of the biographical strand of biofiction’s inheritance, and an associated reluctance to relinquish the (female) author purely at the behest of formalism. The same divided heritage, though perhaps less of the anxiety, is shared by the four works of biofiction under consideration in this chapter. These are Richard Liebmann Smith’s *The James Boys*, David Lodge’s *Author, Author*, Colm Tóibín’s *The Master*, and Edwin M. Yoder Jr.’s *Lions at Lamb House*. While Bosanquet plays a role in Lodge and Yoder’s novels, and Woolson in Lodge, Yoder and Tóibín’s, these are not fictions of recovery in the same way as *Felony* and *The Open*

²⁰⁹ Savoy, ‘*Entre Chien et Loup*’, p.109.

²¹⁰ Stevens, ‘*Queer Henry*’, p.123.

Door. Their subject is, decidedly, James himself, and the writers engage with that subject on an intertextual rather than an intersubjective basis. Like Ozick and Heyns's works, they thus favour the formalist component of their lineage over the biographical.

The previous chapter, then, provided a conceptual framework for biofiction about James by indicating its cross-pollination with critical theory. It indicated biofiction's potential to "speak" to debates that oppose the textuality of the text to the faith that the signifier refers to a recuperable extra-textual signified. This chapter will further theorise biofiction about James by indicating its symbiotic relationship with literary criticism. It will consider how far critical discourse surrounding James, revision, and the Prefaces to the New York Edition provides a useful framework for discussing these biofictions. Indeed, critical discourse on the Prefaces is often deeply embedded in the aforementioned theoretical debates. To give just one example, Hershel Parker outlines how the presence of what James called 'the produced result' thwarted his attempts to "'remount" the stream of time' and reaccess previously lived states.²¹¹ Here, the textuality of the text is judged to form a barrier between the revising James and the extra-textual signified, his past self. This chapter will argue that biofiction offers a mode of entry to James's fiction that is alternative, though in many ways analogous, to that provided by the Prefaces. Like the Prefaces, biofiction ostensibly offers an introduction to James's prose. However, in both cases, aspects of the introduction are only interpretable by readers already familiar with that prose. And even if 'the anticipated new reading is a rereading', biofiction and the Prefaces share a vast potential to govern subsequent encounters with James's work.²¹²

There are also specific resonances between the individual biofictions under consideration and particular aspects of James's Prefaces, resonances that provide a more detailed rationale for my choice of approach. Taken together, these various

²¹¹ Hershel Parker, 'Deconstructing *The Art of the Novel* and Liberating James's Prefaces', *The Henry James Review*, 14 (1993), 284-307 (p.293).

²¹² Armstrong, p.131.

exemplifications of biofiction's heterogeneity have the potential to illuminate multiple facets of the Prefaces. *The James Boys* may be placed in dialogue with one of the Prefaces' most characteristic tropes, the quest to recover the point of origin for the relevant work. My interpretation of Smith's novel is informed by Rowe's work on James's prefatory substitution of 'extemporised scenes of writing' for this point of origin, which invariably proved to be irrecoverable.²¹³ The tension between the narrated scene of writing and the unobtainable, extra-textual germ also resonates with the frame narrative of David Lodge's *Author, Author*. Despite the narrator's stated desire for an extra-textual union with the subject, the frame narrative mediates James's subjectivity in ways that are explicitly textual. *Author, Author* struggles to overcome its own adherence to biographical modes of representation, and to dispel the spectre of James's master-biographer, Leon Edel. The presence of the (biographical) text thus interposes itself between Lodge and the extra-textual subject, just as the 'produced result' obstructed James's own attempt, in the Prefaces, to re-establish contact with his past self.²¹⁴

Lodge also engages explicitly with the Prefaces in his autobiographical essay, 'The Year of Henry James', calling them 'one of the most impressive feats of authorial self-examination in the English language'.²¹⁵ Like Colm Tóibín in the autobiographical 'Becoming Henry James', Lodge uses this essay to furnish his own novel with a Preface of sorts, a celebration of intentionalism in which 'the person best qualified to give an account of a novel's genesis and composition is the author'.²¹⁶ Lodge and Tóibín's decision to inhabit the Prefaces in this way is suggestive of a close engagement with the form, illuminated by the suggestive juxtapositions that this chapter provides. In turning to Tóibín's *The Master*, the chapter will consider those moments that appear to occupy a prefatory relationship to moments in James's work. Like interpretation of the Prefaces

²¹³ Rowe, p.238.

²¹⁴ Henry James, Preface to 'The Author of Beltraffio, The Middle Years, Greville Fane, and Other Tales', in *The Novels and Tales of Henry James*, 24 vols (New York: Scribners, 1907-9), xvi (1909), pp.v-xii (p.ix).

²¹⁵ Lodge, *Year*, p.xi.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*

themselves, interpretation of these moments is contingent on readers' foreknowledge of James's texts. Such moments in *The Master* also evoke the process of "retouching" on which James embarked while preparing his works for the New York Edition. They are interpretable as "revisions" with the potential to affect readers' subsequent encounters with James's "originals", whether by improvement or by diminution. By thus engaging with James's own textual constructions and reconstructions, *The Master* recognises subjectivity as discursively produced, rather than striving for an irrecoverable extra-textual signified.

Whereas Lodge and Tóibín's provision of autobiographical essays is suggestive of an engagement with the Prefaces, *Lions at Lamb House* foregrounds this interest on the level of plot. Freud's imagined visit to Lamb House is prompted by William James's anxieties regarding the rationale for the New York Edition as a whole, while a smaller section of the narrative problematises the Preface to *The Turn of the Screw*. Against the fictional James's claim that *The Turn of the Screw* 'is a fairy tale pure and simple', *Lions at Lamb House* offers a range of critical interpretations of James's novella, ranging from the psychoanalytic, to the Lacanian, to the poststructuralist.²¹⁷ Once again, these interpretations have the potential to shape subsequent readings, or re-readings, of *The Turn of the Screw*. Ultimately, to quote James himself, both criticism on the Prefaces and the biofictions themselves will 'gain in significance' by this 'placing together'.²¹⁸ In demonstrating the cross-pollination between fiction and literary criticism, this chapter will ask not just what the Prefaces can reveal about biofiction, but also what biofiction might reveal about James.

²¹⁷ Edwin M. Yoder Jr., *Lions at Lamb House* (New York: Europa Editions, 2007). Hereafter referenced parenthetically.

²¹⁸ Henry James, quoted in Simon, *Critical Reception*, p.27.

**‘I fail to disinter again the buried germ’: Richard Liebmann Smith’s
The James Boys (2008)**

Though published two years after Lodge’s essay, ‘The Year of Henry James’, Richard Liebmann-Smith’s *The James Boys* might be numbered among those biofictions which, rather than adhering ‘closely to the historical record, as [Lodge] did in *Author, Author*, invent freely, to the point of travesty’.²¹⁹ Subtitled *A Novel Account of Four Desperate Brothers*, the text is inspired by Otis Pease’s assertion that ‘virtually the entire story of nineteenth-century America is encompassed in the saga of the James brothers – William and Henry in the East, Frank and Jesse in the West’.²²⁰ Its conceit is that Henry James’s younger brothers, Garth Wilkinson and Robertson, deserted midway through the Civil War and reinvented themselves as Frank and Jesse James. This ‘sorry saga’, the narrator remarks, ‘no doubt informed the opening pages of the novelist’s late work *The Wings of the Dove*, in which his protagonist, Kate Croy, muses about her own fallen family – including, most tellingly, her “two lost brothers”’ (73).

The novel is most relevant to the themes of the previous chapter when interpreted as a work of mock-recovery. Not only does Smith recreate the ‘rotten fruit’ of the James family as two of America’s most celebrated outlaws (73), he also “discovers” a woman overlooked by history, Elena Hite, who ‘likely served among the real-life models for some of Henry’s most celebrated fictional heroines’ (xv). Although she is killed at the end of the novel, and ‘rubbed out of the history of the James family so thoroughly that for most biographers, it is as if she never lived’ (258), Elena, Smith claims,

lives on in the “bad lecture blood” of Verena Tarrant in *The Bostonians*; in the beauty, intelligence, and independence of Isabel Archer in *The Portrait of a Lady*; in the wealth and iron resolve of Milly Theale in *The Wings of the Dove*; and, of course, in the fatal indiscretions of Daisy Miller. (254)

²¹⁹ Lodge, *Year*, p.9.

²²⁰ Richard Liebmann-Smith, *The James Boys* (New York: Random House, 2008), p.x. Hereafter referenced parenthetically.

By citing Elena's influence over texts chosen from the breadth of James's career, from 'Daisy Miller' near the beginning to *The Wings of the Dove* near the end, Smith echoes Lyndall Gordon's organisation of that career into 'two high waves of creativity', beginning and ending with Minny Temple.²²¹ Smith also repeatedly cites Gordon by name. The way in which he situates his privileging of Elena as a corrective to the elisions of 'most biographers' is therefore interpretable as a nod to Gordon's revisionist agenda, her challenging of 'the myth of the solitary artist' with 'a truer story of [...] collaboration'.²²² Smith's "recovery" of a fictional character also engages ironically with the concerns of previous biofiction authors, namely Tennant and Maguire's attempts to recuperate Constance Fenimore Woolson.

Tennant situated *Felony* as an alternative Preface to 'The Aspern Papers', symbolically undermining the masterly James of the New York Edition with the "revelation" of his biographical sources. In privileging Elena as the "original" for Daisy Miller, Milly Theale, and several intervening heroines, Smith similarly suggests that his novel may be seen as prefatory to any number of James's works. But while Tennant used the Preface as a tool with which to "out" James, Smith engages more closely with the form's signifying tropes, namely its quest for the germ, the *donnée*, the precise moment of literary origin. This reading of *The James Boys* builds on Rowe's assertion that 'James's role as a "reader" of his own work is controlled by his frustrated quest for the "origins" of his own stories, especially as that quest focuses on the concept of the "germ"'.²²³ James admitted to the thwarting of his quest in, for instance, the Preface to 'The Author of Beltraffio' (1909): 'I but see to-day the produced result – I fail to disinter again the buried germ'.²²⁴ In that instance, the presence of the finished work interposes a symbolic barrier between the revising author and the point of origin. For Rowe, James's

²²¹ Gordon, *Private Life*, p.298.

²²² *Ibid.*, p.9.

²²³ Rowe, p.235.

²²⁴ James, 'Preface', p.ix.

failure ‘to discover the germinal origin for the literary work – the point at which it would mark its difference from life and thus justify the author’s identity’ resulted in the substitution of “‘dramatizations” of what must be termed his imaginary “scenes of writing,” extemporised versions of that origin now lost’.²²⁵

The James Boys dramatises an extemporised version of origin for a scene in ‘Daisy Miller’: James, having been abducted by Frank and Jesse, ‘awoke to the call of nature and abandoned his bedroll to relieve himself in the bushes’, only to discover ‘Elena and his outlaw brother going at it buck naked under the stars’ (81-2). Smith, in prefatory mode, suggests that this

may well have supplied the *donnée* for the famous scene [...] in which Winterbourne spies on Daisy’s scandalous assignation with her cicerone in the ruins of the Coliseum – the moment when the narrator prudishly judges her to be “a young lady whom a gentleman need no longer be at pains to respect”. (82)

The suggestion that this scene of bawdy comedy ‘supplied the *donnée*’ for ‘Daisy Miller’s’ climactic tableau ironically emphasises the potential for missteps when James attempted in 1909 to recover the ‘germinal origin’ of a story published in 1878. Smith’s sly ‘may well have’ echoes James’s own admissions of authorial fallibility, those moments wherein ‘blankness overtakes me’.²²⁶ The novel thus uses comedy to dispute James’s mastery, questioning his ability, at so great a chronological remove, to accurately discern the original figures in his own experiential carpet. It also memorably dramatises how, in the words of Vivienne Rundle, ‘the New York Edition prefaces constitute a barrier that interposes James’s own interpretations between reader and text’.²²⁷ Through the anecdotal layering of personal detail, James ‘looks backward from the reader’s experience of a novel to a moment shared by author and text alone: the moment of literary creation’.²²⁸ That this aspect of James’s “self-communing” was to

²²⁵ Rowe, p.238.

²²⁶ James, Preface to ‘The Author of *Beltraffio*’, p.vi.

²²⁷ Vivienne Rundle, ‘Defining Frames: The Prefaces of Henry James and Joseph Conrad’, *The Henry James Review*, 16 (1995), 66-92 (p.70).

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, p.79.

some extent masturbatory is suggested in *The James Boys* by a third party's interpretation of his extemporized scene of origin. Detective Pinkerton 'spotted Henry James standing in the bushes behind the barn with, as the detective later reported back to Chicago, "his generative member in hand, fully exposed"' (83). Pinkerton's misinterpretation of James urinating as James masturbating parallels the previous (mis)connection of the germinal origin for 'Daisy Miller' to the *al fresco* liaison between Jesse James and Elena Hite. In this context, Pinkerton's inability to perceive the truth of the situation is suggestive of James's own inability to recover accurately his original germ.

Armstrong writes that 'what James does to his germs, transforming them beyond recognition, bespeaks the necessary indeterminacy of criticism as a quest for origins'.²²⁹ Since for James, the 'buried germ' was irrecoverable from the 'produced result', the critic similarly cannot hope to deduce the point of origin from the discursive field of the text. The inextricability of the germ from the discourse it inspired undermines Tennant and Maguire's attempts to recover the extra-textual Woolson from the textual construct of 'The Aspern Papers'. For as James wrote of the relation of Isabel Archer to Minny Temple, 'the thing is not a portrait'; he aimed not to represent life but to complete life, to render his subjects 'more rounded, more finished'.²³⁰ This irretrievability of the extra-textual subject from the discursive construct is vividly dramatised in the ending to *The James Boys*. The narrator promises revelations about Elena's subjectivity by reproducing 'the singed leaves of what was to be the final entry in her diary' (258). The pages are, however, peppered with ellipses: a 'scorched segment', a tear, a 'missing page' (259). This decisively severs the link between the text and the signified, as evinced by Elena's final summing-up of 'the James brothers': 'I find them all infinitely fascinating & [illegible]' (261).

²²⁹ Armstrong, p.135.

²³⁰ Henry James to Grace Norton, 28 December 1880. *Henry James Letters*, ed. by Leon Edel, 4 vols (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1974-84), II (1975), pp.322-4 (p.324).

‘Remount[ing] the stream of time’: David Lodge’s *Author, Author*

(2004)

The interplay between the textual and the extra-textual is also central to David Lodge’s *Author, Author*, published in the same year as *The Master* and Alan Hollinghurst’s *The Line of Beauty*. The ‘backbone of [the] novel’ as described by Lodge ‘is Henry James’s friendship with George Du Maurier [...] framed by an account of Henry James’s last illness and death’.²³¹ It charts the trajectory of James’s ill-fated attempt to establish himself as a playwright, which ended with ‘the calamitous first night of Guy Domville’, and juxtaposes this with Du Maurier’s rise.²³² While the framing narrative employs the present tense and an ‘impersonal narrative voice’, Lodge judges the bulk of the novel to utilise a ‘more traditional method’.²³³ This is ‘a past-tense, third-person narrative focalised through the consciousness of my main character’ and unfolded in ‘chronological sequence’.²³⁴ Immediately apparent in Lodge’s description of his narrative technique is the similarity of that technique to the biographer’s. While the focalisation of the narrative through James’s subjectivity is a novelistic strategy, the use of the preterit tense, the third person and a chronological sequence are all common features of biographical discourse. Critics including Vanessa Guignery, Karen Scherzinger, J. Russell Perkin, and Max Saunders drew attention to this ambiguity of genre in *Author, Author*. Guignery judged it to ‘oscillat[e] between the historical novel and biography’:

On the one hand, the book reads like a fascinating story with a range of narrative devices, a play on focalisation, strategies of suspense and the choice of one central

²³¹ Lodge, *Year*, p.13.

²³² Ibid.

²³³ Ibid., p.53.

²³⁴ Ibid., pp.53-4.

and dramatic episode, but on the other it is a selective and chronological biography of Henry James which contains very few invented episodes.²³⁵

Lodge's chronological emphasis is apparent in his decision to incorporate 'the whole history of [James's] five year campaign to establish himself as a playwright'.²³⁶ While Lodge hoped that this would enable readers to 'better apprehend the pain he suffered at the disastrous first night of *Guy Domville*', his desire to be comprehensive resulted in the novel being criticized for 'a surfeit of detail'.²³⁷ When compared to Colm Tóibín's psychological novel *The Master*, Lodge's 'practice' seemed even 'closer to that of the biographer', closer, in Saunders's opinion, to that 'depraved literary biographer' than to 'the novelist'.²³⁸

These critics were not, it appears, convinced by the paratextual material to *Author, Author*, in which Lodge energetically defends the generic distinction between the novel and the biography. This material includes a brief preface, which recalls James's own prefatory attempts to circumvent his texts' 'possible contamination by misreading'.²³⁹ Lodge writes that 'this book is a novel, and structured like a novel. It begins at the end of the story, or near the end, and then goes back to the beginning, and works its way to the middle, and then rejoins the end, which is where it begins...' (AA, n.pag). To stress *Author, Author*'s distinctness from the cradle-to-grave biography, Lodge confuses its narrative structure; his text might be described more accurately as "essentially chronological, but for the frame narrative". Lodge's grounds for distinction also imply a somewhat restrictive view of conventional biography. There are, as Guignery points out, 'several examples of original biographies that do not proceed

²³⁵ Vanessa Guignery, 'David Lodge's *Author, Author* and the Genre of the Biographical Novel', *Etudes Anglaises*, 60 (2007), 160-72 (p.160); Karen Scherzinger, 'Staging the Author: Representing the Author in Colm Tóibín's *The Master* and David Lodge's *Author, Author! A Novel*', *The Henry James Review*, 29 (2008), 181-96 (p.183); J. Russell Perkin, 'Imagining Henry James as a Fictional Character in Colm Tóibín's *The Master* and David Lodge's *Author, Author*', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 33 (2010), 114-30 (p.118); Saunders, p.6.

²³⁶ Lodge, *Year*, p.54.

²³⁷ Ibid.; Scherzinger, p.183.

²³⁸ Perkin, p.118; Saunders, p.6.

²³⁹ Rundle, p.70.

linearly from A to Z', but rather, as Edel proposed, 'move forward and backward [...] as Proust moved among his memories and associations'.²⁴⁰ Similarly problematic is Lodge's attempt to distinguish fiction from biography in terms of its treatment of 'facts'. In 'The Year of Henry James', he states that 'in historical writing every discrete, documented fact about the subject has a certain value, but in fiction 'facts' are redundant if they do not have a literary function'.²⁴¹ But the inclusion of 'every discrete, documented fact' would, as Edel warned, result in the biographer being 'engulfed by [his] data', flinging 'a card index [...] into the face of the public' instead of a life.²⁴² Lodge chooses not to acknowledge the way in which biographies of James since Edel's one-volume digest have been increasingly sparing with what Woolf called the 'granite' of fact, striving for the better illumination of 'the person to whom things happened'.²⁴³

Lodge's 'anxiety that the novel should not read like a biography' is imbricated with the type of intimacy he desires with his subject: an intimacy that is unmediated and extra-textual.²⁴⁴ This desire for intimacy is evident in his reaction to the substitution of a proper noun in an edited extract from *Author, Author*. 'Why oh why', he asked the unhappy *Guardian* editor, 'did you change 'Henry' to 'James' without consulting me? It makes the discourse sound like biography, which was just the effect I was trying to avoid'.²⁴⁵ He adds that the 'intimacy and familiarity of 'Henry' is appropriate to the fictional focusing of the narrative through HJ's consciousness'.²⁴⁶ What turned out to be over-zealous use of the style book interposed a biographical arm's-length between Lodge and his subject, in contrast to the 'intimacy' of 'Henry' or the 'familiarity' – James might have called it over-familiarity – of 'HJ'. This is a stark contrast to the

²⁴⁰ Guignery, p.165; Leon Edel, *Literary Biography* (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1973), p.xvi.

²⁴¹ Lodge, *Year*, p.30.

²⁴² Edel, *Literary Biography*, p.xiii.

²⁴³ See Virginia Woolf, 'The New Biography' [1927], in *Granite and Rainbow* (London: Hogarth, 1960), pp.149-55 (p.149). Hereafter referenced parenthetically.

²⁴⁴ Lodge, *Year*, p.50.

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p.82.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

desired extra-textual union outlined in the frame narrative to *Author, Author*. There,

Lodge describes

a fantasy of somehow time-traveling back to that afternoon of late February 1916, creeping into the master bedroom of Flat 21, Carlyle Mansion, casting a spell on the little group of weary watchers at the bedside, pulling up a chair oneself, and saying a few reassuring words to HJ, before he departs this world, about his literary future. (375)

In expressing a desire to reassure ‘HJ’ ‘about his literary future’, Lodge conflates the extra-textual subject with the implied author of the novels, defined by Nehamas as the ‘creature of the text’, ‘the product of the writer’ and a being ‘close to a fictional character’.²⁴⁷ In other words, he conflates ‘HJ’ with ‘James’. It is, of course, not ‘HJ’ but ‘James’ who ‘after a few decades of relative obscurity would become an established classic’ (375). In thus assuring ‘HJ’ that he would become ‘essential reading for anyone interested in modern English and American literature’ (375), Lodge paradoxically suggests that the extra-textual subject is capable of being “read”. He goes on to provide a litany of the texts that would appear after the author’s death: the ‘innumerable postgraduate theses and scholarly articles and books (and of course biographies – but it wouldn’t be tactful to mention them [...]’ (375). It is, I contend, this evidence of the textuality of the subject that raises a barrier between Lodge and the extra-textual ‘HJ’. What he desires, in the manner of Woolf in ‘Sketch of the Past’, is to ‘fit a plug into the wall’ and ‘turn up’ February 1916.²⁴⁸ Yet what he encounters, is ‘a textuality that is the historical condition of every act of expression and representation’.²⁴⁹

Evidence for this argument is abundantly provided by the framing narrative to *Author, Author*. While apparently striving for unmediated access, the framing narrative

²⁴⁷ Alexander Nehamas, ‘Writer, Text, Work, Author’, in *Literature and the Question of Philosophy*, ed. by Anthony J. Cascardi (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), pp.267-91, repr. in *The Death and Resurrection of the Author?*, ed. by Irwin, pp.95-115 (p.100).

²⁴⁸ Virginia Woolf, ‘Sketch of the Past’, in *Moments of Being: Autobiographical Writings*, ed. by Jeanne Schulkind (London: Pimlico, 2002), pp. 78-160 (p.81). Hereafter referenced parenthetically.

²⁴⁹ Rowe, p.234.

negotiates James's subjectivity in ways that are conspicuously textual. The novel opens with a summative mode of address:

[...] The author is seventy-two. He has had an interesting and varied life, written many books, traveled widely, enjoyed the arts, moved in society (one winter he dined out 107 times), and owns a charming old house in Rye as well as the lease of this spacious London flat with its fine view of the Thames. (3)

The narrator advances a litany of outward particulars from which the figure of 'the author' vanishes entirely. The co-ordinate clauses accrue unspecific information about that author's life, culminating in the parenthetical interpolation of one of the most frequently quoted anecdotes about James's first London season. Like the Edwardian novelist travestied in 'Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown' (1924), he then gives us Carlyle Mansions and Lamb House in lieu of the person who lives there.²⁵⁰ Lodge continues his textual mediation of the subject via the use of quotation, the biographical lightning sketch, and the epithet. As the signatory of a telegram,

The name of H. G. Wells draws a frown – the wound inflicted by his *Boon*, a satirical jeu d'esprit published earlier that year, with its cruel caricature of HJ's late style ('*It is a magnificent but painful hippopotamus resolved at any cost, even at the cost of its dignity, upon picking up a pea which has got into a corner of its den*'), has not healed. (32)

In order to incorporate the quotation, Lodge also interposes three sub-clauses into the simple sentence "the wound inflicted by his *Boon* has not healed". This is a syntax that, like James's unpunctual Lionel Croy, '[keeps] us unconscionably'.²⁵¹ The quotation from Wells, like those from Shakespeare in Tom Stoppard's screenplay *Shakespeare in Love*, delivers a 'jolt [...] of genius, heady and rich, that tend[s] to dull the surrounding prose'.²⁵² In short, the discourse risks being hijacked by a stronger voice, turned into a vehicle for Wells's satire.

²⁵⁰ Virginia Woolf, 'Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown', in *Collected Essays*, ed. by Leonard Woolf, 4 vols (London: Hogarth, 1966-7), II (1966), pp.319-37 (p.30): 'he is trying to hypnotise us into the belief that, because he has made a house, there must be a person living there'.

²⁵¹ James, *Wings*, p.21.

²⁵² Emma French, *Selling Shakespeare to Hollywood: The Marketing of Filmed Shakespeare Adaptations from 1989 Into the New Millennium* (Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press, 2006), p.148.

Lodge makes liberal use of the biographical lightning sketch: James's valet, Burgess Noakes, 'was barely an inch over five feet, but muscular and well-proportioned, an amateur boxer who had once been Sussex bantamweight champion' (8). Similarly, housemaid Minnie Kidd 'was a buxom, pleasant-featured young woman of thirty-three, and stood a head taller than Burgess Noakes, much to her regret' (8). We might recall Lodge's assertion that, contra biography, 'in fiction 'facts' are redundant if they do not have a literary function', and enquire as to the potential function of Kidd's age or Noakes's boxing career.²⁵³ Since these details do not have a demonstrable relevance to the narrative, except as local colour, then perhaps they are included because they 'possess a certain value' as 'discrete, documented facts', identifying the discourse more closely with 'historical writing' as Lodge defines it.²⁵⁴ Lodge's use of epithets is also something of a generic anachronism in fictional writing, in which "show, don't tell" is the prevalent injunction:

Edmund Gosse, versatile man of letters, poet, critic, essayist, translator, recently retired Librarian to the House of Lords, who had known Henry James for thirty-five years, calls as arranged, a little after ten the next morning. (31)

As Guignery writes, 'such an enumeration certainly belongs more to the biographical genre than the novelistic one'; in fiction it might be dismissed uncharitably as falling under the broader category of "information dumping".²⁵⁵ Guignery considers whether this litany might also 'testif[y] to a pedagogic concern and an attentive care for the general reader'.²⁵⁶ However, it seems that "versatile man of letters, who had known Henry James for thirty-five years" would serve sufficiently to orient the reader, while interposing only two sub-clauses, rather than seven, between subject and main verb. The danger of so great an accretion of nouns is that they cease to be individually representative; the reader sees the signifier rather than the thing described. Along with

²⁵³ Lodge, *Year*, p.30.

²⁵⁴ Ibid.

²⁵⁵ Guignery, p.167.

²⁵⁶ Ibid.

Lodge's use of quotation and "pen portraits", these epithets draw attention to the textual surface at the expense of the extra-textual signified.

Having outlined some of the literary features by which Lodge paradoxically emphasises the textuality of the subject, I shall now explore the distancing strategies by which he ironically imposes further barriers between himself and 'HJ'. These include the use of authorial interpolation and explanation, the biographical flashback pioneered by Edel, and the use of foreshadow and dramatic irony. Having learned that his employer is experiencing an attack of 'gastric' problems, Noakes states darkly that 'All that Fletcherising done it' (8). This prompts the narratorial explanation that 'Ten years earlier Henry James had been converted to the teachings of the American dietician Dr Horace Fletcher, who recommended that every mouthful of food should be chewed and masticated until it was reduced to liquid before being swallowed' (8). This explanatory digression dilutes the urgency of the revelation that 'Mr James 'as been took bad' (7). The effect is compounded when the narrative flashes back from the extremity of James's illness to a scene of Fletcher and James lunching together at Lamb House, 'a solemn ritual in which priest and acolyte vied with each other for merit' (8). As was the case with Edel's use of the biographical flashback, his own 'distinct innovation', 'the point of view [...] becomes more panoramic'.²⁵⁷ Yet while the panoramic might be an appropriate angle for the seventy-two-year sweep of *Henry James: A Life*, Lodge's representation of James's last illness strives towards the extreme close-up shot, as evinced by his stated desire to 'pull up a chair' at HJ's bedside (376). In this context, the flashback to an incongruously comedic scene disrupts the established angle of vision, interposing Lodge's contextual knowledge between the reader and the subject.

Lodge's use of foreshadow, or "flash-forward", parallels and compounds his use of flashback, and is another narrative strategy employed in *Henry James: A Life*. Lodge

²⁵⁷ Adeline R. Tintner, 'Biography and the Scholar: The Life of Henry James', in *Essaying Biography: A Celebration for Leon Edel*, ed. by Gloria G. Fromm and Leon Edel (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii, 1987), pp.21-35 (pp.33-4).

writes that in October 1915, ‘Henry James went down to Rye for what proved to be the last time’ (5), and that ‘on the first day of December he finished a letter to his niece, Peggy, in America, with the phrase, ‘the pen drops from my hand’ – a purely rhetorical flourish, since the letter was dictated – but, as it turned out, a prophetic one’ (10). Those who are familiar with the facts of James’s life will recall that he would shortly, in his own words, suffer a paralytic stroke ‘in the most approved fashion’; those unfamiliar must wait a page or two for Lodge’s revelation.²⁵⁸ Lodge’s heavy use of dramatic irony precludes the reader’s full immersion in the narrative as it unfolds scene-by-scene. These authorial “little-did-he-knows” privilege Lodge’s retrospective knowledge, an effect which is once again at odds with his desired intimacy with the subject. They would not appear out-of-place in Edel’s biography, alongside such sentences as ‘James did not know it that September in Paris, but he had found the plot for one of his most amusing “international” comedies’.²⁵⁹

As though to defend himself against these alleged similarities with Edel, and with biographical discourse, Lodge attempts to rout James’s master-biographer in the closing half of his frame narrative. Contemplating the conclusion of James’s essay ‘Is There a Life After Death?’ (1910), he writes that

Leon Edel, who made himself the world’s greatest authority on the life and work of Henry James, summarises the essay, in his monumental biography, as follows: *If one meant physical life, he believed there was none. Death was absolute. What lived beyond death was what the creative consciousness had found and made: and only if enshrined in enduring form.*

Actually, that was not quite what Henry James said. It was what you might expect him to say on the subject, if you were a convinced materialist and a professor of literature, but it is not what he in fact said. (380)

Lodge suggests that Edel’s role as a critic (and a materialist critic at that) imposes restrictions on his intimacy with James. Implicitly, Edel’s scholarly preconceptions of ‘what [he] might expect [James] to say’ raise interpretative barriers between himself and his subject. Against this suggested misreading, Lodge opposes the novelist’s ability to

²⁵⁸ Leon Edel, ‘The Deathbed Notes of Henry James’, *The Atlantic Monthly*, 221 (1968), 103-5.

²⁵⁹ Edel, *Henry James: A Life*, p.212.

reconstruct ‘what Henry James [...] in fact said’. Lodge’s claim to privileged access of James’s “actual” meaning is rooted in a new interpretative model based around the illusion of contact between his physical body and James’s textual body. He writes that James’s prose ‘is a fine-spun web’, and that ‘you have to negotiate the web, spread yourself over it, experience it, to get the meaning’ (380). Each comma denotes an advancement in intimacy, culminating in interpretative enlightenment as the reader climactically ‘get[s] the meaning’. This notion of reading James with the body recalls Lodge’s suggestive description of his visit to Lamb House, during which he ‘slept in Henry James’s bedroom [...] when *Author, Author* was just a gleam in my eye’.²⁶⁰

Lodge’s sensual reading of James is used to marginalize Edel, whose summary of the essay is judged to demonstrate insufficient readerly abandon. ‘Stand back from the web’, Lodge warns, ‘and you can hardly trace its structure, its threads are so fine; try to condense it, and you risk destroying it’ (380). As Scherzinger points out, Lodge’s emphasis on the ‘fine slippage’ between Edel’s paraphrase and what ‘Henry James [...] in fact said’ ‘reverberates ironically with Lodge’s own reconstructions’.²⁶¹ For in seeming defiance of these injunctions, Lodge then himself paraphrases the conclusion of James’s essay: that death should be seen as ‘the portal to an extension, not an extinction of consciousness’ (381). This reinterpretation enables Lodge to circumvent Edel’s assertion that ‘death was absolute’, in favour of ‘a different and more pleasing’ fantasy:

The spirit of Henry James existing out there somewhere in the cosmos, knowing everything I wished he could know before he died, observing with justifiable satisfaction the way his reputation developed after his death, totting up the sales figures, reading the critiques, watching the films and the television serials on some celestial video player or DVD laptop, and listening to the babble of our conversation about him and his work, swelling through the ether like a prolonged ovation. (382)

²⁶⁰ Lodge, *Year*, p.18.

²⁶¹ Scherzinger, p.192.

The problem with this fantasy is that it risks ‘confusing cause (the biographical James who writes) with effect (the James who is an effect of our reading)’.²⁶² For ‘the critiques’ are of the implied author; ‘the films and television serials’ are adaptations of that implied author’s work. Lodge paradoxically attempts to reconnect these to ‘the spirit of Henry James’, a ghostly trace of the extra-textual subject he so palpably desires. The irony, then, is that the only extant version of the subject is in the form of text; access to the embodied writer is an impossible fantasy. Lodge’s attempts at unmediated access in the former half of the frame narrative were thwarted by his use of narrative techniques and distancing strategies more appropriate to biography than fiction. Similarly, his vision of ‘Henry James existing out there somewhere in the cosmos’ is summoned through intertextual dialogue with Leon Edel, confirming the textuality of the subject even at his most ethereal.

Lodge’s position might fruitfully be compared to that of the revising James, on the grounds that both James’s Prefaces and *Author, Author* emerged from acts of re-reading. While James re-read his own oeuvre, Lodge returned to Edel’s ‘indispensable biography’, supplementing this with ‘Leonee Ormond’s comprehensive and lavishly illustrated biography, *George Du Maurier* (1969)’.²⁶³ Though Lodge’s bibliography spans a further two pages, these texts were central to his project, ‘basic sources’ from which he ‘worked outwards [...] in all directions’.²⁶⁴ It is, I argue, *Author, Author*’s foundation in biographical discourse that caused the generic ambiguity previously noted, and which emphasised that unmediated access to the extra-textual subject could only ever be a ‘self-indulgent fantasy’ (376). Just as Lodge dreamed of ‘time-traveling back to that afternoon of late-February 1916’ (375), James in the Prefaces was interested in whether ‘an actively responsive and preferably pen-in-hand rereading of an earlier work’

²⁶² Stevens, ‘Queer Henry’, p.121.

²⁶³ Lodge, *Year*, p.28.

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p.28.

might enable him to ‘live back into a forgotten state’.²⁶⁵ But like Lodge, he discovered that forgotten state to be extant only in the form of its textual representation, the published work. This is supported by Rowe’s previously cited reading of the Prefaces as ‘extemporized versions’ of lost origin, and Jacob Stougaard-Nielsen’s view of how James eventually ‘deconstruct[ed] a mode of reading that would allow for any unmediated access [...] to his past self’.²⁶⁶ This was because, again like Lodge, the revising James successfully reaccessed only the implied author, ‘a construct inferred from the text’, as opposed to ‘the living, breathing author who held pen and book in hand’.²⁶⁷ Ultimately, this allows *Author, Author* and James’s Prefaces to emerge as parallel intertextual constructs, rather than devices by which either writer might ‘fit a plug into the wall and listen in to the past’.²⁶⁸

‘Simultaneously anticipatory and retrospective’: Colm Tóibín’s *The Master* (2004)

Discourses surrounding the revising, Preface-writing James of the New York Edition also open up new interpretations of Colm Tóibín’s *The Master* (2004). As indicated in ‘The Year of Henry James’, there is considerable narrative overlap between Lodge’s novel and Tóibín’s, which begins on the opening night of *Guy Domville* and encompasses a five-year period ending in 1900.²⁶⁹ For Lodge, the failure of *Guy Domville* was integral to the Major Phase, prompting James to abandon the theatre and ‘apply to prose narrative the method he had used in developing his ideas for plays’ (AA

²⁶⁵ Millgate, p.84.

²⁶⁶ Rowe, p.238; Jakob Stougaard-Nielsen, ‘Frontispieces and Other Ruins: Portraits of the Author in Henry James’s New York Edition’, *The Henry James Review*, 28 (2007), 140-58 (p.155).

²⁶⁷ Rundle, p.73.

²⁶⁸ Woolf, ‘Sketch’, p.81.

²⁶⁹ Lodge writes that ‘The first half of my main story leads up the first night of *Guy Domville*, and the second half corresponds almost exactly to the chronological span of *The Master*’. See *Year*, p.13.

283). Tóibín, by contrast, downplays the importance of James's theatrical venture in favour of his accretion, across the five years covered by *The Master*, of 'the images and figures that would constitute the three masterpieces he was gathering all his strength to write'.²⁷⁰ *The Master* moves fluidly between the narrative present and James's past, allowing Tóibín to demonstrate that 'for James, as for most artists, personal experience was the bank from which some of his images were borrowed'.²⁷¹ Critics including Eibhear Walshe, Ágnes Kovács and Laura Savu have interpreted Tóibín's associative narrative as suggesting a direct relationship between the emergence of James's late style and his lifelong tendency to repress.²⁷² Walshe writes that 'it is suggested that his art profited by his suppression of his own sexuality', while Kovács argues that 'the Master is born because of personal and professional anxieties that trigger his new way of writing', anxieties which eddy around 'James's unresolved sexual identity'.²⁷³ For Savu, James's 'literary mastery' was contingent on his self-mastery, requiring him to 'accept [...] the renunciations exacted by the creative life' and to 'subsume [...] fantasy within work'.²⁷⁴ Finally, Eric Savoy argues that 'the point' of *The Master* 'is to articulate the particular modes and functions of James's closet, and to reconstruct the inner life within that closet that emerged in his work'.²⁷⁵

There are, of course, exceptions to this mode of reading: Daniel Hannah attends to how Tóibín 'refract[s] and reinterpret[s] the potentially homophobic trope of the

²⁷⁰ Colm Tóibín, 'A More Elaborate Web: Becoming Henry James', *The Henry James Review*, 30 (2009), 227-36 (p.236).

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p.235.

²⁷² Thurschwell similarly notes that 'authors who fictionalize James, like the biographical critics whose work they draw on [...] often dramatize a direct relationship between James's renunciation of desire [...] and his single-minded devotion to his work'. See 'The Typist's Remains', p.3.

²⁷³ Eibhear Walshe, "'A Different Story to Tell": The Historical Novel in Contemporary Irish Lesbian and Gay Writing', in *Facing the Other: Interdisciplinary Studies on Race, Gender and Social Justice in Ireland*, ed. by Borbala Farago and Moynagh Sullivan (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2008), pp.137-50 (p.148); Ágnes Zsófia Kovács, 'Recanonizing Henry James: Colm Tóibín's *The Master*', *Americana* 3 (2007) <<http://americanajournal.hu.vol3no1/kazs>>[accessed 13 October 2012].

²⁷⁴ Savu, p.178.

²⁷⁵ Savoy, '*Entre Chien et Loup*', p.116.

closet and “outing”, while Saunders inverts the relationship between repression and creativity by emphasising how, in *The Master*, ‘the fiction transforms the life’.²⁷⁶ Yet the prevalent critical interest in *The Master*’s queerness has meant that its intertextuality has largely been under-represented. By placing Tóibín’s novel in explicit dialogue with James’s own work, this section will open up productive re-readings of both. Building on a suggestive article on *The Master* by Scherzinger, and on work on the New York Edition by Armstrong and others, it will explore how moments in Tóibín’s writing might occupy a prefatory relationship to moments in James’s. This symbolic inversion of linear temporality will allow Tóibín’s treatment of his subject’s past to be reinterpreted. Where previous critics have mined such scenes for their representation of withholding and sublimation, I will attend to the fictional James’s *literary* relationship to the past. In one such moment, I will suggest that Tóibín catches James both in the act of remembering, and in the act of revising, subjecting the “text” of his own past to creative reinterpretation.

There is in *The Master* a two-page passage that is illustrative of the complexity with which Tóibín mediates James’s personal experience. The passage is taken from the fifth chapter, set in May 1896, in which James, longing for a permanent home in Rye, recalls his nomadic adolescence on the continent:

In the time they lived in Boulogne, Henry walked with his father on the beach. On one of those occasions, it was a windless and calm day, the beginning of summer, with a long sandy expanse and a wide sweep of sea. They had been to a café with large clear windows and a floor sprinkled with bran in a manner that gave it for Henry something of the charm of a circus. It was empty save for an old gentleman who picked his teeth with great facial contortions and another gentleman who soaked his buttered rolls in his coffee, to Henry’s fascinated pleasure, and then disposed of them in the little interval between his nose and his chin. Henry did not wish to leave, but his father wanted his daily walk on the beach and thus he had to abandon his delight in observing the eating habits of the French.

[...]

There was a woman bathing, a young woman being watched by an older woman on the beach. The bather was large, perhaps even overweight, and well protected from the elements by an elaborate costume. She swam out expertly, allowing herself to float back with the waves. Then she stood facing out to sea letting her

²⁷⁶ Daniel Hannah, ‘The Private Life, the Public Stage: Henry James in Recent Fiction’, *Journal of Modern Literature*, 30 (2007), 70-94 (p.73); Saunders, p.6.

hands play with the water. Henry barely noticed her at first as his father stopped and made as though to examine something on the far horizon. Then his father walked forward for awhile, silently, distracted, and turned back to study the horizon once more. This time Henry realised that he was watching the bather, examining her fiercely and hungrily and then turning away, observing the low dunes behind him, pretending that they also interested him to the same intense degree. [...] (85-6)

This passage operates on two different levels, for two distinct audiences. Tóibín states that *The Master* had to appeal to ‘someone who has never read a word of James and who knows nothing about him’.²⁷⁷ To such a reader, the passage describes an isolated incident in the subject’s boyhood, one of many determinants over his adult sexuality. The full weight of its meaning depends on ‘our ability to recognise an idea or a situation as the germ of a later story’, and, as such, is interpretable only by those familiar with James’s work.²⁷⁸ To these readers, it strongly recalls those sections of *What Maisie Knew* that concern the aftermath of Sir Claude’s flight with his stepdaughter to Boulogne. The ambiguity of *The Master’s* intended audience parallels that of the Prefaces, which refuse to specify whether the encounter they anticipate is a first reading or a re-reading. Like readers who encounter the Preface before the text it precedes, readers who come to *The Master* without foreknowledge of *What Maisie Knew* find themselves ‘asked to share recollections about [a] work [...] towards which they still need to have their expectations oriented’.²⁷⁹ Such readers may interpret this passage simply as a representation of what Tóibín calls ‘sexual almostness’, overlooking the intertextual reference.²⁸⁰ Conversely, the Prefaces and *The Master* still require of those readers familiar with the relevant text ‘a temporally double structure [of consciousness] which looks ahead and back in time’.²⁸¹ The ‘simultaneously anticipatory and retrospective’ reading demanded by the Prefaces, the doubled gaze that encompasses a

²⁷⁷ Dave Weich, ‘Turning Back the Century with Colm Tóibín’, *Powells.com Author Interviews*, 2 June 2004 <<http://www.powells.com/authors/Toibin.html>> [accessed 15 May 2011].

²⁷⁸ Saunders, p.6.

²⁷⁹ Armstrong, p.131.

²⁸⁰ Tóibín, ‘A More Elaborate Web’, p.233.

²⁸¹ Armstrong, p.131.

previous reading as well as an imagined one, is replicated by this section of *The Master*. For both texts, interpretation is contingent on readers' prior knowledge of James.²⁸²

Literary criticism of *The Master* differs widely in its constructions of Tóibín's readership. Anders Olsson writes that 'collaboration between the author's guidance and the reader's foreknowledge by means of a common frame of reference creates recognition: a recognition of a literary past reached by memories of previous readings'.²⁸³ This presupposes familiarity with James's texts, failing to account for those readers whose first encounter with James is through *The Master*. The inverse is true of J. Russell Perkin's assessment, which "outs" Tóibín for the presumed benefit of those novice Jamesians: 'Tóibín bases an incident in which the young Henry walks with his father on a beach in France [...] on a scene in *What Maisie Knew*, which he shamelessly appropriates for his own purpose'.²⁸⁴ Perkin's revelation is, however, undermined: Tóibín spelled out the origins of his passage in an article which appeared in *The Henry James Review* four years before the publication of Perkin's. Tóibín wrote that 'alert readers will know that before I began to write, I crossed the room and searched for a book. It was, of course, *What Maisie Knew*, which has a long passage set in Boulogne sur Mer'.²⁸⁵ This, incidentally, presupposes a readership of sharp-eyed Jamesians, which necessarily excludes the previously projected reader 'who's never read a word of James and who knows nothing about him'.

Having named *What Maisie Knew* as his source, Tóibín also reproduces the passage in question:

After they were seated it was different: the place was not below the hotel, but further along the quay; with wide, clear windows and a floor sprinkled with bran in a manner that gave it for Maisie something of the added charm of a circus. They had pretty much to themselves the painted spaces and red plush benches;

²⁸² Ibid.

²⁸³ Anders Olsson, 'The Broken Place: Memory, Language, Tradition, and Storytelling in Colm Tóibín's Texts', in *Recovering Memory: Irish Representations of Past and Present*, ed. by Hedda Friberg-Harnesk, Irene Nordin Gilseman, and Lene Pedersen Yding (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2007), pp.128-48 (p.141).

²⁸⁴ Perkin, p.126.

²⁸⁵ Tóibín, 'A More Elaborate Web', p.235.

these were shared by a few scattered gentlemen who picked teeth, with facial contortions, behind little bare tables, and an old personage in particular, a very old personage with a red ribbon in his buttonhole, whose manner of soaking buttered rolls in coffee and then disposing of them in the little that was left in the interval between his nose and his chin might at a less anxious hour have cast upon Maisie an almost envious spell.²⁸⁶

Tóibín's reproduction of this passage enables him to lay bare his sources, but in such a way as to question the integrity of James's art. James's description of the café is reproduced almost exactly in *The Master*, only with 'Henry' being substituted for 'Maisie'. Tóibín also cites an earlier moment in *What Maisie Knew* in which Sir Claude, 'with a kind of absent gaze...followed the fine stride and shining limbs of a young fishwife who had just waded out of the sea with her basketful of shrimps. His thoughts came back to [Maisie] sooner than his eyes'.²⁸⁷ This is incorporated into the same scene in *The Master*: Henry and his father leave the café, whereupon they see the young woman swimming. By lifting the details of café, patron, and woman from James's text and inserting them into his own, Tóibín suggests an entirely biographical basis for this moment in James's work.

It transpires that this is not entirely unfounded: Tóibín in his essay describes his discovery of a letter from Henry James Senior, paraphrased in Sheldon Novick's *The Young Master*. The letter contained details of a walk 'near the beach, Father talking as usual, his eyes following a young fisherwoman as with fine stride and shining limbs she waded from the sea with her basketful of glistening black shrimps'.²⁸⁸ Tóibín claims to have produced his own passage in response to James's 'astonishing' use of this biographical detail.²⁸⁹ By demonstrating the recurrence of the image across three different contexts, the letter, *What Maisie Knew*, and *The Master*, Tóibín purports to illuminate James's habit of 'merging the deeply personal with the imagined'.²⁹⁰ Yet it

²⁸⁶ Henry James, *What Maisie Knew*, in *Novels, 1896-1899* (New York: Library of America, 2003), p.622. Quoted by Colm Tóibín in 'A More Elaborate Web', p.235.

²⁸⁷ Tóibín, 'A More Elaborate Web', p.235.

²⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p.233.

²⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.235.

seems that the personal and the imagined are only permitted to combine if *The Master* is removed from the equation. This leaves the personal detail of Henry James Senior's voyeurism, which his son merges with the imagined café, bran-floor, and coffee-drinking patron to create a fictional narrative. The reinstatement of *The Master* has the inverse effect, rendering James's imagination surplus to requirements. Tóibín appropriates all of the details from the passage in *What Maisie Knew* and translates them, with little mediation, back into James's life.

This contrasts sharply with the way in which Tóibín offers James a broad range of potential sources for *The Turn of the Screw*, forming a densely woven pattern of influence wherein origin is difficult to define. These sources range from 'the ghost story told to [James] [...] by the Archbishop of Canterbury' to James's own memories of his relationship with his sister, whose name 'he found he was about to use [...] in place of Flora' (50). Further influences include the Wilde children, whose father, like Peter Quint, is 'a ghostly memory, standing smiling at them on the bare half-lit landing' (78), and the unattended child at Dublin Castle, frequently discovered within earshot of 'words or insinuations she should not have to hear' (34). Tóibín refuses to impose a hierarchy of influence, wherein a specific child or pair of children provides the catalyst for James's writing. Instead, James is permitted to synthesise multiple influences ranging from the anecdotal, to the personal, to the contextual. This tallies with Tóibín's definition of 'All a Novelist Needs': 'nothing exact or precise, no character to be based on an actual person, but a configuration [...] a set of shadowy relations that the writer can begin to put substance on'.²⁹¹ Tóibín's emphasis on his subject's artistic synthesis is also true to the prevalent accent of James's Prefaces. Here, too, 'emphasis is placed on

²⁹¹ Colm Tóibín, 'All a Novelist Needs', in *All a Novelist Needs: Colm Tóibín on Henry James*, ed. by Susan M. Griffin (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), pp.107-12 (p.110).

that process of composition which transforms the “welter of impression” into the form of art by means of the “magic” of the creative imagination’.²⁹²

Conversely, the relation of *The Master* to *What Maisie Knew* takes the form of the kind of Preface James was at pains to avoid. As was also the case with Tennant and ‘The Aspern Papers’, Tóibín’s emphasis on biographical inspiration provides ‘too clear and straightforward an introduction’ to *What Maisie Knew*, and as such ‘might diminish rather than enhance attention directed towards the text’.²⁹³ For what Armstrong writes of the Prefaces is as true of *The Master*: ‘what we see through [it] is not only James’s past but also the work of fiction we will read differently as a result of what we learn’.²⁹⁴ It is therefore possible to interpret *The Master* as Rundle has interpreted the Prefaces, as ‘a Derridean supplement’ that ‘completes the novel it accompanies’.²⁹⁵ Rundle adds that ‘since James’s own prefatory readings direct the interpretation of the text, the preface displaces the novel, substituting James’s version of the novel for the text itself’.²⁹⁶ The Boulogne passage of *The Master* is similarly directive of readerly interpretations of a moment in *What Maisie Knew*, and thus might be judged to substitute Tóibín’s version of the novel for James’s own. For first readers, there is the danger that Tóibín’s (biographical) interpretation will become definitive. Those familiar with James experience *The Master* as a form of revision, after which the relevant passage in *What Maisie Knew* is irrecoverably altered. In returning to James’s original, Tóibín’s alterations are invisibly appended as a cluster of textual traces. This echoes the way in which readers familiar with, say, the New York Edition of *The Portrait of a Lady* are

²⁹² Rowe, p.233.

²⁹³ Armstrong, p.127.

²⁹⁴ Ibid., p.131.

²⁹⁵ Rundle, p.72.

²⁹⁶ Ibid.

unable to read the 1881 text without mentally adding ‘Ah but, Isabel – *adored!*’ to Ralph Touchett’s assurance that ‘if you have been hated, you have also been loved’.²⁹⁷

For Scherzinger, such layers of interconnection produce ‘an acute reversal of temporality’, and this is paralleled by the inverted temporality noted by Rowe in James’s Preface to *The American*.²⁹⁸ The Preface details how James discovered the germ for that work while riding in his ‘American horse-car’, prompting readers to recall ‘Christopher Newman’s description of his revealing ride in that “immortal historical hack”’.²⁹⁹ ‘It is as if,’ Rowe writes, ‘the image in the Preface has anticipated the dramatic scene in the novel, published over thirty years before the Preface was written’.³⁰⁰ Tóibín’s passage similarly “anticipates” a dramatic scene in a novel published one hundred and seven years before *The Master*. For Scherzinger, Tóibín’s inverted temporality provides a ‘means by which James [...] may be retrieved from the past and situated as Tóibín’s contemporary, or even [...] as his literary son’.³⁰¹

The suggestion of a father-son relationship provides a final, illuminative, point of comparison between *The Master* and critical discourses surrounding James, the Prefaces, and revision. Armstrong describes the Prefaces as ‘accounts of what it meant to James in the recent past of rereading and revising to visit earlier versions of himself’, while Nielsen similarly observes how ‘the author is observed by his other revising self’.³⁰² Martha Banta also sees ‘the monumental back of the author bent over his desk viewed in chiaroscuro retrospect by the meditative narrator of the prefaces’ as one of the ‘masterly strokes’ of the New York Edition.³⁰³ These statements pivot on the idea that, in revising, James was able to impose a division between his present and past selves. Like

²⁹⁷ Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881 text), ed. by Philip Horne (London: Penguin, 2011), p.609; Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady* (New York Edition text), p.576.

²⁹⁸ Scherzinger, p.187.

²⁹⁹ Rowe, p.238.

³⁰⁰ Ibid.

³⁰¹ Scherzinger, p.187.

³⁰² Armstrong, p.130; Nielsen, p.145.

³⁰³ Martha Banta, ‘The Excluded Seven: Practice of Omission, Aesthetics of Refusal’, in *Henry James’s New York Edition*, ed. by McWhirter, pp.240-60 (p.248).

the novelist Clare Vawdrey in 'The Private Life', who is able to appear in both public and private simultaneously, the Preface-writing James of the *fin de siècle* exists independently of his past self at various moments of literary production. When placed in dialogue with Scherzinger's ideas, James's relationship to his past self is implicitly paternalistic; he is a 'literary father' looking back at his own self as 'literary son'.³⁰⁴

With this in mind, I would like to conclude by recasting the nature of the dialogue established between the Boulogne passage of *The Master* and James's New York Edition. The dialogue has thus far proven productive, revealing several unanticipated similarities, and advancing discussion of *The Master* from a reductive focus on the subject's sexuality. Similarities between Tóibín's passage and James's Prefaces included an ambiguity of audience, a certain difficulty for first readers, and the potential to revise, indeed to displace, the text being introduced. Tóibín has been seen to appropriate *What Maisie Knew* for his depiction of James's boyhood, an act of biographical "revision" after which James's own work reads differently. But it is also possible to read the passage as anticipatory of James's own 'comprehensive 'act of re-appropriation' of his [...] earlier productions constituted by the New York Edition itself'.³⁰⁵ As well as looking back, in 1896, to his childhood, Tóibín's James unwittingly looks forward to the 1900s, when he would revise the vast majority of his oeuvre. This is supported by the closeness of Tóibín's engagement with *What Maisie Knew*, which has the effect of mediating James's nostalgia in ways that are explicitly textual. This renders the passage less convincing as an act of remembering, and more convincing as an act of revising. The incidental differences between Tóibín's passage and James's then come to represent the stylistic peculiarities of the 1897 text of *What Maisie Knew*, which James would 'retouch' to bring the novel in line with the rest of the New York Edition. Whereas the revising James of the New York Edition 'treat[ed] his early fictions as 'life' and not as classics', refusing 'to let any of them be purchased as definitive', Tóibín

³⁰⁴ Scherzinger, p.187.

³⁰⁵ Millgate, p.96.

shows James experiencing his past as one of his own texts rather than as ‘life’.³⁰⁶ James is thereby treated to a prolepsis of what it will mean to him to re-encounter his oeuvre. By thus ‘read[ing] James’s life as if it were a James novel’, and subjecting that novel to reinterpretation, Tóibín engages with the textuality of the self.³⁰⁷ This contrasts with the strategy adopted by Lodge, who attempted unmediated access to the extra-textual subject in a bid to assure James of the posthumous confirmation of his mastery. Tóibín, while similarly confining himself to James’s ‘Middle Years’, succeeds in summoning the Master through this symbolic engagement with the New York Edition, the ‘Tempest-like culmination of [James’s] career, his passport to immortality’.³⁰⁸

‘A fairy-tale pure and simple?’: Problematizing the Preface to *The Turn of the Screw* in Edwin M. Yoder Jr.’s *Lions at Lamb House* (2005)

Of the works of biofiction considered in this chapter, Edwin M. Yoder Jr.’s *Lions at Lamb House* engages in the most explicit dialogue with discourses surrounding the Prefaces and revision. The novel opens with Freud’s arrival in Rye in 1908, as observed by Horace Briscoe, an American doctoral student staying at Lamb House while researching a thesis on James’s ‘parables [...] of art and artists’ (26). Freud, it transpires, has been summoned by William James in order that the psychoanalyst might ‘discreetly probe’ Henry James’s ongoing ‘project of “translating” or “revising” his limpid early works into the new manner for uniform publication’ (20). The William James character finds this project ‘a bizarre investment, even dissipation, of creative energy, with the

³⁰⁶ Stuart Culver, ‘Ozymandias and the Mastery of Ruins: The Design of the New York Edition’, in *Henry James’s New York Edition*, ed. by McWhirter, pp.39-57 (p.49).

³⁰⁷ Michiel Heyns, ‘The Curse of Henry James’, *Prospect*, 26 September 2004 <<http://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/magazine/thecurseofhenryjames/>> [accessed 13 December 2012].

³⁰⁸ Millgate, p.91.

single qualification that he is writing so-called “prefaces” to accompany each volume; and so far, if one can survive the ethereal reach of them, they promise to be monuments of criticism’ (20). In four alternating sections, the novel moves between Rye in 1908 and Baltimore, Maryland in 1941. In the Baltimore sections, Horace, now the resident James expert at Johns Hopkins University, is corresponding with Anna Freud in a bid to prevent the destruction of Freud’s ‘fragment of an analysis of a literary artist’ (208).

Freud’s preliminary notes on Henry James record that ‘his brother, who is not free of the envy common in gifted siblings, views the “late style” and elaborate revisions of his earlier work as a rococo cakewalk, which view is at the least imprecise; but when was Cain sympathetic to the labours of Abel?’ (139). Together with James’s ‘redundant mastication of food’ (140) in obedience of ‘the dubious theories of a Dr. Fletcher’ (74), Freud concludes that this ‘indicate[s] a predisposition to obsessional neurosis with both oral and anal features’ (74). Freud’s suspicions of ‘fraternal rivalry’, and his interpretation of James’s stylistic decisions as transparent indicators of pathology, suggest a desire to poke fun at the quintessential analytical biographer, Leon Edel (74). While Freud compares the James brothers to Cain and Abel, Edel uses the parable of Jacob and Esau as a leitmotif, similarly suggesting ‘the long-buried power struggle that had existed between the two – ever since their nursery days in Washington Square’.³⁰⁹ And just as Freud reductively interprets the revising James’s ‘fixing in verbal amber’ as ‘a familiar variant of anal retentiveness’ (140), Edel was criticised for ‘his assumption that all James’s creative work was a reflection of his unconscious need to work out a few psychological problems’.³¹⁰ Horace’s own impressions of Freud are suggestive of the negative aspects of Edel’s biography, a work of post-Freudian analysis that would ‘line the royal road to Uncle Henry’s unconscious with garish signposts and mileage markers’ (72).

³⁰⁹ Edel, *Henry James: A Life*, p.613.

³¹⁰ Simon, *Critical Reception*, p.68.

The implicit problem with Freud's 'signposts' to James's unconscious is that they lead readers of his case notes in entirely erroneous directions. In interpreting the New York Edition as indicative of James's retentive desire to crystallise his productions, Freud ascribes to the view of the collected edition expressed in a contemporary review of George Meredith's complete works. The reviewer, Paul E. More, wrote that 'when a novelist's works come to us in a new edition, revised and complete, it is time to consider him seriously as one whose task is accomplished'.³¹¹ The trouble with this assessment, as Leuschner explains, is that 'few living authors saw their work as complete, their task as accomplished'.³¹² Yoder's James proves no exception, protesting that 'the story isn't subject to being 'done' in the way of one of Mrs. Paddington's roasts [...]; it is a living, organic thing, subject to unceasing pentimento' (167). Yoder gives us James at his most Derridean, insisting upon the endless deferral of meaning. Even in the New York Edition, no work 'is ever f-f-finished, let alone definitive'; it is included because the author had 'reach[ed] a certain equilibrium of satisfaction at the given moment' (167). Yoder ultimately gives us a Derridean Freud to match his Derridean James. The case history in question, Horace reflects, 'might indeed be fragmentary, but Freud had a habit of attaching that qualification to practically all his case histories, as if they were provisional' (204).

An understanding of meaning as necessarily provisional is central to that strand of the novel which problematises James's prefatory attempts to direct interpretation of *The Turn of the Screw*. This strand traces the genealogy of critical responses to James's prefatory insistence that the story was, as Yoder's James puts it, was 'a fairy-tale pure and simple' (41). It shows the development of interpretation from the psychoanalytic, which reads James's story for revelations concerning his extra-textual subjectivity, to the poststructuralist, which focuses on the surface of the prose. In doing so, it demonstrates

³¹¹ Quoted in Eric Leuschner, "'Utterly, insurmountably, unsaleable": Collected Editions, Prefaces, and the "Failure" of Henry James's New York Edition', *The Henry James Review*, 22 (2001), 24-40 (p.26)

³¹² *Ibid.*,

a nuanced understanding of the relationship between psychoanalysis and literature. Rather than being permitted to ‘dominate [...] and explain [...] the literary text’, psychoanalysis is situated alongside literature as a parallel interpretative narrative.³¹³ The psychoanalytic thereby becomes another means by which we tell stories about ourselves, rather than the definitive expression of a prior subjectivity.

In the Preface to *The Turn of the Screw*, James asserted that the tale was ‘of a kind [...] least apt to be baited by earnest criticism’, proleptically circumventing scholarly ‘pentimento’ by indicating how the work ‘should, in his matured judgment, be read and understood’.³¹⁴ This was as ‘a piece of ingenuity pure and simple, of cold artistic calculation,’ as ‘an amulette to catch those not easily caught’.³¹⁵ Yet James’s focus on the story’s ‘ingenuity’ or originality did nothing to deter Edmund Wilson in his essay ‘The Ambiguity of Henry James’ (1934). Wilson’s theory that ‘the governess [...] is a neurotic case of sex repression’, and the ghosts mere hallucinations proved highly influential, serving, as Shoshana Felman explains, to ‘focalise and concretely organise all aspects of critical discussion’.³¹⁶ While Yoder’s Freud is more interested in Miles and Flora than in the figure of the governess, his reading of *The Portrait of a Lady* alludes to Wilson’s focus on sexual repression. This is supported by Wilson’s framing of the governess as ‘a variation on one of [James’s] familiar themes’, that of women ‘longing [...] for affection but too inhibited or passive to obtain it for themselves’.³¹⁷ Freud tries ‘to take [James] in flank [...] by putting to him the case of his heroine Isabel Archer [...], asking him why she rejects the suit of two virile men only to wed the effete narcissist Gilbert Osmond. My suggestion that it was perhaps a displeased fear of sexuality now drew a heated reaction’ (75). Freud interprets James’s reaction as a sign

³¹³ Julie Rivkin, ‘The Genius of the Unconscious: Psychoanalytic Criticism’, in *Palgrave Advances in Henry James Studies*, ed. by Rawlings, pp. 59-79 (p.62).

³¹⁴ James, ‘Preface’, p.35; Millgate, p.90.

³¹⁵ James, ‘Preface’, p.38.

³¹⁶ Shoshana Felman, ‘Turning the Screw of Interpretation’, *Literature and Psychoanalysis: The Question of Reading: Otherwise*, Yale French Studies, 55 (1977), 94-107 (pp.97-8).

³¹⁷ Edmund Wilson, p.110-11, quoted in Felman, pp.107-8.

that ‘he is withholding secrets, many of them concealed by repression from himself’ (76). This prompts him to ‘touch the very bottom of this enquiry’ and suggest to James that his ‘own fear of robust sexuality [...] is reflected in Isabel Archer’ (77). In demanding a (repressed) ‘Jamesian body prior to the scene of writing’, Freud embodies the pre-formalist approach to James’s sexuality as something that his work expresses rather than consciously performs.³¹⁸ Stevens outlines one of the effects of this approach: ‘James is constructed as a writer, but not a reader; at least, he cannot read himself as well as we can’.³¹⁹ This is clearly demonstrated in Wilson’s 1948 addendum to his essay, in which he stated that ‘not merely is the governess self-deceived, but [...] James is self-deceived about her’.³²⁰ Freud’s readerly claim to expound on James’s authorial “blind spots” is, however, undermined by his unwitting use of the double entendre ‘touch the very bottom’. If James’s ‘own fear of robust sexuality [...] is reflected in Isabel Archer’, a construction of language, then what is reflected in Freud’s own suggestive turn of phrase? The effect of this innuendo is to undermine readerly presumptions to “unlock the secret” of James’s prose, implicitly favouring the queer formalist understanding of that prose as ‘the scene of erotic exploration’.³²¹

Freud’s persistent understanding of literary analysis as the quest to ‘unridl[e] ‘the figure in the carpet’ informs his attempts to reify the nebulous ‘horrors’ summoned in ‘The Turn of the Screw’ (113). He reminds James of the scene in which

the governess says with great assurance: “They’re talking horrors!” Exactly! Horrors! A suitably prudish circumlocution. You clearly might have said that the two children are reviewing and amplifying their precocious information on *les choses génitales*.”

“My dear doctor, you have, as it were, inflated with vivid and unexpected gas the rather vacant word, horrors. They are speaking of genital matters, are they? I t-tremble on the verge of astonishment to hear it!”

“But of course. What could those horrors be but those smutty words for daring to echo which Master Miles has from his school been sent down? And for what purpose other than to initiate his small sister, Flora, into this precocious

³¹⁸ Stevens, ‘Queer Henry’, p.123.

³¹⁹ Ibid., p.121.

³²⁰ Edmund Wilson, quoted in Felman, p.187.

³²¹ Stevens, ‘Queer Henry’, p.123.

knowledge? What you intuit, science amply confirms.” Freud beamed like a bright student who has pleased his teacher. (43)

This exchange dramatises a moment in the Preface to *The Turn of Screw* in which James complained of ‘being assailed, as has befallen me, with the charge of a monstrous emphasis, the charge of all indecently expiating’.³²² Freud frames the sexual subtext to the word ‘horrors’ not as his own interpretation, but as an undercurrent so obvious as to be all-but-explicitly stated. This accusation of obviousness implicitly judges James to have failed in his attempt to ‘make [the reader] *think* the evil, make him think it for himself’.³²³ Instead, it reduces James’s passage to the ‘weak specifications’ that the Preface condemned.³²⁴ Defending his tale’s resistance to concretising interpretations, James noted that

one had seen, in fiction, some grand form of wrong-doing, or better still of wrong-being, imputed, seen it promised and announced as by the hot breath of the Pit - and then, all lamentably, shrink to the compass of some particular brutality, some particular immorality, some particular infamy portrayed: with the result, alas, of the demonstration’s falling sadly short.³²⁵

James deemed the “horrors” of his tale liable to be diminished by the specification of their exact nature. Defined as a ‘particular brutality’, they would have been “only” this or that; shrouded in vagueness they come to represent “everything”. James similarly frustrates readers who turn to the Preface in search of the particulars that the tale suggestively elides. What Leuschner writes of the genre is truest, perhaps, of this particular example: ‘answers are exactly what readers do not find’.³²⁶ Conversely, by treating *The Turn of the Screw* as a case study in childhood sexuality, Freud produces a schematic, over-literalising “Preface” of a kind that might ‘diminish, rather than enhance’ readings of James’s text.³²⁷

³²² Henry James, ‘Preface’, p.42.

³²³ Ibid.

³²⁴ Ibid.

³²⁵ Ibid., p.41.

³²⁶ Leuschner, p.35.

³²⁷ Armstrong, p.127.

Superficially, the interpretation Yoder attributes to Freud bares all the hallmarks of what Felman saw as a ‘vulgar Freudianism’.³²⁸ In Freud’s view, *The Turn of the Screw* is ‘all about sex’.³²⁹ Miss Jessel, ‘the disgraced former governess, has allied herself with the butler, Quint, to pervert the children’; Miles ‘has carried Quint’s smutty talk back to school with him’; the headmaster has expelled Miles, suggesting that he himself ‘no doubt [...] is repressed’ (42). What Felman writes of Wilson’s reading is as true of Freud’s: it sees ‘the sexual reference as an *answer*, [...] an end to all textual questions and ambiguities’.³³⁰ However, Freud’s suggestion that ‘what you intuit, science amply confirms’ (43), coupled with the image of Freud as the ‘student’ to James’s ‘teacher’ is suggestive of the ‘poststructuralist psychoanalytic’ reading offered by Felman herself.³³¹ Her essay ‘Turning the Screw of Interpretation’ (1977) responded to Wilson’s reading from a Lacanian perspective. She rejected what Julie Rivkin refers to as ‘a Hegelian master-slave model in the usual pairing of psychoanalysis and literature’, in which psychoanalysis engages in the ‘act of judging literature from the height of its mastery position’.³³² Instead, she argued for a symbiotic relationship based around psychoanalytic theory’s ‘own inescapable participation *in* literature’.³³³ She was interested ‘not only in what psychoanalytic theory has to say about the literary text, but also in what literature has to say about psychoanalysis’.³³⁴ In *Lions at Lamb House*, Freud himself does not claim that psychoanalytic theory may ‘dominate’ the literary text, instead conceiving of an equal relationship in which ‘what I had discovered, you, sir, had imagined’ (42). In the case of *The Turn of the Screw*, what James ‘imagined’ is precisely what Freud’s ‘critics scorned: the universality of infantile sexuality’ (42). Freud is permitted to sanction Felman’s view of a ‘mutually informing relation’ between

³²⁸ Rivkin, ‘Genius’, p.62.

³²⁹ Ibid.

³³⁰ Felman, p.171.

³³¹ Ibid.

³³² Rivkin, ‘Genius’, p.62; Felman, p.199.

³³³ Felman, p.200.

³³⁴ Ibid., p.102.

psychoanalytic theory and literature, as well as the earlier, somewhat balder assertion of Allen Tate: ‘James knew substantially all that Freud knew before Freud came on the scene’.³³⁵ This reflects the historical Freud’s view of the unconscious as ‘corroborated by legendary matter’, the most famous example being his citation of *Oedipus Rex* as exemplary of the ‘universality’ of the Oedipus complex.³³⁶ Yoder hereby levels the relationship between psychoanalysis, as represented by Freud, and literature, as represented by James. Rather than master and slave, or even ‘teacher’ and ‘student’, Freud and James are ‘two different wayfarers in search of the mysteries of consciousness’; they approach the same subject from contrasting, though complimentary directions (192).

Lions at Lamb House reads differently still when placed in dialogue with the crux of Felman’s argument: ‘what the literary text “knows” most centrally is that reading is an act of transference’.³³⁷ The concept of transference is integral to James’s prefatory claim that ‘there is no eligible absolute of the wrong; it remains relative to fifty other elements, a matter of appreciation, speculation, imagination - these things, moreover, quite exactly in the light of the spectator’s, the critic’s, the reader’s experience’.³³⁸ This in turn carries with Yoder’s James’s protest that ‘we poor scribblers deal only in the inexplicit and look to our audience to supply the deficiency’ (47). By giving us a James who positively welcomes readerly transference, Yoder questions Freud’s claim that ‘what I had discovered, you, sir, had imagined’ (42). Instead, James explains to Freud that ‘when one writes of the overwrought governess that she believes Miles and Flora are ‘talking horrors’, one writes, I fear, in perfect ignorance of what content our readers may inject into the words’ (44). The ‘infantile sexuality’ Freud

³³⁵ Quoted in Colm Tóibín, ‘Pure Evil: “The Turn of the Screw”’, in *All a Novelist Needs*, ed. by Griffin, pp.38-44 (p.41).

³³⁶ Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. by Joyce Crick, ed. by Ritchie Robertson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p.201.

³³⁷ Rivkin, ‘Genius’, p.62. See Felman, pp.129-38, and her claim that ‘all narratives imply a transferential structure’ (p.133).

³³⁸ James, ‘Preface’, p.42.

perceives in *The Turn of the Screw* is thereby reconceptualised; rather than being the text's latent content, it is a product of "reading in".

Amusedly describing the exchange in a letter to Edith Wharton, James writes that Freud's 'manner of literary construction is a bit Procrustean, as you see, & there was a constant naughty temptation not only to pull his leg but to make a rude bosun's knot of it' (47). Having considered, and then seemingly rejected, the possibility that James anticipated the imagined Freud's conclusions regarding childhood sexuality, Yoder here gives the interpretative screw a final turn. When James claims to have 'not a shred of a notion what those horrors might be' (47), could he in fact be lying? Like Freud, we are 'no longer quite sure what [James] was saying, or suggesting' (44). Do we or do we not detect 'a grain of irony in the flow of words?' (44). Yoder foregrounds the indeterminacy of narrative by prioritising James's tone, which cannot be recovered, over his language, which can. Listening in to one of James's conversations, Horace notes its 'high registers of verbal teasing, self-mockery and exaggeration' (23). But the reader of biofiction is aligned with Horace's vision of 'a stranger reading a bare transcript of the exchange', liable to 'miss', or misinterpret, 'its tone and key' (23). Here, the main determinant of James's "meaning" is not what he says, but how he says it; clues such as pause, emphasis, intonation, and facial expression are implicitly more revelatory than his choice of words. But since speech is irrecoverable as a performative act, leaving only the 'bare transcript' of language, we have no accurate means of determining how much, exactly, Henry James knew. This ambiguity echoes the shift in interpretation of *The Turn of the Screw* throughout the poststructuralist readings of the 1980s and 1990s. In many of these interpretations, engendered in part by Felman's reading, the 'import of the undecidability' of James's tale was imbricated with 'the epistemological and rhetorical indeterminacy of narrative itself'.³³⁹

³³⁹ Teahan, 'Critical Theory', p.27.

This concept of indeterminacy is integral to Freud's conclusions in his 'fragment of an analysis of a literary artist'. Superficially, his professional interpretation is straightforward; he writes to William James that the analysand is 'a balanced man with no marked obsessional neuroses such as you had feared' (230). In place of the expected indicators of pathology, Freud uncovers 'the most prosaic of reasons' behind the New York Edition: 'he wishes to leave behind a literary monument, and he hopes to make some money' (230). Yet Freud's 'discussions with Henry James' are expanded upon in his case notes, which incorporate the 'apparently heretical concession' that leads to their threatened destruction by the 'caretakers of psychoanalytic orthodoxy' (232). 'After musing on the competing roles of psychology and literature', Freud is judged to imply 'that the human mind is too complicated to be fully understood by any psychoanalytic system' (232). This is paralleled by James's assertion that 'your psychoanalysis, with its mechanical dynamics of the structure and pressures and gauges of consciousness, aspires to science but is no less a form of storytelling than my own' (182).

This renewed understanding of the relationship between psychoanalysis and literature informs the developing assessment of *The Turn of the Screw* traced in the preceding pages. When placed in dialogue with psychoanalytic criticism of James's story, *Lions at Lamb House* reveals the development of interpretation from Wilson's claims to "know" more than James's text, to Felman's argument that 'the literary text "knows" as much as the psychoanalytic one', to subsequent destabilising of the authority and reliability of any narrative, psychoanalytic or literary.³⁴⁰ The interpretative screw is turned full circle: whereas Freud begins by interpreting *The Turn of the Screw* as a psychoanalytic case study, James ends by interpreting the psychoanalytic case study as 'a form of storytelling' (182). James's view is confirmed by Horace's assessment of Freud's 'fragment of an analysis of a literary artist': 'the disguise is so thin that one

³⁴⁰ Rivkin, 'Genius', p.62.

needn't be a James authority to see through it' (62). This figures the case study as *roman à clef*, even as a piece of biofiction comparable to *Lions at Lamb House*. Psychoanalysis thus emerges from Yoder's work as an interpretative narrative akin to literature, rather than a definitive expression of subjectivity.

Conclusion

While Yoder establishes a mutually beneficial dialogue between literature and psychoanalysis, this chapter has indicated the ways in which biofiction and literary criticism might similarly inform each other. Specific aspects of the Prefaces, James's 'plea for Criticism, for Discrimination, for Appreciation' are illuminated by biofiction, while the revising gaze adopted by James in the Prefaces helps us to better understand biofiction's complex relationship with its Jamesian hypotexts.³⁴¹ These final pages offer a summative response to the chapter's two underlying questions: what might biofiction reveal about the Prefaces, and what might the Prefaces reveal about biofiction?

The dialogue has illuminated the way in which the Prefaces seem to reinstate subjectivity only to thwart it, invariably substituting textuality for the irrecoverable extra-textual essence. Leuschner notes how the Prefaces promise 'an intimate, private connection with the author', and their failure to fulfil this promise is interpretable as a loss not only to the implied reader of the Prefaces, but also to James himself.³⁴² James's stated desire to 'live back into forgotten states' is suggestive of a desire to re-establish an intimate connection with his past self, the historical writer who wrote, say, 'Daisy Miller' or *The American*.³⁴³ But that connection necessarily proved unobtainable; James succeeded in re-establishing contact only with the implied author of the texts

³⁴¹ Quoted in Michael Anesko, 'O O O O that Ja-hame-sian Rag / It's so elegant / So intelligent: Tracing Appropriations of the Master's Aura in Modernist Critical Discourse', *The Henry James Review*, 27 (2006), 264-74 (p.271).

³⁴² Leuschner, p.36.

³⁴³ Henry James, quoted in Millgate, p.84.

themselves. The potential of textuality to form a barrier to intimacy is implicit in James's comparison of his oeuvre to 'some such reordering scroll or engraved commemorative table – from which the 'private' character, moreover, quite insist[ed] on dropping out'.³⁴⁴ A similar barrier was formed by the dissimulating text of Elena Hite's burned diary in *The James Boys*, which failed to deliver its promised revelations regarding the James brothers as historical subjects. On a subtextual level, Edel's majestic five-volume biography interposed a long 'commemorative table' between Lodge and his subject in *Author, Author*. Unlike the metaphorical table in the Preface to 'The Aspern Papers', a symbol of the close proximity of the recent past, the 'commemorative table' of biographical discourse proved unbridgeable by Lodge's 'long arm'.³⁴⁵ This prevented the extra-textual subject, James, from being rendered 'palpable, imaginable, visitable'.³⁴⁶ Tóibín adopted rather a different strategy, conflating the workings of memory with the act of revising and allowing James to mediate his own past in ways that were implicitly textual. Tóibín thus surrendered willingly to the impossibility of extra-textual recuperation rehearsed in the Prefaces. Instead, he attended to the revelatory potential of the 'reordering scroll' itself, James's oeuvre.

Another aspect of the Prefaces illuminated by their juxtaposition with biofiction was their pedagogical impetus, and their potential to affect, whether by enhancement or by diminution, subsequent readings of James's texts. Armstrong indicates how James attempted, in the Prefaces, to 'direct and even discipline the reader's attention without coercing or constraining it'.³⁴⁷ Biofiction, by combining intertextual engagement with invented detail, in many ways embodies James's 'paradoxical ideal of criticism as a

³⁴⁴ Henry James, quoted in Anesko, *Monopolizing the Master*, p.5.

³⁴⁵ James, 'Preface to The Aspern Papers', p.31: 'I delight in palpable imaginable visitable past – in the nearer distances and the clearer mysteries, the marks and signs of a world we may reach over to as by making a long arm we grasp an object at the other end of our own table.'

³⁴⁶ Ibid.

³⁴⁷ Armstrong, p.127.

rigorous response to the text and an infinitely full act of imagination'.³⁴⁸ By providing a route in to James for the uninitiated, they also perform the Prefaces' function of 'mediating' between the Master and consumer culture, 'regulating their interaction, rendering it less loose and vague, installing protocols of respect'.³⁴⁹ Naturally, this is a task of grave responsibility, not least because of biofiction's inherent potential to substitute rather than supplement its intertexts. James was himself alert to the possibility that the paratextual trappings of the New York Edition might 'do the worst of services' to the texts themselves; illustrations, for instance, might 'relieve [...] responsible prose of the duty of being, while placed before us, good enough'.³⁵⁰ Biofiction can be viewed as an extension of the New York Edition's paratext, part of 'the accessory messages and commentaries that come to surround the text and which at times become virtually indistinguishable from it'.³⁵¹ Like James's over-literal illustrations, moments such as Tóibín's biographical "illustration" of *What Maisie Knew* might similarly perform a disservice to James's prose by constraining possible interpretations. These contrasted with Tóibín's offering of a broad range of influences for *The Turn of the Screw*, and Yoder's supplying of a similarly broad range of readerly interpretations. Such moments satisfied the ideal function of the Prefaces, directing and focussing subsequent encounters with the text without imposing undue constraints on readerly response. Furthermore, in Yoder's case, the interpretations offered ran counter to James's insistence that *The Turn of the Screw* was a naïve text, 'a piece of ingenuity pure and simple'.³⁵² Yoder thus implicitly foregrounded the need for what Armstrong refers to as 'a doubled reading that constantly compares [James's] perspective on his works with the reader's own independent assessment of them'.³⁵³ Yoder, like Tennant, thereby equips

³⁴⁸ Ibid.

³⁴⁹ Attridge, p.41.

³⁵⁰ Henry James, quoted in Leuschner, p.142.

³⁵¹ Stam, 'Introduction', p.28.

³⁵² James, 'Preface', p.38.

³⁵³ Armstrong, p.127.

his audience with a reading strategy for the Prefaces themselves, reminding them of the need for both scepticism and self-awareness in their encounters with James's work.

For Rowe, the uniqueness of James's Prefaces is contained in their 'explicit notion of what it means for an author to become a reader'.³⁵⁴ This chapter has, paradoxically, highlighted this generic idiosyncrasy by exploring some of the ways in which the characteristics of James's Prefaces might be replicated in contemporary works. This illuminates the distinctiveness of James-the-author from James-the-reader by attributing the latter's task, the writing of the prefatory text, to an independent body. In the case of 'Daisy Miller', for instance, James of course remains the author, but Richard Liebmann-Smith becomes the reader, tasked with identifying the precise moment in James's life that supplied the *donnée*. The resulting demarcation of the differing functions of author and reader is of benefit to both the Prefaces themselves and the writers of biofiction. If viewed as the works of a single, unified subject, James the author, the Prefaces risk dismissal as theoretically naïve texts. This is because, as Cardwell indicates, authorial intentionalism has fallen into disfavour; instead, contemporary criticism 'recognises that we retrospectively assume the author's intentions primarily through our reading and interpretation of his or her work'.³⁵⁵ But when we recognise that 'the "James" who is author of the novels differs markedly from the "James" who is responsible for the prefaces', then the Prefaces may be reconceptualised. They emerge less as testaments to authorial intentionalism than records of a readerly experience, of what James retrospectively assumed about his past intentions through reinterpreting his own work. In other words, biofiction highlights the postmodern characteristics of the Prefaces and their continuing relevance to the contemporary.

The writers of biofiction in turn find a parallel, legitimizing project in James's re-reading of his own work. Identifying biofiction with the Prefaces, and identifying the

³⁵⁴ Rowe, p.234.

³⁵⁵ Cardwell, p.25.

Prefaces as acts of reading resonates with contemporary theories of appropriative literature as ‘a form of criticism or “reading” [...], one not necessarily subordinate to or parasitic on its source’.³⁵⁶ This interpretation, however, predominantly rests on an understanding of biofiction as the hypertext to James’s hypotext. *The Turn of the Screw* is, for instance, the ‘anterior text’ that Yoder’s reading ‘transforms, modifies, elaborates, or extends’.³⁵⁷ But placing biofiction in dialogue with the Prefaces highlighted the potential for biofiction to act as an introduction to James, to become the ‘experiential “original”’ for many readers.³⁵⁸ By symbolically challenging the primacy of James’s texts, this chapter disputes the concept that biofiction, as an appropriative genre, must necessarily be seen as secondary. Rather, it positions biofiction at the borders and thresholds of James’s work, a mode of entry as well as a means of return. Biofiction thus provides an ideal counterpart to James’s Prefaces, the two forms concealing a vast potential for mutual revelations.

³⁵⁶ Stam, ‘Introduction’, p.8.

³⁵⁷ Stam, *Literature through Film*, p.5.

³⁵⁸ Stam, ‘Introduction’, p.14.

Chapter Three: ‘They leave out the person to whom things happened’:

Re-reading the Biographical Subject in Sigrid Nunez’s *Mitz: The*

Marmoset of Bloomsbury (1998) and Michael Cunningham’s *The*

Hours (1999)

Here I come to one of the memoir writer’s difficulties – one of the reasons why, though I read so many, so many are failures. They leave out the person to whom things happened. The reason is that it is so difficult to describe any human being. So they say: “This is what happened”; but they do not say what the person was like to whom it happened. And the events mean very little unless we know first to whom they happened. Who was I then? (79)

Attempting to recall her life in the autobiographical ‘Sketch of the Past’ (1939-1940), Virginia Woolf highlighted a vacancy at the heart of the memoir form. A ‘great memoir reader’, she recognised that the subject, ‘the person to whom things happened’, was invariably absent in autobiographical writing. In writing the ‘lives’ of other people, the effect was much the same: ‘people [...] collect a number of events and leave the person to whom it happened unknown’, a problem of which Woolf was made acutely aware by her concurrent work on a biography of Roger Fry (83). In ‘Sketch’, she attributed the absence of the (auto)biographical subject to that subject’s own complexities, concluding that ‘the person is evidently immensely complicated’ (82). Yet implicit in Woolf’s analysis is the suggestion that (auto)biography is itself to blame for the problematic absence at its centre. The ‘impossibility of bringing “herself” into text’ is, in large part, the result of generic conventions that functioned to obscure, rather than illuminate, the subject.³⁵⁹ In other words, ‘the person to whom things happened’ was not well-served by (auto)biography’s emphasis on the “things” that happened, by its rigid adherence to facts.

In turning from novels about James to novels about Woolf, I wish to place these works in dialogue with Woolf’s own thoughts about biography as developed in ‘Sketch

³⁵⁹ Nora Sellei, ‘Control, Creativity and the Body in Virginia Woolf’s “A Sketch of the Past”’, in *New Essays on Life Writing and the Body*, ed. by Christopher Stuart and Stephanie Todd (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), pp.38-57 (pp.38-9).

of the Past', and in her essays 'The New Biography' (1927), a review of Harold Nicolson's *Some People*, and 'The Art of Biography' (1939), a retrospective account of Lytton Strachey. In so doing, I want to ask if and how biofiction might redress the central absence, indeed failure, that Woolf perceived in conventional life-writing. Might this new kind of writing, by exploiting 'the novel's techniques for representing subjectivity rather than the objective, evidence-based discourse of biography' be able to address the problem of the elusive subject?³⁶⁰ There also exist resonances between what we might, for want of a better word, call the postmodern characteristics of Woolf's autobiographical writing: namely, its scepticism of narratorial authority, 'of textual representation, of the closure between the sign and the referent, of the very process of signification', and, as demonstrated in the two preceding chapters, the issues that preoccupy many of the writers of biofiction.³⁶¹ Such resonances demand the addition of a caveat to any suggestion that biofiction might reinstate the absent subject. While biofiction's foregrounding of a relationship between the life of the writer and the life of the work is a provocation to Barthes's *Death of the Author*, biofiction about Woolf does not straightforwardly resuscitate the Author-God. Rather, as this chapter will demonstrate, the subject is clearly reinstated as textual, existing in the form of literary discourse.

The works under consideration are Sigrid Nunez's novella *Mitz: The Marmoset of Bloomsbury*, Michael Cunningham's *The Hours*, and, in the following chapter, Susan Sellers's *Vanessa and Virginia*.³⁶² I shall begin by exploring how Nunez satisfies one of Woolf's predictions about biography: that it will 'admit contradictory versions of the same face'. She does this by digesting and synthesising multiple biographical versions of Woolf as a subject: the ethereal, the political, the visionary, the industrious, the

³⁶⁰ Lodge, *Year*, p.8.

³⁶¹ Sellei, p.53.

³⁶² In order to avoid confusion, 'Vanessa' and 'Virginia' will be used throughout this chapter to represent the fictional characters created by Sellers, Nunez, Freeman, and Cunningham; 'Woolf' and 'Bell' will be used to refer to the historical persons.

whimsical, the sexual.³⁶³ I shall then discuss how Nunez uses the enigmatic figure of the animal to foreground the limitations of biographical knowledge, and to highlight biofiction's contrasting potential to imagine, rather than to impose conclusions on, the subject. Turning to *The Hours*, the chapter will then explore how Cunningham extends the scope of biofiction about Woolf by re-examining the meaning of the author's life in relation to an imagined reader and character, replacing the repressive figure of the Author-God with a subject conceived as the product of a secular trinity, and conceived explicitly in relation to *Mrs. Dalloway*. Finally, in Chapter Four, I shall examine how Sellers offers a reversal of biography, proposing revisions to narrow, reified constructions of Woolf and Vanessa Bell. I then place these nuanced, synthesised readings of the sisters' lives in dialogue with Bloomsbury art criticism to suggest new ways of thinking about women's lives in relation to artistic form. More specifically, I situate biographical readings as complement, rather than anathema, to Roger Fry and Clive Bell's attentiveness to form and structure.

Just as, in the two previous chapters, I developed Max Saunders's suggestion that biofiction about James originated in developments in James biography and criticism, I also find literary antecedents for biofiction about Woolf. This chapter will continue and complicate my exploration of biofiction by locating the wellsprings of novels about Woolf in Modernist developments in life-writing by Lytton Strachey, Harold Nicolson, and Woolf herself. I wish to consider briefly the reasons Woolf proposed for the absence of the subject in pre-Modernist life-writing, before discussing the advances and the limitations she attributed to 'The New Biography'. This is by way of situating the kinds of questions biofiction opens up in relation to Woolf's abiding preoccupations. In 'The New Biography', her discussion of the genre falls into three chronological phases: pre-Boswell, post-Boswell, and the titular 'New Biography'. The

³⁶³ Virginia Woolf, 'The Art of Biography', in *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays* (London: Hogarth, 1943), pp. 119-26 (p.125). Hereafter referenced parenthetically as AB.

latter phase is exemplified by Strachey's *Eminent Victorians* (1918), Nicolson's *Some People* (1927), and, implicitly, *Orlando* (1928), the joke-biography of Vita Sackville-West which Woolf was writing concurrently with the essay. Taking her cue from Sidney Lee, Woolf defined the central task of biography as the attempt to combine the 'granitelike solidity' of truth and the 'rainbow-like intangibility' of personality 'into one seamless whole', a task that, prior to Boswell's *Life of Johnson* (1791), 'biographers have for the most part failed to solve' (149). This failure is attributed to generic conventions, namely the expectation that biography be grounded in verifiable fact, 'truth in its hardest, most obdurate form [...] truth as truth is to be found in the British Museum' (149). In *Orlando*, published the following year, 'Truth' is numbered jokingly among 'the austere Gods who keep watch and ward by the inkpot of the biographer'; eleven years later, in 'The Art of Biography', Woolf reiterated seriously that the genre 'imposes conditions, and those conditions are that it must be based upon fact' (123).³⁶⁴ Prior to Boswell, the two halves of the biographical equation, fact/truth and personality, were engaged via the tacit assumption that 'the true life of your subject shows itself in action which is evident rather than in that inner life of thought and emotion' (NB 150). The resultant focus on externals is satirised in *Orlando*, in which the narrator-biographer is confronted with a subject who 'will neither love nor kill, but will only think and imagine' (240). Pretending to accept the prevailing feeling that 'thought and imagination [...] are of no importance whatsoever', the biographer is tempted to conclude that Orlando 'is no better than a corpse' and therefore to 'leave her' (240).

Woolf identified the publication of Boswell's *Life of Johnson* as a turning point in the history of biography, following which 'we can no longer maintain that life consists in actions only or in works. It consists in personality' (NB 150). This revelation, she suggested, led to a broadening of the genre's scope, wherein the 'sedentary' figures of 'poets and painters' were numbered alongside the 'active' figures of 'soldiers and

³⁶⁴ Virginia Woolf, *Orlando* (London: Penguin, 2006), p.120. Hereafter referenced parenthetically.

statesmen' as legitimate subjects for biography (151). Yet this widening of biography's lens was counterbalanced by the restrictive nature of the archive; whereas the soldier's biographer could 'tell a fine tale with a flourish' the poet's was forced to 'toil through endless labyrinths and embarrass himself with countless documents' (151). *Orlando* offers a witty satire of the exhaustive – and exhausting – cradle-to-grave biographies that resulted, citing the 'documents, both private and historical' that enable the narrator to satisfy the 'first duty of the biographer, which is to plod, without looking to right or left, on and on methodically till we fall plump into the grave and write finis on the tomb stone above our heads' (59). Turning back to 'The New Biography', Woolf suggested that this newfound "archive fever" left biographers with a marmoreal touch; their biographies were 'amorphous mass(es)', devoid of 'voice or laughter' (151).

Woolf also saw the Victorian biographer as distinct from his predecessors by virtue of being 'dominated by the idea of goodness' rather than by standards of bravery or erudition (151). Such preoccupations are evident in *Flush*, Woolf's biography of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's spaniel, in which the narrator must negotiate the delicate issue of the subject's intimate relations. Whereas the narrator, a representative of the new biography, is able to state simply that 'before he was well out of his puppy-hood, Flush was a father', there is a gloss to the effect that 'such conduct in a man even, in the year 1842, would have called for some excuse from a biographer'.³⁶⁵ In 'The Art of Biography', Woolf ultimately nuanced the biographer's obsession with moral virtue, suggesting that this was less an intrinsic quality than a result of his being 'tied' by the subject's family (120). She posed a case in which 'the man of genius was immoral, ill-tempered, and threw the boots at the maid's head', suggesting that his biographer would be forced to 'cover up; omit' by a widow conscious of her familial relation to the subject and of his status in the eyes of the public (120). This was a problem with which, by this point, Woolf had been intimately acquainted as both family member and biographer. As

³⁶⁵ Virginia Woolf, *Flush: A Biography*, ed. by Kate Flint (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p.12. Hereafter referenced parenthetically.

Alex Zwerdling reminds us, it was she who ‘was delegated by her siblings to select the letters her father’s official biographer would be permitted to use’, she who decided which details would be illuminated, and which covered up or omitted.³⁶⁶ This experience may have informed her satire of ‘eulogistic biographies’, the ‘two volumes of life and letters [...] produced with the sanction of the family’, in ‘Memoirs of a Novelist’ (1909).³⁶⁷ Conversely, as Roger Fry’s official biographer, Woolf herself had to remain mindful of the sensibilities of five Quaker sisters ‘who had been raised in the most constricted of Victorian households’.³⁶⁸ She wrote to Vanessa Bell for advice on ‘how to deal with love so that we’re not all blushing’, and ultimately omitted any mention of Bell’s three-year affair with Fry in favour of a more socially acceptable, though ultimately less representative narrative of marital fidelity.³⁶⁹

While such compromises suggest, as Woolf herself acknowledged, that there remained ways in which the biographer would always be ‘tied’, ‘The New Biography’ situated the eponymous movement as a wholesale break with tradition rivalled only by the advent of Boswell. Despite Laura Marcus’s claim that ‘‘the new biography’ is defined as much by a reaction against Victorianism as by any positive identity of its own’, Woolf identified a number of specific developments enabled by Strachey and Nicolson, all of which were concerned with the more accurate transmission of the subject’s personality.³⁷⁰ The first of these developments, each of which is pertinent to the study of biofiction, was the poetic précis enabled by the biographer’s more equal

³⁶⁶ Alex Zwerdling, ‘Mastering the Memoir: Woolf and the Family Legacy’, *Modernism/modernity*, 10 (2003), 165-88 (p.168).

³⁶⁷ Ibid., Virginia Woolf, ‘Memoirs of a Novelist’, in *Memoirs of a Novelist* (London: Hesperus, 2006), pp.77-92 (p.79).

³⁶⁸ Thomas S. W. Lewis, ‘Combining ‘the advantages of fact and fiction’: Virginia Woolf’s Biographies of Vita Sackville-West and Roger Fry’, in *Virginia Woolf: Centennial Essays*, ed. by Elaine K. Ginsberg and Laura Moss Gottlieb (New York: Whitson, 1983), pp.295-324 (p.315).

³⁶⁹ Virginia Woolf to Vanessa Bell, 8 October 1938. *The Letters Of Virginia Woolf*, ed. by Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann, 6 vols (London: Hogarth, 1975-80), VI (1980), pp.284-8 (p.285); Virginia Woolf, *Roger Fry: A Biography* (London: Hogarth, 1940).

³⁷⁰ Laura Marcus, *Auto/Biographical Discourses* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), p.92.

relationship to the subject. Where formerly he was reduced to ‘toiling even slavishly in the footsteps of his hero’, documenting each stage of the subject’s life, the biographer now stood ‘raised upon a little eminence’ (NB 152), able to select and to synthesise: to condense, in the case of *Flush*, three dog-snatchings into a single incident. This approach produced biographies, Strachey’s *Eminent Victorians* and Nicolson’s *Some People* among them, which were condensed in size and anecdotal in tone, founded on the assumption that ‘the man himself, the pith and essence of his character, shows itself to the observant eye in a tone of voice, the turn of a head, some little phrase or anecdote picked up in passing’ (153). Thus when the narrator of *Orlando* wishes to describe Addison, Pope, and Swift, she simply informs us that they were ‘fond of tea’, that they ‘liked arbours’ and that they ‘collected little bits of coloured glass’ (184). In the words of ‘The New Biography’, such are the few ‘subtle phrases’ by which ‘whole chapters of the Victorian volume are synthesized and summed up’ (153).

But by far the most suggestive development, for my purposes in this chapter, is ‘The New Biography’’s revelation that fact and fiction may be productively interspersed. Surprisingly, this revelation was attributed wholly to Harold Nicolson, who, as a biographer, Woolf regarded ‘as little more than an epigone’ of Lytton Strachey.³⁷¹ Nicolson was judged to have proven, in *Some People*, ‘that one can use many of the devices of fiction in dealing with real life’ (154). ‘A little fiction mixed with fact’ was seen to shed new light upon the subject, ‘to transmit personality very effectively’ (154). Yet no sooner was Nicolson credited with discovering what is now revealed as the central technique of biofiction, than qualifications immediately presented themselves. For this method, Woolf suggested, risked caricaturing the subject; indeed, ‘the figures in *Some People* are all rather below life-size’ (154). This criticism was rehearsed in ‘The Art of Biography’, in which Strachey’s *Eminent Victorians* were described as ‘short studies with something of the over-emphasis and the foreshortening

³⁷¹ Lewis, p.295.

of caricatures' (122). And despite Nicolson's partial success in combining 'truth of fact and truth of fiction', Woolf concluded, with a logic that is not entirely transparent, that the two were 'incompatible', 'antagonistic; let them meet and they destroy each other' (NB 154-5).

The fact-fiction dichotomy was laid to rest in 'The Art of Biography', in which the failure of Strachey's *Elizabeth and Essex* was attributed to the combination of disparate elements, verifiable fact and invented fact, elements that 'refused to mix' (123). The 'further discoveries' enabled by Strachey's career were also conspicuously unconcerned with the marriage of fiction and fact (124). Instead, Woolf suggested that future biographies would incorporate 'all the facts that are available' (124), gesturing towards an issue that was to trouble her when writing her memoirs: 'not so much lack of information as reluctance to use what one knows'.³⁷² They would reject the arbitrary distinctions of 'the old chapter-headings – life at college, marriage, career' (124), a detail that reads ironically in light of *Roger Fry's* division of the subject's life into phases including 'Cambridge', 'Chelsea: Marriage' and 'The Omega Workshops'.³⁷³ They would display an enlightened, post-Freudian attitude toward (homo)sexuality; they would consider the contrasting facets of the subject; and they would attend to the Lives of the Obscure, on the understanding that 'anyone who has lived a life, and left a record of that life, [is] worthy of biography' (125). In this, Woolf's final critical word on the subject of biography, fact and fiction were ultimately deemed to be incompatible: 'no one, the conclusion seems to be, can make the best of both worlds; you must choose, and you must abide by your choice' (124).

³⁷² Zwerdling, p.26.

³⁷³ Woolf, *Roger Fry*, n.pag.

Mitz: The Marmoset of Bloomsbury

What, then, might biofiction on Woolf open up in relation to the questions Woolf considered in her essays? It is apparent from the previous contextualisation that many of the techniques employed by Nunez, Cunningham, and Sellers were originally developed by the New Biographers Strachey, Nicolson, and Woolf. Whereas the conventional biographer is bound by the facts in the archive, the writer of biofiction, like the new biographer, is able to choose, to synthesise, to pause over incidental details like ‘the tone of a voice or the turn of a head’ (NB 153). Thus while ‘M. Maurois boiled the usual two volumes of a Shelley life into one little book the size of a novel’ (NB 151), Sigrid Nunez condenses two volumes of Leonard Woolf’s memoirs, five volumes of Woolf’s diaries, and six volumes of Woolf’s letters into fewer than one hundred and fifty pages of a novella. She dismisses the superfluous facts that the conventional biographer, according to Woolf, ‘must [...] build with’ (AB 125), and focuses instead on the detail: a bee ‘drifting from red rose to yellow rose’, ‘the sun, suspended between two dark elms’.³⁷⁴ Through the use of focalisation, the writer of biofiction is also able, like Woolf in *Flush* and in *Orlando*, to show the subject thinking, to account for ‘that riot and confusion of the passions and emotions which every good biographer detests’ (*Orlando* 15). Thus while the conventional biographer has no way of knowing what passed through Woolf’s mind when she drowned herself on 28 March 1941, Michael Cunningham imagines, perhaps voyeuristically, how ‘the current wraps itself around her and takes her with such sudden, muscular force it feels as if a strong man has risen from the bottom, grabbed her legs, and held them to his chest’.³⁷⁵

In successfully combining ‘the substance, the reality of truth’ with ‘the freedom, the artistry of fiction’, biofiction also enables us to contradict Woolf’s diagnosis of the

³⁷⁴ Sigrid Nunez, *Mitz: The Marmoset of Bloomsbury* (Brooklyn, NY: Soft Skull Press, 2007), pp.7-8. Hereafter referenced parenthetically.

³⁷⁵ Michael Cunningham, *The Hours* (London: Fourth Estate, 2003), p.5. Hereafter referenced parenthetically.

incompatibility of fiction and fact (NB 152). The acknowledgments at the end of *Mitz* explicitly draw our attention to the granite/rainbow dichotomy, stating that ‘although much of this unauthorised biography of Mitz has had, for want of biographical detail, to be imagined, it is based on published fact’ (n.pag.). Whereas the novelist, according to Woolf, ‘simply says in his foreword, “every character in this book is fictitious”’, and whereas the biographer, by contrast, ‘is tied’, Nunez’s combination of imagined and verifiable details partakes of ‘the intensity of poetry’, ‘the excitement of drama’, while continuing to enjoy ‘the peculiar virtue that belongs to fact – its suggestive reality’ (AB 120-2). If, then, Nunez, Cunningham, and Sellers succeed where Strachey, in *Elizabeth and Essex*, was judged to have failed, this is perhaps because theirs are biographical novels, rather than novelistic biographies. Despite the demonstrable continuities in technique between biofiction on Woolf and the works of Nicolson and Strachey, they owe more, perhaps, to *Orlando* and *Flush* than to *Some People* and *Eminent Victorians*. Whereas Nicolson’s method was to mix ‘a little fiction’ with fact (NB 154), Woolf, Nunez, Cunningham, and Sellers mix a little fact with fiction and, in so doing, avoid the need ‘to choose, and to abide by [their] choice’ (AB 124).

Thus marketed as fiction, rather than as biography, biofiction on Woolf avoids the tendency inherent in conventional biography to lay claim to originality by reinterpreting the subject’s life in light of a unique thesis. Lyndall Gordon has explored how, in contrast to the advances pioneered by Woolf, ‘the supposed “golden age of biography” in the latter half of the twentieth century really looked back to the well-worn laborious path from pedigree to grave’; if the outline of Woolf’s life was unlikely to change, a different accent was required to distinguish each biography from its predecessors.³⁷⁶ Hermione Lee discusses how, in the wake of Quentin Bell’s two-volume biography, Woolf ‘was rewritten, on Laingian lines, as the victim of repressive attitudes

³⁷⁶ Lyndall Gordon, “This Loose, Drifting, Material of Life: Virginia Woolf and Biography”, in *Woolf in the Real World: Selected Papers from the Thirteenth Annual International Conference on Virginia Woolf*, ed. by Karen V. Kukil (South Carolina: Clemson University Digital Press, 2005), pp.11-18 (p.17).

to mental illness, and in the late 1980s and 90s her life-story was seen to be determined by childhood sexual abuse'.³⁷⁷ The texts to which Lee is referring are Roger Poole's *The Unknown Virginia Woolf* (1978) and Louise DeSalvo's *Virginia Woolf: The Impact Of Childhood Sexual Abuse On Her Life and Work* (1990). Discussed in greater detail in the second half of this chapter, Poole's biography combed Woolf's fiction for 'the key to what she suffered in her bouts of so-called 'insanity'', resulting in a reductive reading of her oeuvre as 'an account of the mental distress'.³⁷⁸ DeSalvo, conversely, universalised Woolf's documented accounts of sexual molestation to all four of the Duckworth-Stephen sisters, tending in particular to make extrapolations about Vanessa's experience based on Virginia's. DeSalvo's thesis, like Poole's, led to reductive readings of Woolf's fiction, as exemplified by her interpretation of 'Sketch of the Past', that most plural, exploratory, of texts, as 'a document analysing a lifelong depression'.³⁷⁹ In her celebrated biography of 1997, Lee herself had an agenda: to reclaim Woolf as 'a sane woman who had an illness'.³⁸⁰ Jacqueline Rose argued that a by-product of Lee's determination to thus champion Woolf was that 'madness gets marginalised', 'becomes an aside, the great spoiler' where it might equally well have been understood as 'a form of vision'.³⁸¹

Each of these biographies, then, gives us a specific version of Woolf: the mentally ill, the victim, the 'hero against adversity'; each requires the denial of other versions for the better illumination of its thesis.³⁸² 'A biography', as Woolf herself

³⁷⁷ Hermione Lee, 'Biomythographers: Rewriting the Lives of Virginia Woolf', *Essays in Criticism*, 46 (1996), 95-114 (pp.107-8).

³⁷⁸ Roger Poole, *The Unknown Virginia Woolf* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), pp.2-3. Hereafter referenced parenthetically.

³⁷⁹ Louise De Salvo, *Virginia Woolf: The Impact of Childhood Sexual Abuse on Her Life and Work* (London: The Women's Press, 1989), p.82.

³⁸⁰ Hermione Lee, quoted in Elizabeth Shih, 'When Woolf Goes Missing (From Herself): The Surfeit of Contemporary Short Articles on Virginia Woolf's Life and Work', *The Virginia Woolf Miscellany*, 62 (2003), 2-3 (p.3).

³⁸¹ Jacqueline Rose, 'Smashing the Teapots', *London Review of Books*, 19 (1997), 3-7 <<http://www.lrb.co.uk/v19/n02/jacqueline-rose/smashing-the-teapots>> [accessed 16 August 2013].

³⁸² Shih, p.3.

reminded us in *Orlando*, 'is considered complete if it merely accounts for six or seven selves, whereas a person may well have as many thousand' (273). As a work of biofiction, *Mitz: The Marmoset of Bloomsbury* is able, by contrast, to satisfy Woolf's prognosis for life-writing in 'The Art of Biography'. Writing in an age in which, even more than Woolf's, 'a thousand cameras are pointed, by newspapers, letters, and diaries, at every character from every angle', Nunez is 'prepared to admit contradictory versions of the same face', to 'enlarge [her] scope by hanging up looking glasses at odd corners' (AB 124-5). Under the guise of writing a biography of the Woolfs' pet marmoset, Nunez digests diaries, letters, memoirs, biographies, and fiction, thereby synthesising popular, critical, and biographical views of Woolf herself. Gordon and Lee have summarised these different "Virginia Woolfs" as the Leavisite "delicate authoress" at sea in the world of politics; the creative genius; the industrious, ascetic Woolf suggested by *A Writer's Diary* (1953), and the asexual Woolf created in part by Vanessa and Clive Bell's story of her so-called frigidity.³⁸³ As though mindful of how, as Rachel Bowlby writes in a different context, 'Woolf's texts provide ample support for almost any position', Nunez admits a plurality of lives rather than favouring any one specific angle, highlighting the limits of each of these popular representations by immediately juxtaposing it with another.³⁸⁴ While the majority of the novella, as Drew Patrick Shannon has argued, thus 'takes on the semblance of biography' by virtue of its third-person limited narration, fleeting passages written from the perspective of Mitz or Virginia suggest the potential of biofiction on Woolf to reimagine a subject objectified by conventional biographical discourse.³⁸⁵ Like Strachey in *Elizabeth and Essex*, Nunez thus 'shows us the way in which others may advance', paving the way for Michael

³⁸³ Gordon, 'This Loose, Drifting, Material', p.13; Lee, 'Biomythographers', pp.107-8; Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf* (London: Vintage, 1997) p.244.

³⁸⁴ Rachel Bowlby, *Feminist Destinations and Further Essays on Virginia Woolf* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), p.13.

³⁸⁵ Drew Patrick Shannon, 'The Lightly Attached Web: The Fictional Virginia Woolf', in *Woolf in the Real World*, ed. by Kukil, pp.153-58 (p.156).

Cunningham's adoption of a narrative perspective focalised largely through Virginia herself (AB 124).

Nunez inserts these multiple and single Virginias into a story about the possible redemptions offered by love, domestic life, and creativity in the context of unprecedented barbarism. The span of the marmoset's life with the Woolfs, 1934-1938, encompasses the accelerating belligerence of Nazism and Italian fascism in the lead-up to the Second World War. In this context, Nunez's ultimate revelation of Mitz's brutalisation by her captors becomes a synecdoche for the plight of the individual at the hands of historical forces, a chilling reminder of the likely fate of Virginia and Leonard Woolf, blacklisted by Hitler, in the event of Nazi invasion, and a vivid realisation of the backdrop against which Woolf took her own life. Nunez's engagement with biography then provides a means of transcending this bleak historical context. By tracing the contours of Woolf's developing reputation, she shows how the subject, in the words of *To the Lighthouse* (1927), 'would survive', to become the figure Brenda Silver would eventually describe as 'Virginia Woolf: Icon'.³⁸⁶

In characterising Mitz and Virginia as 'two nervous, delicate, wary females', Nunez critically examines one of the most enduring and problematic constructions of Woolf (60). This is summarised by Shannon as 'the Q.D. Leavis-influenced impression [...] of Woolf as the delicate madwoman of Bloomsbury'.³⁸⁷ One exemplification of Woolf's fragility is provided by Quentin Bell in the first volume of his biography, paraphrased by Nunez as follows: 'one endless summer, she had lain in bed, as sick as she would ever be, and heard the birds singing in Greek and King Edward VII babbling obscenities' (37).³⁸⁸ Having acknowledged the perception of Woolf as a frail woman, Nunez then skirts that aspect of her image by aligning the subject with a marmoset that, 'like Virginia [...] could take only so much. Too many soirées frayed her nerves and

³⁸⁶ Brenda Silver, *Virginia Woolf: Icon* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

³⁸⁷ Shannon, p.154.

³⁸⁸ See Quentin Bell, *Virginia Woolf: A Biography*, 2 vols (London: Hogarth, 1972), I (1972), p.90.

gave her a headache' (90). Establishing these whimsical connections between the delicate writer and the nervous marmoset enables Nunez to satirise the prevalent image of Woolf in the 1930s, one of the low points of her reputation. Gordon explains how 'with the rise of dictators, followed by the Second World War, she came to appear a frail, batty lady author, out of touch with the brutal world of politics'.³⁸⁹ Such a vision is exemplified in Bell's biography, which describes how to many in the thirties, Woolf appeared 'oddly irrelevant – a distressed gentlewoman caught in a tempest and making little effort either to fight against it or to sail before it'.³⁹⁰

Situating her novella in the approach to the Second World War, Nunez explicitly reengages Woolf with 'the brutal world of politics', thereby challenging constructions of her ethereal detachment. When the Woolfs and the Rothschilds dine together in the opening chapter of *Mitz*, it is 1934, and the narrator observes that 'conversation was mostly serious that night and kept coming round – as was no doubt the case at many another dinner table – to the same topic [...] the possibility of war' (13). By the end of the novella, in 1938, the Woolfs are watching the last stages of appeasement, able to 'think of nothing but war' (116). Throughout, Virginia is presented as deeply engaged with political developments, charting with horror the 'tempest' in which she is caught. Towards the end of the text, the narrator asks,

what do you do when you know all you've got for the price of disgrace is another six months or a year? If you are Leonard or Virginia Woolf, you throw yourself into your work. They had their own trenches: they buried themselves in books. (121)

This escape into work could be viewed as a strategy of wilful ignorance, validating the Leavisite view of a writer 'not living in the contemporary world'.³⁹¹ This is, however, complicated by Nunez's engagement with one of the 'books' in which Virginia 'buried [her] self'. Drawing on diary entries from the beginning and the end of 1931, Nunez

³⁸⁹ Gordon, 'This Loose, Drifting, Material', p.13

³⁹⁰ Bell, *Virginia Woolf: A Biography*, I, p.185.

³⁹¹ Q.D. Leavis, 'Caterpillars of the Commonwealth Unite!', *Scrutiny*, 7 (1938), 203-214 (p.203).

traces the genesis of *Three Guineas* (1938), the text Woolf referred to as ‘my war book’.³⁹²

It had begun as a sequel to *A Room of One’s Own* [...]. In the sequel she planned to discuss education and professions for women. But now, with the threat of fascism and war always present, she began thinking of it also as her ‘war pamphlet’: a meditation upon the reasons for war and what might be done to prevent it. Virginia believed that fascism, the pursuit of war, and the oppression of women were all connected, and in *Three Guineas* she meant to show how. (100-101)

Silver has demonstrated how, by the mid-1970s, feminist critics were making the case for “‘Another Version of Virginia Woolf’, one that foregrounded her political, social, and feminist concerns’.³⁹³ By highlighting the complex imbrication of politics and feminism in *Three Guineas*, a text (mis)read by Q.D. Leavis as the work of a writer ‘insulated by class’ from ‘the realities of life’, Nunez inserts this later recuperation of Woolf into the version that was prevalent in the 1930s.³⁹⁴ She thereby reconstructs a subject who, responding directly to political developments, both ‘fight[s] the tempest’ and ‘sail[s] before it’ by attacking its root causes.

Nunez is also able to invoke and to complicate the image of Woolf as a visionary, reconstructing both her ecstatic flashes of inspiration and the ‘donkey work’ that followed.³⁹⁵ Virginia’s moment of illumination for *Between the Acts* (1941) is portrayed as ‘the eerie and rapturous feeling that something was about to be communicated to her, as from another world’ (112). Having ‘held her breath’ and ‘closed her eyes’, she hears ‘a muffled music, like distant horns; a soft rising and falling,’ before ‘her mind took flight: people, houses, streets, landscapes, weather, seasons, friendships, patterns, fates, passions, necessities – A new novel’ (112). A textual analogue for this passage is Woolf’s description, in ‘Sketch of the Past’, of a

³⁹² Virginia Woolf, ‘Diary entry for 20 January 1931’, in *A Writer’s Diary*, ed. by Leonard Woolf (London: Hogarth, 1953), pp.165-6 (p.165).

³⁹³ Silver, p.9.

³⁹⁴ Leavis, pp.203, 210.

³⁹⁵ Virginia Woolf, ‘Diary entry for 12 April 1938’, in *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, ed. by Anne Olivier Bell and Andrew McNeillie, 5 vols (London: Hogarth, 1977-84), V (1984), pp.133-4 (p.133).

walk in Tavistock Square during which ‘I made up – as I sometimes make up my books – To the Lighthouse; in a great, apparently involuntary, rush’ (92). Coherent between Nunez’s passage and Woolf’s is an emphasis on the accrual of associative ideas as ‘one thing burst into another. Blowing bubbles out of a pipe gives the feeling of the rapid crowd of ideas and scenes which blew out of my mind, so that my lips seemed syllabbling of their own accord as I walked’ (‘Sketch’ 92-3). This image of Woolf as a poetic visionary would be popularised in Stephen Daldry’s film adaptation of *The Hours* (2002), prompting Lee to complain that ‘I wish that the idea of ‘creativity’ didn’t consist in an inspirational flash, of the first sentence leaping to the novelist’s mind, shortly followed by a whole book’.³⁹⁶ While, as suggested above, Woolf’s ecstatic flashes of inspiration are well documented, “Professions for Women”, for instance, being ‘conceived’ in its entirety ‘while having my bath’, the constraints of Daldry’s single-day narrative precluded their accurate situating within a context of years of industry.³⁹⁷ The problem, then, with presenting only the inspirational flash is the risk of disengaging the subject from the process of writing, representing Woolf as a poetic vessel detached from her own creative output.

Spanning four years as opposed to a single day, and digesting Woolf’s diary entries from across the period, Nunez is able to represent the ‘sober drudgery’ that was the necessary counterpart of creative inspiration.³⁹⁸ The narrator states that *Flush* was conceived as ‘a relaxation – something to cool a brain that had seethed and bubbled over during the feverish labour of completing *The Waves*’ (39), echoing a diary entry in which Woolf noted how she ‘fled, after *The Waves*, to *Flush*’, wanting ‘simply to sit on

³⁹⁶ Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf’s Nose: Essays on Biography* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005), p.55.

³⁹⁷ Virginia Woolf, ‘Diary entry for 20 January 1931’, in *A Writer’s Diary*, pp.165-6 (p.165).

³⁹⁸ Virginia Woolf, ‘Diary entry for 12 April 1938’, in *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, V, pp.133-4 (p.133).

a bank & throw stones'.³⁹⁹ However, Nunez subsequently observes that *Flush* itself 'soon turned into what all book writing always turns into: work, work, work' (39), as evinced by another diary entry in which Woolf records 'trying to re-write that abominable dog in 13 days, so as to be free – oh heavenly freedom – to write The Pargiters'.⁴⁰⁰ Whereas Daldry's film represents an atypical day, in which Woolf embarks upon *Mrs. Dalloway* after discovering the first sentence in her sleep, Nunez emphasises that the Woolfs habitually 'worked from nine-thirty until one', attributing their prolific output not to the inspirational flash, but to their having 'spent so many mornings of their life in this way' (16). A potential source for this information is Leonard Woolf's memoirs, in which he states that 'I have never known any writer work with such concentration and assiduity as [Virginia Woolf] did'.⁴⁰¹ Perhaps mindful of Tom Paulin's provocative critique of Woolf's social privileges in the television series *J'Accuse* (1991), Nunez is also keen to demonstrate how her subjects' creative machinery was oiled by domestic service: 'for if they had had to do their own shopping and cooking and tidying, how much time would have been left for reading and writing and publishing?' (18).⁴⁰² For Nunez, as for Alison Light, the situating of Virginia's creativity within a framework of steady labour leavened by domestic service contests 'a romantic view of art which imagines it to be the product of lonely genius'.⁴⁰³ Instead, Nunez makes what Alan Bennett calls 'the habit of art' central to her portrayal of the subject. By situating Woolf-the-visionary within a 'Monday or Tuesday' context of daily industry, she insists upon her ownership over her creative output, giving the biographical subject full credit for the incremental creation of her published texts (39).

³⁹⁹ Virginia Woolf, 'Diary entry for 17 July 1935', in *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, IV (1982), pp.331-2 (p.332).

⁴⁰⁰ Virginia Woolf, 'Diary entry for 3 Jan 1933', in *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, IV, pp.139-41 (p.139).

⁴⁰¹ Leonard Woolf, *Beginning Again: An Autobiography of the Years 1911-1918* (London: Hogarth, 1964), p.81.

⁴⁰² Silver, p.10.

⁴⁰³ Alison Light, *Mrs Woolf and the Servants* (London: Penguin, 2007), p.xvii.

Nunez's emphasis on her subject's industry might easily have had the same effect as Leonard Woolf's selections from Woolf's diary, summarised in a contemporary review by Henry Green as 'one long agonised cry from someone who was breaking herself with overwork'.⁴⁰⁴ By including only those entries that related directly to Woolf's profession, *A Writer's Diary* created the illusion that her life was occupied solely by her work. This illusion was compounded by the main text of the volume numbering 365 pages, suggesting a 'year' in which, to quote Green, 'she does not [...] once mention laughter'.⁴⁰⁵ Reference to Bell's biography suggests that this was a misleading representation: 'the new friends whom Virginia made in the 'thirties [...] did not carry away with them the impression of an old and gloomy authoress, frustrated in her work [...]. At Monk's House and at 52 Tavistock Square the prevailing sound was still one of laughter'.⁴⁰⁶ Thus while, as Sellers has argued, the extraction from Woolf's diaries of those entries pertaining exclusively to her work 'distorts [the] essence and arguably misses [the] achievement' of the whole, it also has a distorting impact on the image of Woolf herself.⁴⁰⁷ Nunez, conversely, makes allowance for her subject's light-heartedness by tempering her portrayal of an industrious Virginia with reference to her more whimsical aspects as suggested by her complete diaries. These include Woolf's mention of 'the Zet crawling from one chair to the other, picking at L's head', which Nunez suggests was a nightly occurrence: 'Leonard no longer has to worry about dandruff, [Virginia] announced to astonished friends' (41).⁴⁰⁸ Nunez also engages with an amusing anecdote in Leonard Woolf's memoirs detailing his method for enticing the jealous marmoset down from a tree: 'I got Virginia to stand with me under the tree and I

⁴⁰⁴ Henry Green, 'Review of *A Writer's Diary*', in *Surviving: The Uncollected Writing of Henry Green*, ed. by Matthew Yorke (London: Chatto and Windus, 1992), pp. 179-81 (p.179). Quoted in Lee, 'Biomythographers', p.107.

⁴⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p.180.

⁴⁰⁶ Quentin Bell, II (1972), p.210.

⁴⁰⁷ Susan Sellers, 'Virginia Woolf's Diaries and Letters', in *The Cambridge Companion to Virginia Woolf*, ed. by Sue Roe and Susan Sellers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp.109-26 (p.111).

⁴⁰⁸ Virginia Woolf, 'Diary entry for 30 December 1934', in *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, IV, pp.266-7 (p.267).

kissed her. Mitz came down as fast as she could and jumped on my shoulder chattering with anger'.⁴⁰⁹ In *Mitz*, the marmoset is similarly enraged by 'seeing Leonard put his arm around Virginia' and 'nuzzle Virginia's cheek', a 'trick' which, Nunez suggests, 'worked every time' (33).

As well as tempering the portrayal of Virginia's professional diligence, the last of these references also nuances the stubborn construction of Woolf as 'a chaste, chill, sexually inhibited maiden: Virginia the virgin', a perception which, as discussed in the following chapter, originated in gossip circulated by Vanessa and Clive Bell.⁴¹⁰ By extending the criteria for intimacy to include non-sexual displays of affection, Nunez, like Sellers, attributes to Virginia an active physical life. Aside from the aforementioned embracing and nuzzling, Nunez alludes to nicknames that recur in Woolf's diaries between 1915 and 1936.⁴¹¹ 'To her husband', Nunez writes, Virginia 'was Mandrill (a mandrill is a large, ferocious baboon)' (36). As noted by Lee, such 'pet names' and 'animal games' testify that 'this is not an a-sexual marriage, but one which thrives on affectionate cuddling and play'.⁴¹² Nunez also has Leonard recall with great affection his first glimpse of Virginia as described in Leonard Woolf's memoirs, stating that 'just as Virginia was, at this moment, that beautiful young woman of 1912 again, Leonard was again that ardent young man who declared, 'it would be worth the risk of everything to marry you'' (97). Nunez thus uses the Woolfs' letters and diaries to undermine the popular preoccupation with the sexual dimensional of their marriage, presenting a couple who sleep 'in their separate rooms' (127) yet remain 'closer than they had ever been' (108).

As demonstrated in the preceding pages, Nunez synthesises a plethora of different, often conflicting, popular, critical, and biographical constructions of Woolf.

⁴⁰⁹ Leonard Woolf, *Downhill All The Way: An Autobiography of the Years 1919-1939* (London: Hogarth, 1981), p.244.

⁴¹⁰ Lee, *Virginia Woolf*, p.244.

⁴¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.541.

⁴¹² *Ibid.*, p.333.

She thus satisfies one of Woolf's own predictions for the future of biography by admitting 'contradictory versions of the same face' (AB 125), contrasting the ethereal, out-of-touch version prevalent in the 1930s with the politically engaged and socially conscious figure of the seventies, setting the poetic visionary against the hard-working and industrious, the serious against the whimsical, the asexual against the sexual. Emerging from Nunez's synthesis of biographies, letters, and diaries, these plural figures rebut the thesis-driven versions of Woolf that appeared since the 1930s, approaching something of the complexity of an identity. The coexistence of all these figures in such a slim volume also attests to what Silver refers to as 'the proliferation of Virginia Woolfs, each of which carries its own claim to "truth", and authenticity'.⁴¹³ Shannon sees this proliferation as testament that Woolf has become a 'commodified, iconic figure' who only fiction may 'restore [...] to human proportions'.⁴¹⁴ Shannon's statement is a suggestive one, and Nunez herself implies as much in invoking Woolf's 'picture on the side of a bus driving down Manhattan's Fifth Avenue' and 'she and her friends [...] impersonated on stage and screen', asking 'what would Virginia have thought of this [...]? What would Virginia Woolf have said to all this?' (46-7). The point, of course, is that we have no way of knowing what Woolf would have said or thought; the iconic, like the biographical, is a mode of representation that remains necessarily external. Implicit in Nunez's text is the potent suggestion that fiction might, however, be able to revivify the subject of so many representative discourses, that the focalisation of a voice might restore a measure of agency, however illusory, to Virginia Woolf: icon.

To return briefly to my opening suggestion that biofiction on Woolf has its antecedents in its subject's own biographical experiments, Woolf herself discovered a similar strategy for the representation of subjectivity in *Flush*. For in choosing to write about the Brownings, Woolf chose 'conspicuous figures' whose embodied images as 'passionate lovers – in curls and side-whiskers, oppressed, defiant, eloping' were

⁴¹³ Silver, p.5.

⁴¹⁴ Shannon, p.157.

‘know[n] and love[d] by thousands’.⁴¹⁵ At the time of writing, Woolf’s own reputation, too, was growing: Winifred Holtby’s *Virginia Woolf: A Critical Memoir* (1932) was the first book-length study of her work, prompting her concern that she would ‘settle into a figure’ as Barrett Browning had done.⁴¹⁶ According to Raquel Ribeiro, ‘Woolf wrote *Flush* precisely because Browning’s life was too scrutinised: instead of writing a biography of the poet, she accomplished it through the eyes of her dog’, and the ‘ingenious sidelight on Browning’ thus provided offers a template for Nunez’s own adoption of a “slant” perspective in *Mitz*.⁴¹⁷ As Thomas Lewis explains, it was through the representation of the dog’s sensations, particularly his olfactory awareness, that Woolf suggested a means of transcending ‘the limits of biography’.⁴¹⁸ For where ‘the biographer must perforce come to a pause’ (86), the narrator of *Flush* strides confidently ahead, describing how ‘the cool globes of dew or rain broke in showers of iridescent spray about his nose’, how ‘the earth, here hard, here soft, here hot, here cold, stung, teased and tickled the soft pads of his feet’, how ‘a variety of smells interwoven in subtlest combination thrilled his nostrils’ (11). So too, in *Mitz*, writing about the marmoset allows Nunez to acknowledge the limitations of the biographical form. It allows her to foreground the different possibilities offered by fiction as a means of imagining a more tentative, provisional kind of subjectivity.

The potential of biofiction to provide a contrasting mode of access to biography is particularly apparent in a rare passage focalised through Virginia herself:

⁴¹⁵ ‘Conspicuous figures’: Anna Snaith, ‘Of Fanciers, Footnotes, and Fascism: Virginia Woolf’s *Flush*’, *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, 48 (2002), 614-36 (p.616). ‘Passionate lovers’: Virginia Woolf, ‘Aurora Leigh’, in *The Common Reader: Second Series* (London: Hogarth, 1932), pp.202-13, (p.202).

⁴¹⁶ Virginia Woolf, quoted in Snaith, p.617.

⁴¹⁷ Raquel Ribeiro, ‘Women Writers and Their Animals: Virginia Woolf’s *Flush* and Maria Gabriela Llansol’s *Jade*, Two Dogs with a Voice of Their Own’, in *Transcultural Encounters Amongst Women: Redrawing Boundaries in Hispanic and Lusophone Art, Literature and Film*, ed. by Patricia O’Byrne, Gabrielle Carty, and Niamh Thornton (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010), pp.149-66 (p.156); Dan Wylie, ‘The Anthropomorphic Ethic: Fiction and the Animal Mind in Virginia Woolf’s *Flush* and Barbara Gowdy’s *The White Bone*’, *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, 9 (2002), 115-31 (p.117).

⁴¹⁸ Lewis, p.307.

She wondered about Mitz as she had wondered about the cats and dogs she had known all her life. What was it like to be an animal? How did the world look through a dog's eyes? What did cats think of us? Without such wonder, it is doubtful Virginia ever would have written *Flush*. Now it was Mitz's walnut of a head she wished to crack. Did marmosets dream? Did they remember? Did they regret? What did marmosets want? [...] When Virginia stared hard and unblinking into Mitz's eyes, Mitz stared hard and unblinking back. (59-60)

Reimagining the passage in *Flush* in which the spaniel and Barrett Browning 'gazed at each other [and] each felt: here am I – and then each felt: But how different!' (18), this extract situates Virginia and Mitz in the position of "biographer" to each other, unable to penetrate the subject's 'unbridgeable outside-ness'.⁴¹⁹ The inability to imagine the thoughts of the "other" is perceived to limit the biographical quest; when Vanessa suggests, 'not without tartness', that her sister write the marmoset's biography, the narrator states that 'what Virginia really wanted was for Mitz to write her own' (62). For the majority of the novella, the narrator, too, maintains the pretence of exteriority, asking, for instance, when the marmoset escapes briefly into 'the rustling trees' and 'fur-ruffling wind', 'who can say what fears or what delights, what memories or what yearnings all this woke in tiny Mitz?' (84). Yet as suggested by her confident divulging of Virginia's thoughts as Virginia stares into Mitz's eyes, the writer of biofiction can, when she chooses to, penetrate the subject's imagined interiority with greater ease than the biographer.

This is evident in the penultimate chapter, in which Nunez directs her readers to 'forget this English village' where Virginia and Leonard lie sleeping (128), and where Mitz, unbeknownst to her owners, 'has stopped shivering at last and lies stretched out', presumably dead, on the floor of her cage (131). She then transports us 'back [...] to the beginning' (128), to Mitz's native South America, where we at last discover the object of the marmoset's 'memories and yearnings': 'a world of damp heat and downpours, of opalescent mists and nights of thickest darkness and stillness broken at dawn by the cries of monkeys and birds' (128). Immediately, Nunez confronts her

⁴¹⁹ Wylie, p.122.

readers with images of capture and restraint, as the marmoset is netted and ‘thrust into a saddlebag’ before being ‘transferred [...] to a small wooden box’ and thence to the hold of a ship bound for England (129). The narration of Mitz’s “third passage”, for which textual analogues exist in Flush’s abduction by dog thieves and his transportation to Italy in a box, provide the narrator with unprecedented scope for imaginative empathy. She states that ‘a panic such as [Mitz] had never known came over her inside that box. Uselessly she clawed at the bottom, the sides, the top. There was not enough air – yet her lungs seemed full to bursting.’ (129). Whereas in *Flush*, the narrator’s consciousness ‘freely moves in and out of the spaniel’s’, this is the first instance in *Mitz* of sustained access to the animal’s interiority.⁴²⁰ The narrative voice, formerly studiously external, now merges with the subject’s freely and without restraint; Mitz and the narrator ask, as in one voice, ‘how much time had passed? Hours? Days? [...] How much time remained?’ (129-31).

When Mitz wakes from her fever, she is chained to a perch in the window of a junk shop, where she perceives the London scene through the veil of *Mrs. Dalloway*, the ‘cars, vans, and omnibuses’, the ‘street hawkers’ and ‘barrel organ’, and struggles against a fog which ‘sinks like icy teeth into the bones’ (132-4). Then, just as she ‘has given up hope that she [...] would ever be free again; that she would ever breathe sweet air, hop from branch to branch, hunting butterflies’, she is bought by Victor Rothschild as an impulsive gift for his wife, who reminds him that ‘I’ve invited the Woolves to dinner on Thursday’ (136). A happy ending is thus secured for the marmoset, which blossoms under Leonard Woolf’s tender care. Mitz’s remarkable journey lends itself to a plurality of interpretations; it opens up a critique of slavery, as well as speaking to the difference between contemporary and more enlightened attitudes towards animal

⁴²⁰ Julia Itner, ‘Part Spaniel, Part Canine Puzzle: Anthropomorphism in Woolf’s *Flush* and Auster’s *Timbuktu*’, *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature*, 39 (2006), 181-196
http://Olion.chadwyck.co.uk.wam.leeds.ac.uk/searchFulltext.do?id=R03886837&divLevel=0&area=abell&forward=critref_ft [accessed 16 August 2013].

cruelty. Yet most intriguing, for my purposes in this chapter, are the symbolic implications for life-writing of Mitz's transition from captivity to freedom. After being snatched from the treetops, Mitz is passed from hand to hand, from saddlebag, to box, to cage, to the 'reeking bandanna' of the sailor who steals her, to the perch where she struggles in chains (134). Woolf, too, has been passed from person to person, 'continues to be reinvented – made up, and made over – with every new adapter, reader, editor, critic, and biographer'.⁴²¹ In this context, Nunez's images of constraint and capture suggest the consequences of the imposition of narrative shape. While any one of the resulting "Virginia Woolfs", the 'delicate madwoman', the 'precious aesthete', the 'sexually inhibited maiden', offers the consolation of order, to impose shape is also to establish control, to circumscribe the limits of representation.⁴²² In essence, the imposition of a narrative is a way of putting Woolf herself in a box, of pinning her down, like one of the etherized butterflies Nunez's Virginia receives as a gift from her 'Argentine admirer' (61). Conventional biography is, I have suggested, particularly prone to these restrictions because of the way in which it utilises a shaping thesis to reinterpret the subject's life.

Yet what is true of Mitz is as true as Woolf herself: 'there is no owning her, or the facts of her life'.⁴²³ Mitz's ultimate escape into the garden at Monk's House, where she once again 'clung to her branch and was tossed and rocked', and 'feasted on insects caught on the wing' (84), is symbolic of the freedom and open-endedness of biofiction, which allows the subject to be reimagined without the need to 'say [...] that they were this or were that'.⁴²⁴ In the end, Nunez does for biofiction about Woolf what Woolf herself suggested Harold Nicolson did for biography: 'waves [her] hand airily in a possible direction' for the sub-genre (NB 155). For in *Mitz*, Nunez largely maintains

⁴²¹ Lee, *Virginia Woolf's Nose*, p.61.

⁴²² Gordon, 'This Loose, Drifting Material', p.13; Shannon, p.154; Lee, *Virginia Woolf*, p.244.

⁴²³ Lee, *Virginia Woolf's Nose*, p.61.

⁴²⁴ Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* (London: Penguin, 1996), p.6. Hereafter referenced parenthetically.

narrative distance from the subject(s), reconsidering multiple representations of Woolf while sustaining the biographer's external perspective, and allowing herself only tentative speculation about what Mitz or Virginia is thinking. It is not until her penultimate chapter that she permits herself to enter the animal's mind sustainedly, and, in doing so, opens up the possibility that biofiction might use its unique powers of imaginative empathy to enter the mind of Woolf herself.

The Hours

These possibilities are capitalized on by Michael Cunningham, who extends the scope of biofiction about Woolf beyond the limits observed by Nunez. In *The Hours*, Cunningham adopts a tripartite structure, entering the mind of author, reader, and character across the course of a single day. 'Mrs. Woolf' is beginning *Mrs. Dalloway* on a spring day in 1923; 'Mrs. Brown' is reading that novel in Los Angeles in 1949; and Clarissa Vaughan, nicknamed 'Mrs. Dalloway', is living a version of Woolf's narrative in Greenwich Village at 'the end of the twentieth century' (9). By incorporating intertextual traces from *Mrs. Dalloway*, and by providing an appropriation of that novel in one of his three strands, Cunningham allows us to think about the biographical subject specifically in terms of its engagement with authorship and readership. In so doing, he develops new ways of understanding the relationship of the writer to the text. For the writer-reader-character dynamic enables a return to acknowledging the role of the writer in the interpretation of the work, but not as the Author-God, the single source of authoritative truth refuted by Roland Barthes. Rather, in *The Hours*, subjectivity emerges from the text; it is the relationship between writer, reader, and character, which collectively creates the subject known as "Virginia Woolf".

In his autobiographical article, 'Virginia Woolf, My Mother, and Me', Cunningham describes how *The Hours* was first envisaged solely as 'a contemporary

retelling of *Mrs. Dalloway*'.⁴²⁵ While curious as to 'how much, or how little, Clarissa Dalloway's character would be altered by a world in which women were offered a broader range of possibilities', he soon dismissed this idea on the grounds that 'we already have *Mrs. Dalloway*, a fabulous *Mrs. Dalloway*'.⁴²⁶ Being 'reluctant to abandon the book entirely', he introduced the biographical element, interleaving the Clarissa chapters with 'chapters devoted to the day in Woolf's life when she began writing the book'.⁴²⁷ This diptych was conceived as an evocative tableau: 'I pictured Clarissa Dalloway, and pictured Woolf, her creator, standing behind her. And then, unbidden, I pictured my mother standing behind Woolf'.⁴²⁸ Cunningham's mother became Mrs. Brown, named for 'the old woman in the corner opposite' in Woolf's essay 'Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown', and the novel expanded into its triptych form.⁴²⁹

The film tie-in edition of *The Hours*, published in 2003 to coincide with Stephen Daldry's adaptation, makes a significant alteration to Cunningham's tableau: Nicole Kidman's Virginia is photographed alongside, rather than behind, her "creation". This change is illuminating for two related reasons. Firstly, it is reflective of the prevalent critical approach to *The Hours*, which treats Cunningham's appropriation of *Mrs. Dalloway* and his biographical exploration of Woolf as two distinct projects. Like Meryl Streep and Kidman on the novel's cover, the two strands are perceived to exist alongside each other, but not to inter-relate. Thus critics including Seymour Chatman, Monica Girard, and James Schiff focus on the 'skilful subversion' of *Mrs. Dalloway* offered by Cunningham's "'postcloset" American re-writing', while Gloria Steinem and Laura Savu evaluate Cunningham's success in capturing an extra-textual Woolf.⁴³⁰ While there

⁴²⁵ Michael Cunningham, 'Virginia Woolf, My Mother, and Me', *The Guardian*, 4 June 2011 <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2011/jun/04/virginia-woolf-the-hours-michael-cunningham>> [accessed 28 June 2011].

⁴²⁶ Ibid.

⁴²⁷ Ibid.

⁴²⁸ Ibid.

⁴²⁹ Virginia Woolf, 'Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown', p.9.

⁴³⁰ 'Skilful subversion': Monica Girard, 'Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*: Genesis and Palimpsests', in *Rewriting/Reprising: Plural Intertextualities*, ed. by Georges Lettissier

are exceptions to this mode of reading, including work by Lee, Marilyn Charles, and Natalia Povaylaena which attends to the internal dynamics between Cunningham's three interconnecting strands, his suggestive positioning of Woolf as an informing presence *behind Mrs. Dalloway* has not yet received due analysis.⁴³¹ It is this informing presence to which the second half of this chapter will attend.

The tie-in edition's altered tableau also depicts the difficulties encountered by Laura Brown in connecting the *jouissance* of *Mrs. Dalloway* with the facts of Woolf's life. In contrast to the critical trend outlined above, Laura attempts to engage her reading of the original *Mrs. Dalloway* with what she knows of the extra-textual "Mrs. Woolf", yet the two remain stubbornly separate rather than being mutually informing.

Cunningham implies that Laura is 'reading Virginia Woolf, all of Virginia Woolf, book by book' in search of insights into the writer's life, and of reasons for her death (42).

Laura is, the narrator states, 'fascinated with the idea of a woman like that, a woman of such brilliance, such strangeness, such immeasurable sorrow, a woman who had genius but still filled her pocket with a stone and waded out into a river' (42). Encountering Woolf in 1949, more than twenty years before the publication of her letters, diaries, or memoirs, or of Quentin Bell's biography, Laura's morbid fascination is attuned to the previously cited 'Q.D. Leavis-influenced impressions of Woolf as the delicate madwoman of Bloomsbury, prone to hysteria, obsessed with death'.⁴³² As Kelly Ritter states in a different context, Laura's perspective of Woolf is 'a skewed one that

(Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), pp.50-64 (p.57); "Postcloset" American re-writing': Seymour Chatman, 'Mrs. Dalloway's Progeny: *The Hours* as Second-degree Narrative', in *A Companion to Narrative Theory*, ed. by James Phelan and Peter J. Rabinowitz (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), pp.269-82 (p.281); James Schiff, 'Rewriting Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*: Homage, Sexual Identity, and the Single-Day Novel', *Critique*, 45 (2004), 363-83; Gloria Steinem, quoted by Savu, p.214. See also Savu, p.211.

⁴³¹ Lee, *Virginia Woolf's Nose*, p.51; Marilyn Charles, 'The Hours: Between Safety and Servitude', *The American Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 64 (2004), 305-19 (p.306); Natalia Povaylaena, 'The Issue of Self-Identification in Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* and Cunningham's *The Hours*', in *Woolf Across Cultures*, ed. by Natalya Reinhold (New York: Pace University Press, 2004), pp.269-76 (p.269).

⁴³² Shannon, p.154.

emphasizes her illness and diminishes her personal worth'.⁴³³ Yet in the two passages of *Mrs. Dalloway* embedded in Cunningham's text, Laura is confronted with an affirmation of life that cannot be made to connect with limited popular portrayals of Woolf. Reading Clarissa's ecstatic celebration of 'life, London, this moment of June', Laura wonders 'how [...] could someone who was able to write a sentence like that – who was able to feel everything contained in a sentence like that – come to kill herself?' (41). She 'closes the book and lays it on the nightstand', a symbolic gesture which indicates the irreconcilability of the tone of the passage and the facts of the writer's life (41). Laura's readerly disorientation is, incidentally, reprised on a meta-textual level by Cunningham's juxtaposition of the author's death in the Prologue with Clarissa Vaughan's exclamation, 'What a thrill, what a shock, to be alive on a morning in June' (10). Later in *The Hours*, the passage from *Mrs. Dalloway* beginning with Clarissa's memories of 'throwing a shilling in the Serpentine' and ending with 'Fear no more' prompts a more conclusive interpretation on Laura's part: that 'it is possible to die' (151). By reproducing the passage in its entirety, Cunningham highlights the disconnection between Laura's interpretation of Woolf's lines as suggesting the finality of death, and Clarissa's belief in a post-mortem survival 'in the streets of London, on the ebb and flow of things' (151). Laura's interpretation is founded, then, not in the text itself, but on the image of the embodied writer, 'stepping into a river with a stone in her pocket' (152).

Whereas Laura struggles to engage *Mrs. Dalloway* with what she knows of the extra-textual Woolf, biofiction itself offers a different approach to thinking about Woolf as a subject. The 'Mrs. Woolf' and 'Mrs. Dalloway' sections of *The Hours* offer a way of reading Woolf through the pages of her novel, situating the author not as an embodied person alongside the text, but as an informing presence in its hinterland. While this approach facilitates the re-engaging of Woolf's fiction with the factual details of her life,

⁴³³ Kelly Ritter, 'Making It His Own: *The Hours*', *The Virginia Woolf Miscellany*, 62 (2003), 10-12 (p.11).

it is crucial to differentiate it from the diagnostic readerly attitude favoured by Roger Poole. Superficially, *The Unknown Virginia Woolf* engages in a related project to *The Hours*. Like Cunningham's Laura Brown, Poole was vexed by 'the abyss between the life and the work', which he perceived as the legacy of literary criticism (2). He thus created a forerunner to biofiction, a work that, 'while taking account of works of art', would 'allow [...] itself reference to the life' (4). In practice, however, this resulted in a teleological approach to Woolf's novels, which treated them not 'as 'fiction', 'art' [...] but as records of a life' (2). The novels' status as aesthetic objects was subsumed into their therapeutic function; they became a mere 'account of the mental distress', 'written to master people and states of mind and states of embodiment which had previously mastered her' (3). The implications of this approach are apparent when, turning briefly to Poole's treatment of *Mrs. Dalloway*, Septimus is viewed as a transparent 'persona' for Woolf (266), 'an extremely subtle and cogent symbol for what really was wrong with her' (185-6). Poole extrapolates repeatedly from Septimus's experiences to make assumptions about Woolf's medical treatment, attributing Holmes's advice to 'think about yourself as little as possible' (194) and his belief in the necessity of sudden weight gain to Woolf's own physician, Henry Head (154). Similarly, Constantinople, the city in which Clarissa believes herself to have 'failed' her husband, is framed as interchangeable with 'any of the places mentioned by Leonard as being on their honeymoon itinerary', making *Mrs. Dalloway* itself 'an attempt to 'exorcise' [...] the horror and terror of the months which followed [Woolf's] marriage to Leonard' (184-5). While Quentin Bell also bases certain descriptions of 'Virginia's madness' on *The Voyage Out* and *Mrs. Dalloway*, quoting from the former, for instance, to describe her accompanying insomnia, the difference is one of degree: Poole habitually uses Woolf's fiction as a transparent indicator for her life.⁴³⁴ As a means of writing biography it is

⁴³⁴ Quentin Bell, II, p.11.

speculative; as a mode of literary criticism it is reductive, placing little-to-no emphasis on Woolf's artistic transformation of the experiences of life into the fabric of art.

Whereas Poole, like Laura Brown, strives towards intersubjective engagement with Woolf as an embodied person, Cunningham recuperates the survival of the author through the textual remains. In contrast to the reductively diagnostic readings offered by Poole, *The Hours* facilitates a tentative and open-ended exploration of the different ways in which details from Woolf's life might have been absorbed into her fiction. This interpretation is supported by Girard, who states that 'in *The Hours*, fiction and reality remain tightly imbricate' as 'Cunningham transposes seeds of reality into fiction'.⁴³⁵ Cunningham's approach has much in common with that proposed by Woolf herself in her introduction to the Modern Library edition of *Mrs. Dalloway* (1928).⁴³⁶ Cunningham's familiarity with this introduction is suggested by his close engagement with its revelations: that Septimus did not figure in the first version of the novel, and that Clarissa 'was originally to kill herself'.⁴³⁷ Superficially, Woolf appears to favour biographical readings in framing the author, 'himself and his life', as 'the truth which lies behind those immense facades of fiction'.⁴³⁸ She then complicates this distinction with the caveat 'if life is indeed true and fiction is indeed fictitious'.⁴³⁹ There follows one of Woolf's most suggestive analogies for the permeable distinction between life and literature: '[b]ooks are the flowers or fruit stuck here and there on a tree which has its roots deep down in the earth of our earliest life, of our first experiences'.⁴⁴⁰ This image forms a textual analogue for the many palimpsestic images in *The Hours*, most notably Virginia's vision of a park in which she discovers the first line of *Mrs. Dalloway*.

⁴³⁵ Monica Girard, 'Virginia Woolf's Suicide Notes: Michael Cunningham's Art of Transposing a Life's Epilogue into a Fictitious Prologue', in *Last Letters*, ed. by Sylvie Crinquand (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008), pp.37-57 (p.40).

⁴³⁶ Virginia Woolf, 'An Introduction to *Mrs. Dalloway*', in *The Mrs. Dalloway Reader*, ed. by Francine Prose (Orlando: Harcourt, 2003), pp.10-12.

⁴³⁷ *Ibid.*, p.11.

⁴³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.10-11.

⁴³⁹ *Ibid.*, p.11.

⁴⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

Cunningham states that Virginia, while dreaming in her bed in Hogarth House, 'is beginning to understand that another park lies beneath this one; a park of the underworld, more marvellous and terrible than this; it is the root from which these lawns and arbors grow' (30). The 'lawns and arbors' are interpretable as the 'flowers or fruit' of *Mrs. Dalloway*, a text which has its roots 'deep down' in the marvels and terrors of Virginia's life. The sense of intertextual engagement is heightened in Virginia's waking memory of the dream: '[s]he has dreamed of a park and she has dreamed of a line for her new book - what was it? Flowers; something to do with flowers' (30). This evokes both the first line of Woolf's text, 'Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself' (1), and the central image of her introduction, symbolically rooting the novel in Virginia's own life experiences.

In the first chapter of the 'Mrs. Dalloway' strand, Cunningham attributes to Clarissa Vaughan versions of Woolf's childhood memories as she went on to recall these in 'Sketch of the Past'. By grounding his appropriation of *Mrs. Dalloway* in Woolf's 'earliest life', her 'first experiences', Cunningham provides a microcosm of his creative re-imagining of the author's life through the text of *Mrs. Dalloway* in the 'Mrs. Woolf' strand. Once again, it is crucial to note that this is a textual recuperation of Woolf, one that engages with her literary remains, her memoirs, rather than attempting to recover her as an embodied person. Cunningham states that Clarissa Vaughan's first memory 'seems to involve a snail crawling over the lip of a curb' and that her second is of 'her mother's straw sandals, or maybe the two are reversed' (22). Clarissa's inability to pinpoint the exact origin of perceptions recalls Woolf's vacillation between two geographical and temporal settings in the representation of her own first memory. This, she wrote, was of 'red and purple flowers on a black ground—my mother's dress', but she is unable to decide whether the family was 'in a train or on an omnibus', en route to St. Ives or 'coming back to London' (78). Just as Woolf concluded that 'it is more convenient artistically to suppose that we were going to St. Ives, for that will lead to [...]

the most important of all my memories' (78), Clarissa similarly displaces her earlier memories by summoning a third, 'which more than any other feels deeply, almost supernaturally comforting' (22). This is of 'a branch tapping at the window as the sound of horns began; as if the tree, being unsettled by the wind, had somehow caused the music' (22). The image in turn echoes Woolf's recollection of 'the totality of sensuous pleasure' at 'hearing the waves breaking, one, two, one, two, behind a yellow blind' and 'hearing the blind draw its little acorn across the floor' (78-9).⁴⁴¹ As Andrea Wild notes, both Clarissa and Woolf's memories 'can be broken down into two separate rhythmical and aural sensations', yet only Clarissa invokes a causal relationship between the sensations: 'the tree, being unsettled by the wind, had somehow caused the music' (22).⁴⁴² The attribution of agency to the tree accrues significance when that tree is interpreted as the symbolic culmination of Woolf's acorn; it is as though Woolf's acorn 'had somehow caused' Clarissa's music. Cunningham thus roots his 'Mrs. Dalloway' in Woolf's record of her 'first experiences', using Woolf's memories to 'form a base' which Clarissa Vaughan's life 'stands upon'.⁴⁴³

While this first occurrence of the tree image establishes an engagement between Cunningham's 'Mrs. Dalloway' and 'Sketch of the Past', its reappearance expands the intertextual relationship to include the original *Mrs. Dalloway*. Experiencing a moment of disorientation in her Greenwich Village apartment, Clarissa thinks that 'she lives elsewhere. She lives in a room where a tree taps gently against the glass as someone touches a needle against a phonograph record' (91). This not only recalls Woolf's description of how 'those moments – in the nursery, on the road to the beach – can still be more real than the present moment' (80), but also Clarissa Dalloway's related belief

⁴⁴¹ 'The totality of sensuous pleasure': Sellei, p.42.

⁴⁴² Andrea Wild, 'The Suicide of the Author and his Reincarnation in the Reader: Intertextuality in *The Hours* by Michael Cunningham', *Xchanges*, 1 (2002) <http://infohost.nmt.edu/%7Exchanges/old_xchanges/xchanges/1.2/wild.html> [accessed 22 November 2012].

⁴⁴³ See Virginia Woolf: 'If life has a base that it stands upon, if it is a bowl which one fills and fills and fills [...]', in 'Sketch', p.78.

in the simultaneity of past and present: ‘for she was a child throwing bread to the ducks, between her parents, and at the same time a grown woman’ (41). The juxtaposition implies that, for Clarissa Dalloway, as for Woolf, ‘things which we have felt with great intensity have an existence independent of our minds’ (Sketch, 81). Placing *The Hours* in dialogue with ‘Sketch of the Past’ and *Mrs. Dalloway* thus suggests, as Savu writes in a different context, how aspects of ‘the novelist’s “real life” went into her creation’, supporting Woolf’s view of the indivisibility of life, as recalled in ‘Sketch’, and fiction, as represented by *Mrs. Dalloway*.⁴⁴⁴ This is indicative of the approach to *Mrs. Dalloway* at play in the ‘Mrs. Woolf’ section, in which Cunningham shows Virginia thinking through her “real life” to arrive at her artistic vision, and explores the different ways in which the biographical is absorbed.

As noted by Girard, Woolf’s ‘medical history [...] remain[s] a subtle hovering backdrop’ to *The Hours*, and in the ‘Mrs. Woolf’ strand, Cunningham discerns three aspects of the subject’s mental health through the character of Septimus Warren Smith.⁴⁴⁵ In terms of Woolf’s definition of life-writing as the attempt to combine the ‘granitelike solidity of truth’ with the ‘rainbow-like intangibility of personality’ (NB 149), Woolf’s headaches, her hearing of voices, and her multiple suicide attempts are interpretable as the ‘granitelike’ facts of her life, each of which finds support in both Quentin Bell’s biography and Leonard Woolf’s memoirs. However, as Woolf also stated, ‘the events mean very little unless we know first to whom they happened’, and Cunningham ultimately re-engages these facts with the ‘rainbow’ of Woolf’s personality as refracted through the prism of Clarissa Dalloway (‘Sketch’, p.79). This enables a re-reading of her subjectivity through both *Mrs. Dalloway* itself, and through the ‘Mrs. Dalloway’ strand of *The Hours*. While the biographer, as Quentin Bell acknowledged, ‘may go no further than what I have called the outline’ without indulging in ‘guesswork of a most hazardous kind’, Cunningham thus exploits biofiction’s greater licence to

⁴⁴⁴ Savu, p.239.

⁴⁴⁵ Girard, ‘Virginia Woolf’s Suicide Notes’, p.39.

imagine the subject, and thereby to symbolically reinstate ‘the person to whom things happened’ (‘Sketch’, p.79).⁴⁴⁶

Cunningham’s reference to Virginia’s headaches is supported by Leonard Woolf, who recalls in his memoirs his wife’s ‘peculiar ‘headache’ low down in the back of the head’.⁴⁴⁷ ‘The headache’ is, Cunningham states, ‘always there, waiting, and her periods of freedom, however long, always feel provisional’ (70). He uses pain as a concrete, vividly tangible synecdoche for the unpredictable recurrence of mental illness, described by Quentin Bell as ‘a Dionysian sword above one’s head’.⁴⁴⁸ While Woolf does not include headaches among the symptoms of Septimus Warren Smith, the image Cunningham chooses to describe the pain is the first indicator of the author being imagined through the character. He states that the headache is so severe that Virginia ‘can’t help imagining it as an entity with a life of its own. She might see it while walking with Leonard in the square, a scintillating silver-white mass floating over the cobblestones, randomly spiked, fluid but whole, like a jellyfish’ (69). This recalls a moment in the previous ‘Mrs. Dalloway’ chapter in which Richard Brown, a poet suffering from AIDS who stands in for Septimus Warren Smith, describes his hallucinatory vision as resembling ‘a black, electrified jellyfish’ (59). Placing these passages in dialogue contests Henry Alley’s suggestion that ‘Richard Brown’s story is not really illuminated by Virginia Woolf’s’.⁴⁴⁹ Rather, the internal echo is one of several hints of a relationship between Virginia and Richard. As will be demonstrated, Cunningham then engages intertextually with *Mrs. Dalloway* to suggest a further relationship between Virginia and Septimus.

In the Prologue, Cunningham’s first reference to Virginia’s hearing voices is immediately juxtaposed with a mention of the War: ‘voices murmur behind her;

⁴⁴⁶ Quentin Bell, II, p.109.

⁴⁴⁷ Leonard Woolf, *Beginning Again*, p.76.

⁴⁴⁸ Quentin Bell, I, p.44.

⁴⁴⁹ Henry Alley, ‘Mrs. Dalloway and Three of its Contemporary Children’, *Papers on Language and Literature*, 42 (2006), 401-20 (p.412).

bombers drone in the sky' (3). While both Leonard Woolf and Quentin Bell make reference to Woolf's auditory hallucinations, the juxtaposition suggests that *Mrs. Dalloway* is Cunningham's potential source, in which Septimus hears voices as a result of post-traumatic stress disorder occasioned during the First World War.⁴⁵⁰ This possible echo helps to situate her suicide, like that of Septimus, within 'a broader social and political context [...] the beginning of World War II'.⁴⁵¹ By contrast, the lack of reference to war in the film adaptation of *The Hours* was seen to deprive Woolf's 'radical act of self-determination of context', framing it as wholly due to 'a subjective madness with no clear relationship to the socio-political world'.⁴⁵² Cunningham's engagement with *Mrs. Dalloway* is crystallised in his subsequent description of the nature of Woolf's voices:

Sometimes they are low, disembodied grumblings that coalesce out of the air itself; *sometimes they emanate from behind the furniture or inside the walls*. They are indistinct but full of meaning, undeniably masculine, obscenely old. They are angry, accusatory, disillusioned. They seem sometimes to be conversing, in whispers, among themselves; they seem sometimes to be reciting text. Sometimes, faintly, she can distinguish a word. "*Hurl,*" once, and "under" on two occasions. *A flock of sparrows outside her window once sang, unmistakably, in Greek.* (71; emphasis added)

Both Quentin Bell and Leonard Woolf make reference to the Greek hallucination, but do not connect it to the text of *Mrs. Dalloway* in the same way as Cunningham.⁴⁵³

Cunningham uses his 'Mrs. Dalloway' strand as an intermediary for Woolf's original *Mrs. Dalloway*, providing a way of imagining the author through the character without demanding prior familiarity with Woolf's text. Upon arriving at Richard's apartment in the preceding chapter of *The Hours*, Clarissa overhears him conversing with himself in whispers, and 'can make out the word "hurl"' (55). Richard then describes his visions as 'singing, just now, in a foreign language. It may have been Greek. Archaic Greek.' (59).

⁴⁵⁰ See Leonard Woolf, *Beginning Again*, p.77, and Quentin Bell, I, p.44.

⁴⁵¹ Girard, 'Virginia Woolf's Suicide Notes', p.50.

⁴⁵² Gloria Steinem, quoted in Heather Levy, 'Apothecary and Wild Child: What Lies Between the Acts of 'The Hours' and *Mrs. Dalloway*', *The Virginia Woolf Miscellany*, 13 (2003), 40-49 (p.47); Jeanette McVicker, 'Gaps and Absences in *The Hours*', *The Virginia Woolf Miscellany*, 62 (2003), 8-9 (p.8).

⁴⁵³ See Quentin Bell, I, p.90, and Leonard Woolf, *Beginning Again*, p.77.

The internal echo is reprised on an intertextual level when turning to *Mrs. Dalloway*, in which Septimus, like Virginia, ‘said people were talking from inside the bedroom walls’ (66), and in which ‘[a] sparrow perched on the railing opposite chirped Septimus, Septimus, four or five times over and went on, drawing its notes out, to sing freshly and piercingly in Greek’ (23). By allying Virginia with both Septimus and Richard, Cunningham imagines Woolf’s experiences of mental illness through the filter of *Mrs. Dalloway*, as well as through his own novel. Whereas Poole’s interpretation of Septimus as Woolf’s transparent ‘persona’ imposed the author’s life-story upon the text, Cunningham approaches the relationship from the opposite angle, thinking through the pages of *Mrs. Dalloway* in order to envisage the author’s life.

A final example of these layers of interconnectivity is the overlapping descriptions of the suicides of Virginia, Richard, and Septimus. In the Prologue, Cunningham describes how Virginia is ‘borne quickly along by the current’, so quickly that ‘she appears to be flying’ (7). The imagistic conflation of drowning and flying is a reminder that Woolf’s suicide in 1941 was preceded by an earlier attempt, in 1895, in which she ‘threw herself from a window’.⁴⁵⁴ Yet it also recalls the death of Septimus, who ‘flung himself vigorously, violently, down onto Mrs. Filmer’s area railings’ (151). The resonance between the deaths of author and character is bolstered in the ‘Mrs. Dalloway’ strand, in which, as Mary Joe Hughes notes, ‘Richard Brown [...] succumbs’ to death ‘like Virginia Woolf before him’.⁴⁵⁵ Richard is allied with the author through the description, as well as the fact, of his suicide: throwing himself from a window, he is said to be ‘not jumping, really, but sliding as if from a rock into water’ (223), his final words a quotation from Woolf’s suicide note: ‘I don’t think two people could have been happier than we’ve been’ (200). The association of author and character is ultimately crystallised in the final lines of the ‘Mrs. Woolf’ strand, in which Virginia, having

⁴⁵⁴ Quentin Bell, I, p.90.

⁴⁵⁵ Mary Joe Hughes, ‘Michael Cunningham’s *The Hours* and Postmodern Artistic Representation’, *Critique*, 45 (2004), 349-61 (p.335).

deliberated throughout the day the question of 'how' and 'precisely why' Clarissa Dalloway will kill herself (69), conjures the figure of Septimus to die in her place:

Virginia imagines someone else, yes, someone strong of body but frail-minded; someone with a touch of genius, of poetry, ground under by the wheels of the world, by war and government, by doctors; a someone who is, technically speaking, insane, because that person sees meaning everywhere, knows that trees are sentient beings and sparrows sing in Greek. Yes, someone like that. Clarissa, sane Clarissa - exultant, ordinary Clarissa - will go on, loving London, loving her life of ordinary pleasures, and someone else, a deranged poet, a visionary, will be the one to die. (211)

Situated at the climax of the novel, the reference to Septimus knowing that 'sparrows sing in Greek' recalls the previous revelation that Virginia herself experienced that delusion. Together with the aforementioned twinning of their suicides, this echo conclusively allies Virginia with the 'deranged poet', the 'visionary', imposing a separation between the author and the 'sane Clarissa'. The two are then re-engaged in a contrasting seam which permeates the 'Mrs. Woolf' strand, and which provides a way of imagining Virginia behind 'exultant, ordinary Clarissa'. While Woolf feared that 'the reviewers will say [*Mrs. Dalloway*] is disjointed because of the mad scenes not connecting with the Dalloway scenes', Cunningham unites Septimus and Clarissa by figuring them as contrasting facets of the author's textual remains.⁴⁵⁶

Support for aspects of the author's life being absorbed into Clarissa Dalloway is provided by a diary entry in which Woolf describes Lytton Strachey's response to the character: 'he thinks that she is disagreeable and limited, but that I alternately laugh at her, & cover her, very remarkably, with myself'.⁴⁵⁷ Strachey's view is revived by Gordon's interpretation of *Mrs. Dalloway* as the novel in which Woolf learned 'as Katherine Mansfield had advised, to "merge" with someone alien'.⁴⁵⁸ In *The Hours*, Cunningham illuminates three aspects of Clarissa Dalloway that are "covered" by the writer: her love for London, her relationship with her servants, and her attraction to Sally

⁴⁵⁶ Virginia Woolf, 'Diary entry for 13 December 1924', in *A Writer's Diary*, p.69 (p.69).

⁴⁵⁷ Virginia Woolf, 'Diary entry for 18 June 1925', in *A Writer's Diary*, pp.78-9 (p.78).

⁴⁵⁸ Lyndall Gordon, *Virginia Woolf: A Writer's Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p.189.

Seton. Virginia's love for London is vividly suggested in a passage in which she decides spontaneously to buy a ticket to Paddington and spend the evening walking in the capital:

What a lark! What a plunge! It seems that she can survive, she can prosper, if she has London around her; if she disappears for a while into the enormity of it, brash and brazen now under a sky empty of threat, all the uncurtained windows (here a woman's grave profile, there the crown of a carved chair), the traffic, men and women going lightly by in evening clothes; the smells of wax and petrol, of perfume, as someone, somewhere (on one of these broad avenues, in one of these white, porticoed houses), plays a piano; as horns bleat and dogs bay, as the whole raucous carnival turns and turns, blazing, shimmering; as Big Ben strikes the hours, which fall in leaden circles over the partygoers and the omnibuses, over stone Queen Victoria seated before the palace on her shelves of geraniums, over the parks that lie sunk in their shadowed solemnity behind black iron fences.
(168)

This passage situates the author behind the moment in *Mrs. Dalloway* in which Clarissa contemplates the 'particular hush, or solemnity' before the hour strikes, and goes on to anatomise her love for 'life; London; this moment of June' (*Mrs. D* 2). James Schiff attributes to Cunningham an interest in 'appropriating or extending the stylistic techniques employed by Woolf', and this is supported by Cunningham's engagement with Woolf's passage on the level of form as well as content.⁴⁵⁹ He appropriates Woolf's use of alliteration, parentheses, active verbs, and her incorporation of multiple sub-clauses into the framework of an extended sentence. Thus 'brash and brazen' recalls 'brass bands and barrel organs'; the two parenthetical phrases recall '(drink their downfall)'; 'blazing, shimmering' recalls 'shuffling and swinging', and the systematic iteration of phrases recalls Woolf's accumulative structure (2). Cunningham also cites individual words and phrases from *Mrs. Dalloway*, namely 'Big Ben strikes', 'leaden circles', and 'omnibuses' (2). He includes a companion passage in the first chapter of the 'Mrs. Dalloway' strand, in which Clarissa Vaughan similarly contemplates her love for Manhattan, concluding that 'it has to do with all this [...] [w]heels buzzing on concrete, the roil and shock of it; sheets of bright spray blowing from the fountain as young

⁴⁵⁹ Schiff, p.366.

shirtless men toss a Frisbee and vendors (from Peru, from Guatemala) send pungent, meaty smoke up from their quilted silver carts [...]’ (15). By thus establishing an internal as well as an intertextual resonance, Cunningham is again able to situate the author behind the character without demanding prior familiarity with *Mrs. Dalloway*. This evokes his desire that *The Hours* should “work both ways,” appealing to readers who “know” Woolf and to those who do not’.⁴⁶⁰

In thus entering into dialogue with *Mrs. Dalloway*’s sentiments, Cunningham enables an illuminative reading of the novel, one which views Clarissa’s love for the capital as indicative of Woolf’s own longing to exchange the inertia of Richmond for the vigour of city life. Rather than imposing the facts of the author’s life upon the reluctant text, he proceeds to Woolf’s life by way of *Mrs. Dalloway*, as evinced by his close affiliation with that novel versus his comparative infidelity to the details of Woolf’s life. Thus the aforementioned description of Virginia’s proposed trip to London subverts a recorded incident in which Leonard Woolf failed to arrive in Richmond when expected, and his wife bought a ticket to London to look for him rather than “escaping” for her own ends.⁴⁶¹ As though in agreement that ‘the events mean very little unless we know first to whom they happened’ (Sketch, p.79), Cunningham re-invents the documented truths to bring them in line with the underlying feeling perceived in *Mrs. Dalloway*. This is the author’s fear that ‘her life (already past forty!) is being measured away’ (169), and that it is ‘better to die raving mad in London than evaporate in Richmond’ (71). That this feeling was articulated through *Mrs. Dalloway* is further suggested in the final chapter of the ‘Mrs. Woolf’ strand, in which Cunningham juxtaposes Virginia’s plans for her imminent return to the city with a direct citation from Woolf’s novel. He writes that ‘she will haunt the streets, see everything, fill herself up with stories . . . life; London . . .’ (209). Cunningham’s emphasis on Woolf’s abiding love for ‘life’ and ‘London’

⁴⁶⁰ Michael Cunningham, quoted in Karen L. Levenback, ‘Review of *The Hours: A Novel* by Michael Cunningham and *Mr. Dalloway: A Novella* by Robin Lippincott’, *Woolf Studies Annual*, 6 (2000), 198-202 (p.201).

⁴⁶¹ See Quentin Bell, II, pp.100-1.

symbolically redresses the dissonance perceived by Laura Brown between the facts of the author's life and the text of *Mrs. Dalloway*, re-engaging the author with the *joie de vivre* of Clarissa.

Cunningham also perceives an entire hinterland behind Clarissa's relationship with her maid, Lucy. His implicit textual analogue is the scene in which Clarissa mends her dress while Lucy readies the drawing room for the evening's party:

And Lucy stopped at the drawing-room door, holding the cushion, and said, very shyly, turning a little pink, couldn't she help to mend that dress?

But, said Mrs Dalloway, she had quite enough on her hands already, quite enough of her own to do without that.

'But, thank you, Lucy, oh, thank you,' said Mrs Dalloway, and thank you, thank you, she went on saying (sitting down on her sofa with her dress over her knees, her scissors, her silks), thank you, thank you, she went on saying in gratitude to her servants generally for helping her to be like this, to be what she wanted, generous-hearted. Her servants liked her. (37)

Cunningham grounds this scene in an altercation between Virginia and her cook, Nelly Boxall. By contrasting Virginia's managerial skills with Clarissa Dalloway's intended attributes, Cunningham frames the character as Virginia's attempt to 'puzzle through the paradigmatic social persona that [...] eluded her':⁴⁶²

Why is it so difficult dealing with servants? Virginia's mother managed beautifully. Vanessa manages beautifully. Why is it so difficult to be firm and kind with Nelly, to command her respect and her love? Virginia knows just how she should enter the kitchen, how her shoulders should be set, how her voice should be motherly but not familiar, something like that of a governess speaking to a beloved child. Oh, let's have something more than pears, Nelly, Mr. Woolf is in a mood today and I'm afraid pears won't do nearly enough to sweeten his disposition. It should be so simple.

She will give Clarissa Dalloway great skill with servants, a manner that is intricately kind and commanding. Her servants will love her. They will do more than she asks. (87)

In light of this moment, the scene in *Mrs. Dalloway* previously cited exemplifies how Clarissa is "loved" by her servant; Lucy, in offering to 'help mend that dress', willingly does more than her mistress asks. Yet behind Clarissa's apparently effortless 'skill with servants', Cunningham perceives an author grappling with the changing roles of mistress and employee between the wars, abundantly supported by Woolf's description of her

⁴⁶² Charles, p.305.

volatile relationship with Nelly in her diaries. This indicates how, as Maria Lindgren Leavenworth argues, ‘as we repeatedly go back to the very creation of the preceding text we are forced to read it differently’.⁴⁶³ Virginia’s recognition of the need to be ‘firm and kind with Nelly’ recalls a previous description of Laura Brown’s struggles to treat her son ‘firmly and kindly’, symbolically conflating the role of skilful employer with that of the capable mother (47). The association is bolstered by Virginia’s recollection that her ‘mother managed beautifully’ and that Vanessa, a mother of three, also ‘manages beautifully’. Cunningham shows Virginia measuring herself against the familial model of Victorian service, wherein, as Light notes, ‘mistresses were to be like mothers to their charges, softening the economic relation and such power as they actually wielded’.⁴⁶⁴ Cunningham’s Virginia manifests a deep ambiguity towards this construction of the mistress-employee relationship. Despite smoothing over a dispute between Leonard and typesetter Ralph Partridge ‘in much the same way her own mother might have made light of a servant’s blunder during dinner’(74), Virginia insists that ‘she will not be the mother who intervenes, much as they beg her to with their eager smiles and wounded eyes’ (72). In thus resisting the role of matriarch to her “charges”, Virginia queries a model that, as Quentin Bell writes, can only function effectively ‘when both sides regard it as proper and natural’.⁴⁶⁵

Cunningham indicates how the advent of the twentieth century brought with it an erosion of that model, as supported by one of his sources, ‘Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown’. In that essay, Woolf used ‘the character of one’s cook’ as a synecdoche for the change in human character that took place ‘on or about December 1910’.⁴⁶⁶ She idealised the reconfigured relationship of Georgian mistress to her employee, ‘a creature of sunlight and fresh air; in and out of the drawing room, now to borrow *The Daily*

⁴⁶³ Maria Lindgren Leavenworth, “‘A Life as Potent and Dangerous as Literature Itself’: Intermediated Moves from *Mrs. Dalloway* to *The Hours*’, *Journal of Popular Culture*, 43 (2010), 503-23 (p.507).

⁴⁶⁴ Light, p.26.

⁴⁶⁵ Quentin Bell, II, p.56.

⁴⁶⁶ Virginia Woolf, ‘Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown’, p.4.

Herald, now to ask advice about a hat'.⁴⁶⁷ In *Mrs. Dalloway*, published the following year, Clarissa has a similarly unproblematic relationship with the housemaid Lucy, another 'creature of fresh air and sunlight' who flits 'in and out of the drawing room', sharing details of her theatre parties and attempting to re-arrange the ornaments.⁴⁶⁸ Yet in *The Hours*, Cunningham reveals the substratum of ambiguity and uncertainty that underlay this 'more equal form of contact between employer and employed'.⁴⁶⁹ This is suggested by his use of levels: rather than raising the 'leviathan' to the drawing room, as in 'Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown', Virginia is forced to join her cook in the 'lower depths' of the cellar, only ascending with her as far as the kitchen.⁴⁷⁰ Virginia remembers the war in terms of 'the endless waiting in the cellar, the whole household crammed in together, and having to make conversation for hours with Nelly and Lottie' (169). The detail emerges from Woolf's description of this experience as 'a picture of slum life, 'talking bold & jocular small talk for 4 hours with the servants to ward off hysteria'.⁴⁷¹ Joining Nelly in the kitchen in peacetime, Virginia struggles to regain an even footing with her servant, which is exacerbated by her own ambiguous relationship with food. When Nelly prepares a lamb pie for luncheon, Virginia must remind herself that 'food is not sinister. Do not think of putrefaction or feces; do not think of the face in the mirror' (85). The 'face in the mirror' is an image from 'Sketch of the Past' that Woolf associated with being 'ashamed or afraid of my own body' (Sketch, p.82). In summoning this spectre in connection with Nelly, Cunningham indicates how, in Light's words, 'the figure of the servant was frequently associated with guilt and shame at a

⁴⁶⁷ Ibid., p.5.

⁴⁶⁸ See *Mrs. Dalloway*, pp.37-8. The detail that Lucy 'turned the crystal dolphin towards the clock' (p.36) may have been biographical. See Light, p.151: 'Woolf noted that even her char moved an ornament on the mantelpiece at Monk's House to leave it 'askew' each day, a symptomatic act which, Woolf imagined, showed the desire for ornament and her thirst for art (it might equally have been an assertion of independence)'.

⁴⁶⁹ Quentin Bell, II, p.56.

⁴⁷⁰ Virginia Woolf, 'Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown', p.5.

⁴⁷¹ Virginia Woolf, quoted in Light, p.141.

longing for bodily life devalued as merely animal or low'.⁴⁷² Clarissa's relationship with Lucy thus enables Cunningham to think further about Virginia as an employer, as a "mother", and as a body, furthering his sustained exploration of Woolf's subjectivity through the text of *Mrs. Dalloway*.

Finally, Cunningham enables a revelatory reading of Clarissa Dalloway's multiple losses: of mother, of sister, and of first love. In *Sexuality and the Shaping of Modernism* (1998), a stated, 'illuminating', source for Cunningham, Joseph Boone describes the 'loss of female symbiosis' as 'a repeated, shattering experience in Clarissa's psychological development'.⁴⁷³ Such losses include her mother, the memory of whom, 'walking in the garden in a grey hat', causes Clarissa's eyes to 'fill with tears' (178-9), and the sister whose 'death by a falling tree' is indexed to Clarissa's loss of faith and the formation of her 'atheist's religion' (78).⁴⁷⁴ Yet the most significant loss in *Mrs. Dalloway* is Clarissa's loss of Sally Seton, whose kiss she remembers decades later as 'the most exquisite moment of her whole life' (34). This is echoed in the 'Mrs. Dalloway' strand of *The Hours*, in which Clarissa Vaughan recalls a kiss with Richard that 'had seemed like the beginning of happiness', and which she only later realises 'was happiness' (98). In the 'Mrs. Woolf' strand, Cunningham shows Virginia tracing the process by which the girl who sends Clarissa 'cold with excitement', gives her 'Othello's feeling' (*Mrs. Dalloway* 33), is ultimately to be lost to a house in Manchester and 'five enormous boys' (174):

Clarissa will have had a love: a woman. Or a girl, rather; yes, a girl she knew during her own girlhood; one of those passions that flare up when one is young—when love and ideas seem truly to be one's personal discovery, never before apprehended in quite this way; during that brief period of youth when one feels free to say or do anything; to shock, to strike out; to refuse the future that's been offered and demand another, far grander and stranger, devised and owned wholly by oneself, owing nothing to old Aunt Helena, who sits every night in her accustomed chair and wonders aloud whether Plato and Morris are suitable reading for young women. Clarissa Dalloway, in her first youth, will love another

⁴⁷² Light, p.76.

⁴⁷³ Joseph Allen Boone, *Libidinal Currents: Sexuality and the Shaping of Modernism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p.196.

⁴⁷⁴ See Boone, p.196-7.

girl, Virginia thinks; Clarissa will believe that a rich, riotous future is opening before her, but eventually she will come to her senses, as young women do, and marry a suitable man. (81-2)

Superficially, this passage reads as a straightforward summary of Clarissa Dalloway's trajectory, fleshed out with textual detail from Woolf's novel: that Clarissa 'read Plato [...], read Morris', books which 'had to be wrapped in brown paper' to appease Aunt Helena (*Mrs. D* 32). A more illuminative reading is, however, enabled by a subsequent passage in which Virginia contemplates the changes in her own relationship with Vanessa. 'One moment,' she thinks, 'there are two young sisters cleaving to each other, breast against breast, lips ready, and then the next moment, it seems, there are two middle-aged married women standing together on a modest bit of lawn before a body of children' (116). When the passages are placed in dialogue, Vanessa is situated behind Sally Seton, as the 'girl [Virginia] loved during her own girlhood' (81), before each sister turned to 'a suitable man' (82), and the two became the 'middle-aged married women' of 1923 (116). This is coherent with Kate Haffey's reading of *Mrs. Dalloway's* kiss as a moment situated outside the 'cause and effect logic' of heterosexual narratives moving Clarissa towards marriage.⁴⁷⁵ The echoes of 'Old Bloomsbury' in Cunningham's description of Clarissa's trajectory then further situate Virginia and Vanessa behind Clarissa and Sally. The attribution to Clarissa of a belief in a 'rich, riotous future', 'devised and owned wholly by oneself' echoes Woolf's description of the Stephens' move from Hyde Park Gate to Bloomsbury, a world in which 'everything was going to be new; everything was going to be different. Everything was on trial.'⁴⁷⁶ Virginia's wry assertion that her character will 'come to her senses, as young women do, and marry a suitable man' then evokes Woolf's recollection of the 'horrible necessity' implied by her sister's statement, 'Of course, I can see that we

⁴⁷⁵ Kate Haffey, 'Exquisite Moments and the Temporality of the Kiss in *Mrs. Dalloway* and *The Hours*', *Narrative*, 18 (2010), 137-62 (p.138).

⁴⁷⁶ Virginia Woolf, 'Old Bloomsbury', in *Moments of Being*, ed. by Schulkind, pp.43-61 (pp.46-7).

shall all marry. It's bound to happen'.⁴⁷⁷ Collectively, these resonances figure Clarissa's loss of Sally as revelatory of Woolf's own loss, through adulthood and marriage, of her early symbiosis with her sister.

Clarissa Dalloway's kiss with Sally Seton is then framed by Cunningham as Virginia's attempt to fight this loss, to commemorate her abiding love for Vanessa in a form that 'would remain'.⁴⁷⁸ Woolf describes the kiss as follows:

Peter Walsh and Joseph Breitkopf went on about Wagner. She and Sally fell a little behind. Then came the most exquisite moment of her whole life passing a stone urn with flowers in it. Sally stopped; picked a flower; kissed her on the lips. The whole world might have turned upside down! (34)

Woolf suggests a tableau in which Clarissa and Sally are positioned behind Peter and Joseph, a tableau replicated by Cunningham's description of a kiss shared by the adult Virginia and Vanessa 'behind Nelly's broad, moody back' (210). Clarissa Dalloway's 'most exquisite moment' is thereby grounded in a sisterly kiss that, while 'innocent enough, [...] feels like the most delicious and forbidden of pleasures' (154). Later that night, Virginia's recollection of that moment prompts the decision that Clarissa and Sally will have shared 'one kiss, like the single enchanted kisses in fairy tales, and Clarissa will carry the memory of that kiss, the soaring hope of it, all her life' (210). It is the 'soaring hope' of this kiss that, Cunningham suggests, sustains the character in the face of her aforementioned losses, indicating how, in *Mrs. Dalloway*, 'the preservation of [Clarissa's] feelings for Sally is essential to her life'.⁴⁷⁹ Cunningham has Virginia reflect that 'Clarissa will have kissed a woman, only once. Clarissa will be bereaved, deeply lonely, but she will not die. She will be too much in love with life, with London' (212). This juxtaposition of desire with *joie de vivre* recalls Virginia's earlier inflection of her kiss with Vanessa with 'something not unlike what Virginia wants from London, from life [...] a love complex and ravenous' (210). Collectively, the images work to

⁴⁷⁷ Ibid., p.53.

⁴⁷⁸ Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, ed. by Margaret Drabble (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p.142.

⁴⁷⁹ Haffey, p.156.

situate Virginia's ongoing love for her sister, for London, and for life itself behind the kiss that "saves" Clarissa Dalloway from suicide.

The 'Mrs. Woolf' strand ends, then, with Clarissa granted a reprieve, 'to go on, loving London, loving her life of ordinary pleasures' (211). Situated behind her is the author, poised on the brink of her return to city life, 'a woman who will move to London' (210). By using Clarissa to reflect the subject at one of her most optimistic moments, Cunningham symbolically redresses the dissonance perceived by Laura Brown between the fact of the author's suicide and the prevalent tone of *Mrs. Dalloway*. Whereas Heather Levy complained that 'the double framing of [Daldry's] film with Virginia's suicide pathologises Woolf's life', Cunningham's Prologue effectively dispenses with the moment which so fascinates Laura, that of an extra-textual Virginia 'walking into a river with a stone in her pocket' (152).⁴⁸⁰ Having staged the death of the author as an embodied person, Cunningham reconstructs her survival through her textual remains, of which Septimus and Clarissa represent two contrasting facets. Boone writes that 'Septimus Warren Smith figures as Clarissa's obvious double, a psychological and figural mirror of the fears she represses in the name of connection'.⁴⁸¹ Cunningham reunites these doubled characters in the figure of the author. Taking as the 'granite' of fact the resonances between Virginia and Septimus, the headaches, the auditory hallucinations, and the suicide attempts, he re-engages these with the 'rainbow' of personality as refracted through Clarissa Dalloway, exploring Virginia's relationship with sister and servants, and her abiding love for 'life, London, this moment of June' (41). By thus uniting granite and rainbow, Cunningham replaces the image of the embodied writer 'walking into a river' (152) with a textual representation of 'the person to whom things happened' ('Sketch', p.79).

⁴⁸⁰ Levy, p.47.

⁴⁸¹ Boone, p.193.

It is now possible to return to this chapter's central premise, and to consider how far biofiction about Woolf succeeds in solving the central problem of life-writing as Woolf perceived it. In 'Sketch of the Past', and in 'The New Biography', Woolf suggested that the subject, 'the person to whom things happened', had a tendency to go missing from the text because of the biographer's difficulty in combining the 'granitelike solidity' of fact with the 'rainbow-like intangibility' of personality. I have contended that the techniques of biofiction about Woolf have their origins in techniques developed by the 'New Biographers' for the more accurate transmission of the subject. Thus while biography pre-Boswell emphasised fact at the expense of personality, action at the expense of the subject's inner life, and while the Victorian biographer was constrained by the contents of the archive and by his own 'idea of goodness' (NB 151), the 'New Biographer' 'chooses, he synthesises', developing techniques of poetic précis that illuminated 'the pith and essence' of the subject's character (152-3). Biofiction about Woolf, I have argued, is similarly able to synthesise, and to hone in on the anecdotal, the incidental, while its focalisation of the subject's thoughts develops the New Biographers' emphasis on personality over 'action which is evident' (150). Even more significantly, Biofiction's use of 'the devices of fiction in dealing with real life' extends techniques attributed to Nicolson in *Some People* (NB 152) and Strachey in *Elizabeth and Essex*, and used by Woolf in *Flush* and *Orlando*, flouting Woolf's ultimate insistence on the need 'to choose' between fiction and fact (AB 124).

I have shown how, in *Mitz*, Nunez synthesises and revises a plethora of different "Virginia Woolfs", satisfying Woolf's prediction, in 'The Art of Biography', that life-writing would respond to increasing media saturation by admitting 'contradictory versions of the same face' (125). In so doing, Nunez predominantly maintains a conservative distance from the subject, adopting the third-person limited narration characteristic of biography even while multiplying kaleidoscopically the single, defining thesis favoured by the biographer. Her fleeting insights into Mitz or Virginia's

consciousness then come to a head in a passage focalised through the marmoset herself. This passage ‘show[s] us the way in which others may advance’, suggesting how Virginia Woolf, a subject objectified by conventional biography, might similarly be revived through the focalisation of a voice (AB 124). Proceeding in the direction in which Nunez, in her ultimate empathic merging with the animal’s consciousness, ‘airily waved [her] hand’ (NB 155), Cunningham enters the mind of Woolf herself as she embarks upon the creation of *Mrs. Dalloway*. Imagining the biographical subject through the filter of her own text, Cunningham is able to solve the central problem of life-writing as Woolf perceived it. *The Hours* merges truth, as represented by Septimus, and personality, as represented by Clarissa, into ‘one seamless whole’, thereby reinstating the elusive subject, Virginia Woolf, at the forefront of the text (NB 149).

Like *Mitz*, *The Hours* thus facilitates a different recuperation of subjectivity to conventional biography, which may be attributed to two related factors. Firstly, Cunningham embraces the impossibility of recovering the extra-textual author. This contrasts with the biographical study offered by Poole, which imposed upon the unwilling texts a thesis derived from facts about the writer. In terms of the tableau suggested by Cunningham in ‘Virginia Woolf, My Mother, and Me’, Poole situated the author in front of, rather than behind, her ‘creation’, and forced *Mrs. Dalloway* into alignment with the events of that author’s life. Conversely, Cunningham turns the irrecoverable nature of the body to his advantage. *The Hours* proceeds to the author by way of the text, thereby replacing the body with a tissue of quotations, and recognising identity as something discursively produced. This reading redresses the book jacket’s altered tableau mentioned at the start of this section, wherein author and character were juxtaposed without connecting, but does so in a manner that listens to the textuality of the text.

Secondly, *The Hours* exploits fully the potential for imaginative exploration enabled by biofiction, but prohibited by “straight” biography’s necessary adherence to

verifiable fact. The limitations of conventional biography are encapsulated by Woolf in her diary, which records

my sense, waking early, of being visited again by ‘the spirit of delight’. “Rarely, rarely comest thou, spirit of delight” That I was singing this time last year; and sang so poignantly that I never have forgotten it, or my vision of a fin rising on a wide blank sea. No biographer could possibly guess this important fact about my life in the late summer of 1926. Yet biographers pretend they know people.⁴⁸²

It was this passage that prompted Quentin Bell to acknowledge that ‘to know the psyche of Virginia Woolf, and that is what she is in effect asking of a biographer, one would either have to be God or Virginia, preferably God’.⁴⁸³ Yet the writer of biofiction, by renouncing any claim to empirically ‘know’ the subject’s psyche, affords himself the licence to imagine. Thus Cunningham’s situating of a moment of intimacy between Virginia and Vanessa behind Clarissa Dalloway’s kiss with Sally Seton constitutes imaginative exploration, whereas in a biography it would be ‘guesswork of a most hazardous kind’.⁴⁸⁴ Biofiction’s capacity for alternative insight is crystallised in Cunningham’s attributing to Virginia the vision of ‘a fin breaking through dark waves’ (167). Whereas Woolf asserted that ‘no biographer could possible guess this important fact about my life’, Cunningham suggests that the writer of biofiction, able to focalise his subject’s thoughts, conceivably might. Ultimately, *The Hours* succeeds in ‘nett[ing] that fin in the waste of water’, offering an intertextual reimagining of ‘the person to whom things happened’.⁴⁸⁵

⁴⁸² Virginia Woolf, ‘Diary entry for 4 September 1927’, in Quentin Bell, II, p.109.

⁴⁸³ Quentin Bell, II, p.109.

⁴⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁵ Virginia Woolf, ‘Diary entry for 7 February 1931’, in *A Writer’s Diary*, p.169 (p.169).

Chapter Four: The ‘Supreme Portrait Artist’ and the ‘Mistress of the Phrase’: Contesting Oppositional Portrayals of Woolf and Bell, Life and Art, in Susan Sellers’s *Vanessa and Virginia* (2008)

*I was the carnal sister, you were the intellectual, so the story runs. The truth is rather different.*⁴⁸⁶

Whereas Michael Cunningham’s *The Hours* confines itself to a single day, Susan Sellers’s *Vanessa and Virginia* traces its subjects’ lives across a period of time unrivalled in biofiction about Woolf. An epistolary novel, it takes the form of an extended letter from Vanessa to Virginia written after the latter’s death. Moments from the sisters’ childhoods and adult lives are interleaved with reflective passages from the mature Vanessa in an episodic structure, creating the effect of uninterrupted speech. Such narrative continuity recalls Bell’s later letters to Woolf, in which she ‘dispenses with conventional openings and simply begins, as if speaking to someone seated beside her, or opening a vein that runs continually between two people’.⁴⁸⁷ As Woolf wrote, ‘we are too intimate for letter writing; style dissolves as though in a furnace; all the blood and bones come through.’⁴⁸⁸

Sellers’s novel is, significantly, a *lost* letter, and ends with the narration of its own destruction: ‘I untie my parcel and dip the first sheet in the water. The words blur. When the last one has been released I make my dedication. This story is for you’ (181). By staging Vanessa “drowning her book”, Sellers imbues her “recovered” novel with the

⁴⁸⁶ Susan Sellers, *Vanessa and Virginia* (Ross-shire: Two Ravens Press, 2008), p.76. Hereafter referenced parenthetically.

⁴⁸⁷ Regina Marler, ‘Introduction to Chapter Eight’, in *The Selected Letters of Vanessa Bell*, ed. by Regina Marler (London: Bloomsbury, 1993), p.443.

⁴⁸⁸ Virginia Woolf to Vanessa Bell, 7 August 1908. *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, I (1975), pp.342-4 (p.343).

intrigue of a 'rediscovered lost manuscript'.⁴⁸⁹ Her work is thus boldly offered within another context, that of Vanessa Bell's missing papers, as supported by Sellers's acknowledgement that she was 'driven by an increasing 'sense' of ellipses in the surviving record'.⁴⁹⁰ The lost documents include a memoir of George Duckworth which, Woolf wrote, 'so flooded me with horror that I cant [sic] be pure minded on the subject', and the autobiographical 'jumble of all the people and incidents I can remember up to the age of 14' that inspired Woolf's 'Reminiscences' (1907-8), later published in *Moments of Being*.⁴⁹¹ Sellers engages with the events described by Woolf in 'Reminiscences', '22 Hyde Park Gate' (1920), and 'Old Bloomsbury' (1920), along with Bell's 'Notes on Virginia's Childhood' (1949) and 'Life at Hyde Park Gate after 1897' (c.1950). Her use of these sources is threefold: she rewrites events to give them different outcomes, creates new versions of them, or collates descriptions of events from more than one source. One example of a collated image is an account of George Duckworth on the eve of Vanessa's first ball: 'he raises his eyeglass and appraises me. There is no difference between this gesture and his scrutiny of the Arab mare he has bought for my daily rides' (22). This blends Bell's reference to 'a lovely grey Arab mare' in 'Life at Hyde Park Gate after 1897' with Woolf's description of Duckworth's gaze in 'Sketch of the Past': 'he looked me up and down for a moment as if I were a horse brought into the show ring' (153).⁴⁹² Readers familiar with 'Sketch of the Past' thus experience the uncanny effect of Vanessa viewing events through the veil of her sister's perceptions. This upholds Woolf's belief that the sisters had 'the same pair of eyes, only different

⁴⁸⁹ Cora Kaplan uses this phrase to refer to Henry James's reinvention by David Lodge and Colm Tóibín: 'This reinvention, moreover, has been accompanied with the sort of publicity that typically greets the rediscovered lost manuscript', p.63.

⁴⁹⁰ Susan Sellers and Elizabeth Wright, 'Painting in Prose: Performing the Artist in Susan Sellers's *Vanessa and Virginia*', in *Making Sense: For an Effective Aesthetics*, ed. by Lorna Collins and Elizabeth Rush (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2011), pp.133-40 (p.133).

⁴⁹¹ Virginia Woolf to Vanessa Bell, 3 May 1934. *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, V (1979), pp.299-300 (p.299); Vanessa Bell to Virginia Woolf, 30 July 1907. *Letters*, pp.56-7 (p.57). Bell writes, 'My biography is not fit to be read and has not got much forwarder lately [...] Why don't you write yours?'

⁴⁹² Vanessa Bell, 'Life at Hyde Park Gate after 1897', in *Sketches in Pen and Ink*, ed. by Lia Giachero (London: Pimlico, 1998), pp.67-82 (p.77)

spectacles', allowing Vanessa, as Bell put it, to 'borrow your green eyes in my old age'.⁴⁹³

By refocusing attention on the similarities between the sisters rather than on their differences, Sellers proposes revisions to narrow, reified constructions of Bell and Woolf as the 'proper' versus the 'inauthentic' woman respectively. Diane Gillespie notes the convenience of these as biographical and critical shorthands:

It serves the purposes of Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell, or their later biographers and critics, to think of the virginal, barren woman versus the sensual, maternal one; the domestically inept versus the practical and competent; the dependent versus the independent; the conversationalist versus the silent listener; the mentally unstable versus the sane.⁴⁹⁴

One such dualism is challenged by Sellers: that Vanessa 'was the carnal sister' and Virginia 'the intellectual', a mode of representation evident in Henry James's opposition of the 'crushed strawberry glow of Vanessa's beauty' to 'the promise of Virginia's printed wit'.⁴⁹⁵ Sellers aims to reveal the 'truth' behind this 'story'. She suggests that Virginia enjoyed a rich, if unconventional, sensual life, while the fact of the novel attests to Vanessa's considerable literary gifts. Sellers's fictional re-negotiation of the relationship between her subjects is, she acknowledges, informed by 'the research of numerous critics and scholars, and in particular to four extraordinary biographies: Frances Spalding's *Vanessa Bell*, Angelica Garnett's *Deceived with Kindness*, Jane Dunn's *Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell: A Very Close Conspiracy* and Hermione Lee's *Virginia Woolf* (Acknowledgements, n.pag.). Dunn's popular biography is singled out for further attention at this juncture because of the way in which Dunn, like Sellers, explicitly foregrounds the relationship between the sisters. Dunn's thesis is that 'the sense of never being loved enough, especially by a mother who had prematurely

⁴⁹³ Virginia Woolf to Vanessa Bell, 17 August 1937. *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, VI (1980), pp.158-9 (p.158); Vanessa Bell to Virginia Woolf, 7 December 1904. *Letters*, pp.26-8 (p.27).

⁴⁹⁴ Diane Gillespie, *The Sisters' Arts: The Writing and Painting of Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell* (New York: Syracuse, 1988), p.5.

⁴⁹⁵ Henry James to Anne Thackeray Richie, 3 December 1908. *Selected Letters*, ed. by Leon Edel (London: Hart Davis, 1956), pp.374-75 (p.374).

abandoned them, united the sisters in an emotional symbiosis, that to Virginia particularly was central to her life'.⁴⁹⁶ Thus despite the 'polarities in their characters', which led them to 'divide [...] the worlds of art and experience into two', there cohered a bond which 'could be both inhibiting and inspiring'.⁴⁹⁷ Dunn provides a template for Sellers's resistance to oppositional portrayals of Woolf and Bell, asserting that 'the simple equation that Vanessa had chosen life at the expense of her art and Virginia had chosen art at the expense of life [...] was only one construction in the intimate interlacing of their lives'.⁴⁹⁸ Instead, Dunn perceives the sisters' relationship as one of 'complementary intimacy', asking, in the words of *Flush*, 'could it be that each completed what was dormant in the other?'.⁴⁹⁹

Dunn's further suggestion that 'each [sister] had a distinctive influence on the art of the other' is redolent of the argument of Diane Gillespie's *The Sisters' Arts: The Writing and Painting of Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell* (1988).⁵⁰⁰ Gillespie suggests that Woolf and Bell 'identified with each other as artistic rebels and experimenters', often finding themselves 'stimulated by each other's work or capable of creating parallel works'.⁵⁰¹ Indeed, she argues that 'the amount of potential each did fulfil was due in large part to the professional example of the other'.⁵⁰² A reference point for Dunn and an implicit one for Sellers, Gillespie's monograph has three main objectives: 'to shift the emphasis in the ongoing discussion of Virginia Woolf and the visual arts from Roger Fry to Vanessa Bell; to shift the emphasis from the psychological to the professional and aesthetic and, in these contexts, to define and reveal more fully the pervasive role of the visual arts in Woolf's writing'.⁵⁰³ Like Dunn, Gillespie focuses attention on the

⁴⁹⁶ Jane Dunn, *Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell: A Very Close Conspiracy* (London: Pimlico, 1996), p.115.

⁴⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.3, 1, 4.

⁴⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.217.

⁴⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.5.

⁵⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰¹ Gillespie, pp.8-10.

⁵⁰² *Ibid.*, p.7.

⁵⁰³ *Ibid.*, p.2.

relationship between the sisters, but her predominant accent is critical rather than biographical. Her ‘emphasis’, she states, ‘is not on sexuality, domesticity, sociability, or pathology’ but on ‘artistic productivity’.⁵⁰⁴ She does, however, add the caveat that ‘a recognition of the family relationships between these two women as artists and between their art forms calls into question some of the other dualities as well.’⁵⁰⁵

Whereas Gillespie excavates the professional and aesthetic relationship between the sisters, and indicates the ways in which her findings may be used to trouble their biographical creation as contrasting figures, Sellers approaches the problem from the opposite angle. As will be demonstrated in the first half of this chapter, Sellers uses fiction to challenge and re-negotiate oppositional portrayals of Woolf and Bell, posing an intriguing intervention into narratives of life and of the body. Like Nunez, she admits ‘contradictory versions of the same face’ in considering multiple biographical constructions of Woolf and Bell (AB 124), though she arguably goes further than Nunez in proposing revisions to, rather than merely synthesising these constructions. The biographical then provides a gateway into the critical, as Sellers goes on to foreground the interplay between the sisters’ arts in terms of their structural dynamics. She achieves this by engaging her more nuanced, synthesised narrative of their lives with a different kind of criticism: the art theory of Roger Fry and Clive Bell. At this juncture, it is sufficient to state broadly that both Fry and Bell’s theories are characterised by a hostility towards representation for its own sake, a prioritisation of formal design, and a belief in the need to ‘disentangle our reaction to pure form from our reaction to its implied associated ideas’.⁵⁰⁶ Sellers’s use of ekphrasis, unaccompanied by artistic plates,

⁵⁰⁴ Ibid., p.5.

⁵⁰⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁰⁶ Both Fry and Bell added caveats with regard to representation, namely when such representation was placed at the service of form and aesthetic emotion. Fry wrote that ‘We may, then, dispense once for all with the idea of likeness to nature, of correctness or incorrectness as a test, and consider only whether the emotional elements inherent in true form are adequately discovered, unless, indeed, the emotional idea depends at any point upon likeness, or completeness of representation’. See ‘An Essay in Aesthetics’, in *Vision and Design* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1920), pp.12-27 (p.27). Similarly, Bell

precludes a reaction to ‘pure form’ on the part of the reader. Instead, Sellers *describes* form in such a way as to maximise its associations. For instance, three flowers in one of Vanessa’s compositions, two of which ‘stand in close proximity’ while ‘the other stands estranged and aloof’, are suggestive of the relationship between Clive Bell, his lover Mary Hutchinson, and Vanessa (111). Such associations conflict with Fry and Bell’s assumption that “‘literary,’ in the sense of depending upon outside elements [...] rather than on formal elements within the picture itself, is a pejorative term’.⁵⁰⁷ Sellers’s representation of Vanessa’s ‘struggle against the received templates of design’ poses a significant challenge to Fry and Bell’s ideas.⁵⁰⁸ *Vanessa and Virginia* reengages the ‘formal design’ of a work of art with its biographical or interdisciplinary connotations to produce a broader framework for interpretation.⁵⁰⁹ As shall be seen, this dialogue constitutes a feminist challenge to Fry and Bell’s preoccupation with the ‘universal aspects’ of form.⁵¹⁰ Instead, Sellers illuminates those moments wherein formal interest coexists with, even arises from, biographical elements, thereby championing the aesthetic potential inherent in female lives.

In terms of my dissertation’s thesis, Sellers’s novel exemplifies the unique potential of biofiction to engage in a creative dialogue with critical scholarship. Drawing on both an implicit and an explicit scholarly apparatus, *Vanessa and Virginia* is situated at the intersection of fiction, biography, and art criticism. Sellers is also herself a prominent critic and Woolf expert: the editor of *The Cambridge Companion to Virginia Woolf* (2011) and co-editor, with Jane Goldman, of the New Cambridge Edition of Woolf’s novels. In her contribution to the ‘Making Sense’ colloquium at the University of Cambridge, she described how her ‘sense’ of Woolf and Bell was ‘derived in part

wrote ‘Let no one imagine that representation is bad in itself; a realistic form may be as significant, in its part of the design, as an abstract. But if a representative form has value, it is as form, not as representation’. See *Art* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1914), p.25.

⁵⁰⁷ Gillespie, p.5.

⁵⁰⁸ Sellers and Wright, p.134.

⁵⁰⁹ Roger Fry, ‘Retrospect’, in *Vision and Design*, pp.199-211 (p.203).

⁵¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.207.

from years of reading and viewing all of the available extant materials'.⁵¹¹ In *Vanessa and Virginia*, she is able to draw on this scholarly expertise while simultaneously posing 'unanswered but crucial questions that seemed possible to address only through fictional forms'.⁵¹² This statement indicates the way in which biofiction, as a hybrid genre which blends research with invention, has the licence to imagine the subject to an extent that would be inappropriate in conventional biography or literary criticism; it 'allow[s] interpretations – without foreclosure or distortion of 'known' facts'.⁵¹³ In the novel itself, the recurrent opposing of the 'story' surrounding the sisters with the 'truth' revealed by Vanessa implicitly gives greater credibility to the kind of narrative that biofiction can offer. Blending the biographical with the critical, *Vanessa and Virginia* is framed less as 'a work of fiction' than 'an attempt to discern the truth' (31).

In emphasising the "true" similarities between the sisters and their arts, Sellers breaks with a mode of characterisation prevalent in biofiction about Woolf since Leonard Woolf's *The Wise Virgins* (1914). In this thinly-veiled *roman à clef*, the Vanessa figure, Katharine, is described as 'flesh and blood, [...] flush[ing] the fair skin red and the full lips', a stark contrast to her sister, Camilla, 'so white and fair', 'not a woman, but a fine lady in a dream or a play'.⁵¹⁴ Though Leonard Woolf's novella attends only to the sisters' pre-marital lives, the popular opposition noted by Gillespie between 'the virginal, barren woman' and 'the sensual, maternal one' is nevertheless apparent.⁵¹⁵ Katharine's face 'was already like that of a mother's', whereas Camilla's 'would always retain something of the virgin's'.⁵¹⁶ Gillian Freeman's novel *But Nobody Lives in Bloomsbury* (2006), published almost a century later, suggests the enduring appeal of the contrast. Freeman employs similar descriptors to contrast 'Virginia

⁵¹¹ Sellers and Wright, p.133.

⁵¹² Ibid.

⁵¹³ Ibid., p.134.

⁵¹⁴ Leonard Woolf, *The Wise Virgins* (London: Persephone Books, 2003), p.119.

⁵¹⁵ Gillespie, p.5.

⁵¹⁶ Ibid., p.94.

Stephen [...] beautiful, slender, intense, with a high forehead and green eyes', with Vanessa, 'equally beautiful, but with a more sensual appearance, an oval face, grey-green eyes and full, sensitive mouth'.⁵¹⁷ Freeman uses physical characteristics to distinguish what Sellers calls 'the intellectual' and 'the carnal sister': Virginia, with her high forehead, is quite literally a "highbrow", while Vanessa has a 'more sensual appearance', a rounder face and the 'full' lips described by Leonard Woolf. As in *The Wise Virgins*, the sisters' respective futures as virginal and barren or sensual and maternal are indexed to their facial features. Cunningham, like Freeman, is easily tempted to reproduce rather than to question the popular division. In *The Hours*, Virginia 'has the austere, parched beauty of a Giotto fresco', whereas Vanessa 'is more like a figure sculpted in rosy marble by a skilled but minor artist of the late Baroque', 'a distinctly earthy and even decorative figure, all billows and scrolls' (144). The respective characterisation of Vanessa and Virginia as 'carnal' or 'intellectual' is again apparent: Vanessa's lavish 'abundance' is suggestive of voluptuousness and a fully developed sexuality, while Virginia's austerity carries connotations of virginity, even asceticism. Significantly, Virginia is linked to the named artist, the Giotto, while Vanessa's creator is anonymous, 'skilled but minor', a purveyor of merely 'decorative' art. In contrast to Leonard Woolf and Freeman, Cunningham reads the sisters' physiognomies not only for clues regarding their future, but also for indications of the relative values of their art.

While Leonard Woolf, Freeman, and Cunningham's narrators are anxious that women be one thing or another, Nunez's Vanessa is presented as a boundary-breaker who has both 'her art *and* her children' (35). In *Mitz*, the comparison of the sisters is focalised through Virginia, who notes 'how she looked to herself: very plain and dull beside Vanessa – a goddess in Virginia's eyes, a radiant Madonna, a complete woman, impossible not to envy. Vanessa had what people insisted could not be had: her art *and*

⁵¹⁷ Gillian Freeman, *But Nobody Lives in Bloomsbury* (London: Arcadia Books, 2006), p.2.

her children' (35). Like Sylvia Plath half a century later, who envisaged a future comprised of 'Books & Babies & Beef stews', Vanessa achieves the seemingly impossible in combining artistic pursuits with domesticity.⁵¹⁸ However, Virginia's childlessness remains the unspoken corollary to Vanessa's ability to "have it all". If, in short, one must have art *and* children to be 'a complete woman', Virginia is, implicitly, incomplete in having "only" her art. Indeed, Woolf herself suggested as much in noting that Vita Sackville-West's 'maturity and full-breastedness' and 'motherhood' made her '(what I have never been) a real woman'.⁵¹⁹

Virginia's childlessness is redressed in Claire Morgan's *A Book for All and None* (2011), an academic quest narrative detailing two scholars' search for the intersections between Woolf and Nietzsche. Morgan emphasises the rude health of the mountaineer's daughter frequently seen 'striding along with a stick in one hand', and asserts that 'that life in her, the energy, the force of it', is 'only a hair's breadth [...] from sexuality'.⁵²⁰ Morgan's character Raymond Mortimer implicitly contests the opposition of carnality with intellectuality that was reinforced by Cunningham, Freeman, and Leonard Woolf, asserting that 'art and sex' are 'two sides of the same coin'.⁵²¹ Morgan's reclamation of a sexualised Woolf culminates in the revelation that Virginia secretly gave birth to, and relinquished, a child. While, as Catherine Taylor noted in the *Guardian*, Morgan's 'final revelation defies credibility', her insistence that Woolf had the potential to be sensual and maternal as well as intellectual suggestively allies her project with Sellers's.⁵²² Unlike the other writers under consideration, Morgan

⁵¹⁸ Sylvia Plath, 'Journal entry for 25 February 1957', in *The Journals of Sylvia Plath: Transcribed from the Original Manuscripts at Smith College*, ed. by Karen V. Kukil (London: Faber, 2000), pp.268-72 (p.269).

⁵¹⁹ Virginia Woolf, 'Diary entry for 21 December 1925', in *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, III (1980), pp.51-3 (p.52).

⁵²⁰ Claire Morgan, *A Book for All and None* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2012), p.203.

⁵²¹ *Ibid.*, p.228.

⁵²² Catherine Taylor, 'Catherine Taylor's first novel choice – reviews', *The Guardian*, 1 July 2011 <<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/jul/01/first-novels-roundup-review>> [accessed 21 August, 2013].

and Sellers present their subjects less as extremes on a continuum than as variations on a theme; for Sellers, they are ‘inexact replicas of each other, as if the painter were trying to capture the same person from different angles’ (4). In Sellers’s case, this paves the way for her ultimate emphasis on the interplay between her subjects’ arts.

In thus countering the prevalent direction of biofiction about Woolf, Sellers challenges a series of pervasive myths that are traceable back to the sisters themselves. Loosely summarised, these myths oppose Woolf’s supposed frigidity to Bell’s sensuality, Woolf’s mental instability to Bell’s tranquillity, and Woolf’s skill with words to Bell’s eloquently silent images. Since such myths, as Lee asserts, have ‘powerfully affected’ Woolf’s ‘posthumous life’, *Vanessa and Virginia*’s resistance to dualistic myth-making represents a significant intervention into popular perceptions of Woolf.⁵²³ As discussed briefly in my previous chapter, the stubborn characterisation of Woolf as ‘a chaste, chill, sexually inhibited maiden – Virginia the virgin’ may have originated in a letter from Bell to her husband following her sister’s marriage.⁵²⁴ Bell wrote that the couple

seemed very happy, but are evidently both a little exercised in their minds on the subject of the Goat’s coldness. I think I perhaps annoyed her but may have consoled him by saying that I thought she had never understood or sympathised with sexual passion in men. Apparently she still gets no pleasure at all from the act, which I think is curious. They were very anxious to know when I first had an orgasm. I couldn’t remember. Do you? But no doubt I sympathised with such things even if I didn’t have them from the time I was 2.⁵²⁵

Bell’s letter implicitly opposes ‘the Goat’s coldness’, ironic in context given the animal’s stereotypically sexual associations, with her own, far more sensual nature. ‘I couldn’t remember. Do you?’ is suggestively ambiguous; is Bell asking her husband when *he* first had an orgasm or, rather, when *she* did? The suggestiveness is intensified by Bell’s repeated use of the word ‘sympathised’, a word that carries connotations of simultaneous climax. ‘The Goat’s coldness’ forms a seeming precursor to Bell’s own

⁵²³ Lee, *Virginia Woolf*, p.119.

⁵²⁴ *Ibid.*, p.244.

⁵²⁵ Vanessa Bell to Clive Bell, 27 December 1912. *Letters*, pp.131-2 (p.132).

sexual overtures; in highlighting the unresponsiveness of Clive Bell's former love interest, she reminds him of her own comparable warmth.

Lee asserts that along with *The Wise Virgins*, 'the version of their marital sex-life put about by Vanessa and Clive [...] perpetuated the legend of Virginia's frigidity'.⁵²⁶ Dunn similarly credits the Bells with the formation of 'a pervasive attitude towards Virginia and sexuality, one which [Woolf] did little to counter, and on which the whole suggestion of her sexual frigidity was based'.⁵²⁷ The enduring impact of the letter is demonstrated by its (mis)quotation some ninety years later in *But Nobody Lives in Bloomsbury*. Clive accuses Virginia of being 'a sexual coward', to which Vanessa responds, 'if only she was like me. Orgasms since I was two!'.⁵²⁸ The contrast is reiterated with the narratorial interpolation 'she looked ready to have another'.⁵²⁹ In *Vanessa and Virginia*, the revelation that Virginia 'appeared to find lovemaking unappealing' occurs in an exchange of letters between Leonard and Vanessa from which their spouses are excluded entirely (79). Vanessa assures Leonard that 'you had always been physically unresponsive, especially with men. I told him I did not think he could change you.' (79-80) Sellers's decision to render this conversation as a written, rather than a verbal exchange is suggestive of how deeply ingrained Bell's rejection of her sister's sexuality was to become. As Dunn writes, 'so much of received opinion about Virginia's character, even her art, rests on certain assumptions of her sexual, or asexual, nature'.⁵³⁰ Sellers forces Vanessa to acknowledge her own complicity in the formation of these assumptions: 'Fate was to punish me for this' (80).

⁵²⁶ *The Wise Virgins*, published two years after Vanessa Bell's letter to her husband, continued to propagate the notion of 'a flaw in the Woolfs' union'. On a superficial reading, Camilla's admission that 'passion leaves me cold' euphemises Bell's observation that her sister 'gets no pleasure at all from the act'. Yet Camilla's fear that she is 'incapable of love' and her suspicion of 'this odd convulsion, passion' more directly indexes her coldness to the inability to achieve orgasm. See Lyndall Gordon's Preface to the Persephone edition, pp.vii-xix.

⁵²⁷ Dunn, p.186.

⁵²⁸ Freeman, p.52.

⁵²⁹ Ibid.

⁵³⁰ Dunn, p.187.

Yet Sellers also acknowledges that Vanessa's sensuality, rather than being the foundation of truth upon which the 'virgin Virginia' legend was founded, was itself a constructed image. Turning to her current work-in-progress, a self-portrait, immediately after writing to Leonard, Vanessa notes that 'it seemed to me my face had regained its bloom' (80). This moment is a subtler version of Freeman's suggestion that Vanessa's "othering" of her repressed younger sister was an aphrodisiac of sorts between herself and Clive. Both writers echo the way in which Bell, in her letter, shored up her own self-image as a sexual woman through opposition with 'the Goat's coldness'. Yet Sellers's Vanessa goes on to acknowledge that 'the rose flush on my face, the look of dreamy contentment, were a lie. I had not told Leonard everything' (80). The nature of the concealed material is boldly stated by DeSalvo: 'although the image persists of Vanessa's sexuality as a kind of voluptuous abandon, nonetheless both she and Virginia lived the greater part of their lives in a condition of celibacy'.⁵³¹ The subject's 'look of dreamy contentment' thus belies the way in which her marriage was, by the time of the portrait's composition in 1912, in name only, and that her affair with Roger Fry was to end the following year when she 'transferred her affections to Duncan Grant'.⁵³² Sellers suggests that Vanessa destroyed the portrait 'the day Duncan confessed he could never be my lover again' (80), reminding us of the irony noted by Lee: 'that Vanessa, whom Virginia had envied all her life for her sensuality and maternal calmness, should from her late forties onwards be living in a sexually thwarted and emotionally unreciprocated relationship'.⁵³³ Building on the work of Lee and DeSalvo, Sellers starts to bridge the gap established by the sisters' myth-making by situating them at the same extreme of the sexual continuum. This begins to frame them as allied, rather than opposing figures,

⁵³¹ DeSalvo, p.87.

⁵³² 'Archive Journeys: Bloomsbury: Roger Fry', *Tate Online* <http://www2.tate.org.uk/archivejourneys/bloomsburyhtml/bio_fry.htm> [accessed 24 January 2013].

⁵³³ Lee, *Virginia Woolf*, p.541.

highlighting biofiction's capacity to intervene in the popular representation of its subjects.

Sellers develops her portrayal by going on to invert the sisters' respective positions, having Vanessa credit Virginia with 'intimacies in your marriage that I could only dream of' (76). By extending the criteria for intimacy to include non-sexual displays of affection, Sellers reveals Virginia to have an enviable physical life. In response to Virginia's reference to 'mongooses and mandrills', the couple commence a 'secret game': 'Leonard clasps his hands together as if they are paws and waggles his head. He cleans imaginary whiskers. Then he cuffs a paw round your neck and pretends to pick insects out of your hair. You nuzzle his hand, lick the insides of his palms.' (92). As noted with reference to Nunez, such 'pet names', and 'animal games' were 'often referred to in [Woolf's] letters and diaries' from 1915 to 1936.⁵³⁴ Thus mediated by Sellers, they provide, if not quite the 'evidence of an erotic secret life' that Lee perceived in the source material, then sufficient testament that 'this is not an a-sexual marriage'.⁵³⁵ It thrives, 'on affectionate cuddling and play', qualities which Vanessa perceives to be lacking in her own relationships. This is evinced by the following juxtaposition: 'you catch hold of his hand and kiss his palm. I peer down at my cup. The thought of the solitary bed I must go to each night rises to haunt me' (107).⁵³⁶ Through such comparisons, Sellers inverts both of the sisters' myths, that of 'the Goat's coldness' and of Vanessa's 'voluptuous abandon'.⁵³⁷

Sellers's gradual revelation that while Virginia may have had the 'sexless marriage', Vanessa endured the greater isolation culminates in a striking moment of union between the sisters (80). This takes the form of Vanessa's attempted suicide by drowning, the 'anaesthetizing chill of the water' a panacea for 'Duncan's declaration [...] that he could never make love to me again' (147). By suggesting that Vanessa also

⁵³⁴ Ibid., p.333.

⁵³⁵ Ibid., pp.332-3.

⁵³⁶ Ibid.

⁵³⁷ De Salvo, p.87.

tried to take her own life, Sellers queries another aspect of the sisters' popular creation as contrasting figures, namely the opposition of 'the mentally unstable' with 'the sane'.⁵³⁸ Indeed, the description of the incident borrows its particulars not from Bell's own life, but from Woolf's possible suicide attempt of 18 March, 1941. As described by Dunn, Woolf

had returned to Monk's House from one of her walks, wet through and shaken, having fallen in a dyke, she said. Two days later Vanessa came to tea and, concerned by her sister's state of mind but not expecting such a rapid deterioration, wrote that evening what was to be her last letter to Virginia.⁵³⁹

Sellers inverts the sisters' respective roles, having Virginia arrive for tea at Charleston to find Vanessa 'soaking wet. And covered in blood' (148). Just as Woolf claimed to have 'fallen in a dyke', Virginia asks Vanessa, '[h]ave you had an accident? Did you fall in the river?' (148). Virginia's realisation of the reality of Vanessa's situation prompts a dramatic shift in her perception of their roles: 'I thought that I was the only one who contemplated ending it all. I always picture you happy – in the centre of things' (148). This echoes Woolf's recorded shock at 'hearing Nessa say she was often melancholy & often envied me – a statement I found incredible'.⁵⁴⁰

Sellers's audacious intervention is supported by Leonard Woolf's assertion that Bell's 'tranquillity was to some extent superficial', and concealed 'a nervous tension which had some resemblance to the mental instability of Virginia'.⁵⁴¹ This assertion is in turn corroborated by Virginia Woolf's record of Bell's 'melancholy', and by Angelica Garnett, who viewed her mother's 'intermittent but crippling bouts of lethargy' as evidence for 'a severe depression, different in effect but not perhaps unrelated to Virginia's instability'.⁵⁴² Sellers grounds Vanessa's suicide attempt in such 'crippling'

⁵³⁸ Gillespie, p.5.

⁵³⁹ Dunn, p.299.

⁵⁴⁰ Virginia Woolf, 'Diary entry for 19 August 1929', *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, III, pp.241-3 (pp.242-3).

⁵⁴¹ Leonard Woolf, *Growing: An Autobiography of the Years 1904-1911* (London: Hogarth, 1961), p.14.

⁵⁴² Angelica Garnett, *Deceived With Kindness: A Bloomsbury Childhood* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1984), p.32.

periods of depression, which are shown to recur at intervals throughout her life. For instance, the miscarriage that occurs immediately after she and Roger Fry become lovers prompts a delirium in which Vanessa ‘think[s] constantly of water. [...] Only water can obliterate what I have done. Only drowning will thwart the monsters I might still create.’ (70). The imagistic resonance with Woolf’s means of suicide serves as a reminder that each of the sisters’ lives contained moments of hopelessness. This observation is borne out by the textual patterning between their respective breakdowns, Virginia’s in 1895 following Julia Stephen’s death and Vanessa’s in 1934 after Roger Fry’s (22, 157). Both incidents are characterised by the sufferer’s aversion to light, a detail that gestures towards a broader similarity between the events. Vanessa’s collapse is, like Virginia’s, triggered by the loss of a loved one, and prompts a moment of profound sisterly empathy: ‘I know, without needing to ask, that you are thinking, as I am, how brutal death is’ (157). By emphasising the similarity of Vanessa’s emotional responses, Sellers presents breakdown and attempted suicide as responses to an extremity of circumstance, rather than manifestations of a pre-existing “tendency”. This forms a stark contrast to Freeman’s text, in which Virginia alone is governed by death, ‘the pounding waves growing louder and louder in her head’, and eventually kills herself ‘in a frenzy’ after hearing the birds singing in Greek.⁵⁴³ Conversely, Sellers insists that “the waves” threatened to submerge both sisters at different points in their lives, and that ‘as one of us surrenders, the other must fight’ (171). Having previously exposed ‘the carnal sister’ and ‘the intellectual one’ to be constructed, unrepresentative, personae, Sellers’s depiction of Vanessa’s emotional makeup allows her to contest the pathologising of Woolf, and the concurrent fetishising of Bell’s ‘maternal calmness’.⁵⁴⁴

The potential of biofiction to thus re-negotiate the popular representation of its subjects is indicated in the paratextual material for *Vanessa and Virginia*, which promises ‘a dramatic new interpretation of one of the most famous and iconic events in

⁵⁴³ Freeman, pp.84; 165-6.

⁵⁴⁴ Lee, *Virginia Woolf*, p.541.

twentieth-century literature – Woolf’s suicide by drowning’.⁵⁴⁵ While this most obviously refers to Sellers’s creation of a parallel suicide attempt for Vanessa, it also evokes the way in which the text reframes Virginia’s suicide as a life-giving rather than a purely destructive act. Vanessa visits Virginia on the day of her death to tell her that ‘I – can’t go on any longer’, and Sellers strongly implies that Virginia’s suicide prevented a second attempt on her sister’s part (176). Describing Virginia’s death several years later, Vanessa experiences a moment of catharsis: ‘The water is in my mouth, my lungs, as the river drags us under. This time I cannot escape’ (177). Virginia’s death is thus permitted to serve for both sisters, allowing Vanessa to turn again towards life. This is symbolised by her decision, in the novel’s final lines, to paint ‘a blaze of daffodils under the apple trees’ instead of the cut flowers on her desk: ‘I gaze at the yellow, vivid and tangible in the sunlight. You are right. What matters is that we do not stop creating’ (181).⁵⁴⁶ By reinterpreting Woolf’s suicide as an act that may have “saved” Bell from similar measures, Sellers further elides the distinctions between the sisters, in preparation for her demonstration of the interplay between their arts.

Sellers’s contestation of oppositional biographical representations of Woolf and Bell culminates in a challenge to corresponding restrictions in the discussion of their work. She insists that their chosen disciplines were not hermeneutically sealed, but were instead characterised by interdisciplinary engagement, a suggestion that finds ample support in Woolf’s own writing. While Woolf’s assertion that ‘a story-telling picture is as pathetic and ludicrous as a trick played by a dog’ echoes Fry and Clive Bell’s hostility towards “literary” art, her essay ‘Walter Sickert: A Conversation’ (1934) enumerates

⁵⁴⁵ Sellers, *Vanessa and Virginia*, back cover.

⁵⁴⁶ Vanessa’s emphasis on the sustaining nature of the creative act parallels Woolf’s conclusion in an early draft of her essay ‘Anon’: ‘Only when we put two and two together – two pencil strokes, two written words, two bricks [...] do we overcome dissolution and set up some stake against oblivion’. See Brenda Silver, “‘Anon’ and ‘The Reader’: Virginia Woolf’s Last Essays”, *Twentieth Century Literature*, 25 (1979), 356-441 (p.403).

with interest those artists who ‘are always making raids into the lands of others’.⁵⁴⁷ The artists include Sickert and Vanessa Bell, and the territory in question is, significantly, Woolf’s own. ‘What a poet you are in colour’, she writes to Bell, whom she describes elsewhere as ‘a satirist, a conveyer of impressions about human life: a short story writer of great wit’.⁵⁴⁸ These statements contradict Woolf’s dismissal of ‘story-telling picture[s]’, asserting the co-existence of the “literary” with the visual in Bell’s oeuvre. Woolf also counts herself among ‘the hybrids, the raiders’ on occasion when writing about her own work.⁵⁴⁹ One of the most notable examples concerns her attempts to write about her sister in *Roger Fry*: ‘it’s rather as if you had to paint a picture using dozens of snapshots in the paint’.⁵⁵⁰ It is apparent from these extracts that Woolf and Bell’s commitment to the formal completeness of a work of art was not incompatible with perceived excursions into the other’s chosen form.

In *Vanessa and Virginia*, it is possible to trace the evolution of the sisters’ working relationship from a combative to a complementary one, as their adolescent struggles to prove that ‘mine is the more difficult art’ are succeeded by a mature appreciation of the resonances between their interconnecting disciplines (28). When, as an adolescent, Virginia interrupts her siblings as they pore over Thoby’s experiments with crayons, Vanessa realises that ‘you will move from Shakespeare to the Greeks then onto the Romantics, and I will be more firmly excluded with each transition. Thoby’s sketchbook will lie unopened between you’ (25). In changing the subject from the visual to the literary arts, it is as though Virginia exhorts Thoby to ‘see the infinite superiority

⁵⁴⁷ Virginia Woolf, ‘Pictures’, in *The Moment, and Other Essays* (London: Hogarth, 1947), pp.140-4 (p.142); Virginia Woolf, ‘Walter Sickert: A Conversation’ in *Collected Essays*, ed. by Leonard Woolf, II, pp.233-4 (p.243). Gillespie describes ‘Walter Sickert’ as an essay ‘written at Vanessa’s instigation and, in some ways, an imagined dialogue with her’ (p.102).

⁵⁴⁸ Virginia Woolf to Vanessa Bell, 14 February 1940. *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, VI, pp.381-2 (p.381); Virginia Woolf to Vanessa Bell, 12 May 1928. *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, III (1977), pp.497-9 (p.498).

⁵⁴⁹ Virginia Woolf, ‘Walter Sickert’, p.243.

⁵⁵⁰ Virginia Woolf to Vanessa Bell, 8 October 1938. *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, VI, pp.284-8 (p.285).

of the language to the paint', while Vanessa mutely protests that 'you writers [...] do not know the joy of experimenting in a new medium'.⁵⁵¹ This either/or relationship is succeeded by Virginia's tentative acknowledgement of the relevance to artistic principles to her burgeoning literary endeavours. After Clive Bell's lecture to the Friday Club, Vanessa recognises that Virginia 'will apply his precepts to your writing. For all your affected disdain, it is my art that is showing you the way' (48). Virginia echoes Vanessa's construction of visual art as the pathfinder, acknowledging that 'painting is leading the way. Fiction has forgotten its purpose. The novelists circle around their subject, describing everything that is extraneous to it, and then are surprised when it slips from view' (74). Through these remarks, which echo Woolf's criticisms of the Edwardian novelists in 'Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown', Sellers reveals the process by which Virginia's dismissal of visual art gives way to a recognition of its pedagogical value.

Sellers also demonstrates the inverse of this process: Vanessa's growing appreciation of the influence of Virginia's writing. Frustrated with her husband's unwillingness to focus on literary work, Vanessa thinks longingly of 'the hours you and I spent working together in the conservatory at home. As I broke off and looked at what I had done, the sound of your pen crossing the page was all the incentive I needed to continue' (57). Sellers suggests that, in much the same way as Henry James's dictation was catalysed by the sound of the Remington typewriter, the scratch of Virginia's pen acted as an aural spur to Vanessa's brushstrokes, vividly concretising the stimulation each sister gained from the other's ambition and labour. Their growing recognition of the influence of each other's art culminates in an act of interdisciplinary collaboration. Admiring the woodcuts carved by Dora Carrington for the newly founded Hogarth Press, Vanessa is fascinated by the idea that such images may be used not simply 'on the

⁵⁵¹ Virginia Woolf to Quentin Bell, 6 May 1928. *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, III, pp.492-4 (p.493); Vanessa Bell to Virginia Woolf, 12 March 1909. *Letters*, pp.80-1 (p.81).

dust-jacket' but 'alongside the words' (115). Reading a copy of 'Kew Gardens' later that evening, Vanessa's

mind races with ideas. I find paper and charcoal. I sketch flowers, stems, leaves, around your words. I sketch the two women talking in the garden, hats tilted at an angle as they exchange confidences. I work quickly, excitedly. Soon I have covered your words with my pictures. (115)

While Vanessa is ultimately displeased with Leonard's setting of the woodcuts, their design is radical in terms of the abolition of boundaries. Significantly, Vanessa's images do not provide a decorative supplement for the front cover, but surround, and are inspired by, Virginia's prose. The suggestion that Vanessa 'covered your words with my pictures', while perhaps indicating a residual competitiveness, provides a vivid illustration of the cross-fertilisation between literary and visual arts.

As previously suggested, such illumination of moments of interdisciplinary engagement enables a more targeted interrogation of the restrictive assumptions of Roger Fry and Clive Bell. In the above passage, Vanessa's sketch of 'the two women talking in the garden' is an illustration of lines in Virginia's prose. It thus falls into Clive Bell's category of 'Descriptive Painting', in which 'forms are used not as objects of emotion, but as means of suggesting emotion or conveying information'.⁵⁵² Along with portraiture, 'topographical works', and 'pictures that tell stories', Clive Bell suggested that illustrations 'leave untouched our aesthetic emotions'.⁵⁵³ Fry was similarly critical of what is variously referred to as description, representation, or the creation of illusion in art. He, like Bell, prized 'The Movement' of Post-Impressionist painters after Cezanne for a perceived return to Primitive art's 'ideas of formal design which had almost been lost in the fervid pursuit of naturalistic representation'.⁵⁵⁴ As defined by Fry in 'The French Post-Impressionists', 'these artists [...] do not seek to imitate form, but

⁵⁵² Clive Bell, *Art*, pp.16-7.

⁵⁵³ *Ibid.*, p.17.

⁵⁵⁴ Fry, 'Retrospect', p.203.

to create form; not to imitate life but to find an equivalent for life'.⁵⁵⁵ Fry added that 'the logical extreme of such a method would undoubtedly be the attempt to give up all resemblance to natural form, and to create a purely abstract language of form – a visual music'.⁵⁵⁶ Fry's emphasis on Structural Design has much in common with Clive Bell's 'aesthetic hypothesis – that the essential quality in a work of art is significant form'.⁵⁵⁷ This was defined as the phenomena wherein 'lines and colours combined in a particular way, certain forms and relations of forms, stir our aesthetic emotions' by conveying 'a sense of ultimate reality'.⁵⁵⁸ Both critics' prioritisation of form over representation demanded one essential quality on the part of the artist: detachment. The artist's sole concern must be with 'the relation of forms and colours to one another, as they cohere within the object', necessitating, for Fry, 'the most complete detachment from any of the meanings and associations of appearances', for Bell, 'the most absolute abstraction from the affairs of life'.⁵⁵⁹

For the purposes of my evolving argument, that the sisters' arts were interdisciplinary and open to associative or biographical as well as structural readings, Fry and Bell's ideas have two significant implications. Firstly, their critical emphasis on formal unity, and their associated hostility towards descriptive or representative qualities, are precepts which may be applied to literary as well as visual art. Gillespie suggests that a novelist 'taking cues from modern painting [...] can render the self elusive through multiple and partial points of view; she can place her individuals in larger patterns, and subordinate them to the overall form of her own work of art'.⁵⁶⁰ As indicated by Gillespie, Fry and Bell suggest a "way of looking" at Woolf's fiction that prioritises internal coherence and structural unity. This approach would also reject the

⁵⁵⁵ Roger Fry, 'The French Post-Impressionists', in *Vision and Design*, pp.166-70 (p.167).

⁵⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵⁷ Clive Bell, *Art*, p.100.

⁵⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.8, 54.

⁵⁵⁹ Roger Fry, 'The Artist's Vision', in *Vision and Design*, pp.33-8 (pp.34-5); Clive Bell, *Art*, p.266.

⁵⁶⁰ Gillespie, p.17.

accumulation of such autobiographical details as would prevent a work being contemplated ‘as a whole’, and instead require the viewer to ‘pass outside it to other things necessary to complete its unity’.⁵⁶¹ It is immediately apparent that this attitude is at odds with the approach to the sisters’ arts prioritised by Sellers. By reading Virginia’s writing in dialogue with Vanessa’s painting, Sellers frames each as ‘literary in the sense of depending upon outside elements [...] rather than on formal qualities’.⁵⁶² As previously suggested, ‘literary’ was ‘a pejorative term for the Bloomsbury critics’, as exemplified by Clive Bell’s approving nod to the way in which ‘Cezanne has inspired [painters] with the resolution to free their art from literary and scientific irrelevancies’.⁵⁶³ To place the sisters’ arts in interdisciplinary relation is to emphasise the “literary” or outward-facing qualities of both, and to contest Fry and Bell’s emphasis on a self-contained formal unity.

Secondly, Fry and Bell’s insistence on the necessity of detachment implies an attitude on the part of the viewer as well as the artist. In order ‘to appreciate a work of art we need bring with us nothing from life, no knowledge of its ideas and affairs, no familiarity with its emotions’; we require only ‘that clear disinterested contemplation which is a characteristic of the aesthetic attitude’.⁵⁶⁴ This attitude is again at odds with the generic features of biofiction in general, and with Sellers’s use of ekphrasis in particular. Whereas Clive Bell asserted that ‘for the purposes of aesthetics we have no right, neither is there any necessity, to pry behind the object into the state of mind of him who made it’, Sellers’s technique of representing artistic objects as moments of ekphrasis within a biographical narrative encourages the reader to do precisely that.⁵⁶⁵ And whereas Fry praised Clive Bell’s efforts to ‘isolate the purely aesthetic feeling from the whole complex of feelings which may and generally do accompany the aesthetic

⁵⁶¹ Fry, ‘An Essay in Aesthetics’, p.22.

⁵⁶² Gillespie, pp.6-7.

⁵⁶³ Ibid; Clive Bell, *Art*, p.220.

⁵⁶⁴ Ibid., p.25; Fry, ‘An Essay in Aesthetics’, p.21.

⁵⁶⁵ Clive Bell, *Art*, p.11.

feeling when we regard a work of art', Sellers re-establishes biographical approaches to the work of art as legitimate criteria for interpretation.⁵⁶⁶

Sellers's reunion of aesthetics with an 'art of associated ideas' is sympathetic to the approach taken by Frances Spalding, another of her acknowledged influences.

Spalding states that 'the Bloomsbury belief that art only achieves unity and completeness if it is detached' can be applied to Vanessa Bell only imperfectly.⁵⁶⁷ While maintaining that Bell 'selected her subjects for the reflections, shapes, colours, patterns, lines and spatial relationships that they presented', Spalding argues that 'the recurrence in her oeuvre of certain motifs and themes, the prevalence of certain groupings and simple geometric shapes, suggests that they had for her a personal significance, even if this was unconsciously formulated'.⁵⁶⁸ Gillespie agrees that 'for whatever reason and in spite of her theories, Vanessa rarely excluded representational elements from her art'.⁵⁶⁹ This is borne out by Bell herself, who, while seeming to validate her husband's belief in 'a language simply of form and colour', acknowledged that 'the form and colour nearly always do represent life and I suppose any allusions may creep in'.⁵⁷⁰

A prototypical example of the coexistence of formal and biographical interest in *Vanessa and Virginia* is the passage detailing the creation of Bell's 1912 portrait of Woolf:

I think of Mother in her deck chair in the garden at St Ives, her eyes closed as she allowed herself a few minutes (sic) peace after lunch. My brush restores the caress of hands, the longed-for shelter of loving arms. I fill out the brim of your hat, the band of hair framing your face. I form the arch of your nose, the bow of your mouth. When the features of your face are done I stop and examine the effect. I have failed. I pick a knife and scrape the paint clear. I gaze at your closed eyelids, the back of your head resting against the chair. I wash the entire oval of your face in a flesh tone. I look again. This time your expression is a blank. I set my brush aside. I have painted what you are to me. (108)

⁵⁶⁶ Fry, 'Retrospect', p.207.

⁵⁶⁷ Frances Spalding, *Vanessa Bell* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1983), p.xiv.

⁵⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁶⁹ Gillespie, p.11.

⁵⁷⁰ Vanessa Bell to Julian Bell, 25 January 1946. *Letters*, pp.403-7 (p.406).

By foregrounding the resonance between Virginia's pose and that of Julia Stephen, reclining 'in her deck chair in the garden', Sellers frames Vanessa's portrait as an art of connotation, dependent upon 'the associated ideas of the objects' represented rather than on its internal 'language [...] of form and colour'.⁵⁷¹ This runs counter to the ideal artistic vision described by Clive Bell, in which the artist feels emotion 'for objects seen as pure forms – that is, as ends in themselves'.⁵⁷² Unlike Clive Bell's 'real artist', Vanessa views her objects as 'means': her deck chair is 'a means to physical well-being, [...] an object associated with the intimate life of a family, [...] a place where someone sat saying things unforgettable'.⁵⁷³ For Fry, 'the disadvantage of such an art of associated ideas is that its effect really depends on what we bring with us: it adds no entirely new factor to our experience'.⁵⁷⁴ He opposed this to 'classic art', synonymous with that of the Post-Impressionists, which 'records a positive and disinterestedly passionate state of mind', and conveys 'a new and otherwise unattainable experience'.⁵⁷⁵ Yet a careful reading of Sellers's passage reveals an implicit challenge to Fry and Bell's dualisms. Vanessa's painstaking attempts to reproduce 'the arch of your nose', 'the bow of your mouth' are succeeded by the decision to 'wash the entire oval of your face in a flesh tone'; in Fry's terms, she ceases to 'imitate life' and instead 'find[s] an equivalent for life'.⁵⁷⁶ By suggesting that Vanessa's elimination of facial detail was a spontaneous strategy to render the impenetrability of Virginia, and, by extension, of Julia Stephen, Sellers allows 'an art of associated ideas' to give rise to an incidence of 'pure form'.⁵⁷⁷ She thus challenges the restrictive assumptions of Fry and Bell by permitting the reader to consider the associations of objects in conjunction with their formal relations.

⁵⁷¹ Fry, 'The French Post-Impressionists', p.169; Vanessa Bell to Julian Bell, 25 January 1946. *Letters*, pp.403-7 (p.406).

⁵⁷² Clive Bell, *Art*, p.52.

⁵⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷⁴ Fry, 'The French Post-Impressionists', p.169.

⁵⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p.167.

⁵⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p.169; Fry, 'Giotto', in *Vision and Design*, pp.92-123 (p.92).

Conversely, Sellers's description of Woolf's early novels emphasises their significance as biographical artefacts over their structural execution, reinforcing Fry and Clive Bell's opposition of associative art and pure form. Vanessa's assertion that *The Voyage Out* 'is not literature, it is mere journalism' (75) echoes Vanessa Bell's own view that 'if it's art, it seems to me art of quite a different sort from making a picture', and that the novel 'isn't a whole'.⁵⁷⁸ It is also evocative of Fry's hostility towards visual art that 'seek[s] to imitate life'.⁵⁷⁹ In the fictional Vanessa's view, *The Voyage Out* lacks the formal completeness prized by Fry and Clive Bell; it is outward-facing rather than self-contained, with dialogue which 'could have been taken directly out of our mouths' (75). *To the Lighthouse* is, however, judged to be 'different' (76). Sellers's assertion of the coexistence of associative elements with formal interest in that novel coheres across her representation of its biographical wellsprings, the origins of its aesthetics, and the finished work that 'bridged the gap between biography and art' (76).

The reunion of an 'art of associated ideas' with formal significance is evident even in the section which overtly prioritises biographical inspiration.⁵⁸⁰ Vanessa describes a 'recurring dream' that emphasises the use Virginia makes of her as a template for Mrs. Ramsay:

I am sitting by a window, looking out over a garden. I am wearing mother's green shawl and there is a boy by my side. He is cutting shapes from a magazine, frowning as he concentrates on his task. You are in the garden, reclining in a deckchair, your notebook open on your knee. I watch your hand moving implacably across your page. Suddenly I become aware of a presence in the doorway. I look up and glimpse a man's outline, but the brilliance of the light prevents me from making out his features. I suspect it is Duncan, though I cannot be sure. He comes over to me and lays his hand on my shoulder. I feel the child stir beside me, restive and jealous. I sense that I am needed, though part of me longs to go on sitting quietly by the window, my child by my side. (127)

The tableau described by Sellers mirrors that of 'The Window', the first section of *To the Lighthouse*. Vanessa takes the place of Mrs. Ramsay, the child at her side represents James, and Duncan Grant is Mr. Ramsay, interrupting the mother and the resentful child

⁵⁷⁸ Vanessa Bell to Roger Fry, 31 March 1915. *Letters*, pp.171-3 (p.172).

⁵⁷⁹ Fry, 'The French Post-Impressionists', p.167.

⁵⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p.169.

with his demands for sympathy. Superficially, it is suggested that Virginia, her ‘notebook open on [her] knee’, transcribes the scene directly into her novel. However, the observation that Vanessa is ‘wearing Mother’s green shawl’ frustrates attempts to find specific analogues for the work in the life, instead suggesting that Mrs. Ramsay was a composite portrait of both Vanessa and Julia Stephen. Support for this exists in the form of a letter from Woolf to Bell in which Woolf admitted to blending elements of her sister’s character with those of their mother’s. She acknowledged that ‘probably there is a great deal of you in Mrs. Ramsay; though, in fact, I think you and mother are very different in my mind’.⁵⁸¹ Even when foregrounding the use of biographical inspiration, Sellers thus emphasises that *To the Lighthouse* was not an imitation of life but a work of art that collated and blended detail in order to *create* life. It thus demonstrates the artistic autonomy prized in the work of the Post-Impressionist painters, while at the same time invoking the biographical associations of its characters.

Attention to the biographical resonances of *To the Lighthouse* is juxtaposed with overt emphasis on its aesthetics, represented via the interplay between the novel and an image designed by Bell in 1930 for a tile fireplace at Monk’s House. The image as described by Gillespie comprises ‘a lighthouse on a rocky island’ which ‘provides a line down the centre, and unites the two masses’.⁵⁸² It thus recalls Lily Briscoe’s painting in *To the Lighthouse*, in which ‘a line there, in the centre’ represents the culmination of her ‘vision’.⁵⁸³ Yet in *Vanessa and Virginia*, the tile is painted shortly after Vanessa’s move to Charleston in 1916, allowing Vanessa instead to anticipate *To the Lighthouse*:

You gesture towards one of the tiles. ‘Is this meant to be the sea?’
[...]
‘I suppose I was thinking about the sea, though of course it was the colour and pattern I had most clearly in mind.’
You consider my answer.

⁵⁸¹ Virginia Woolf to Vanessa Bell, 25 May 1927. *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, III, pp.382-5 (p.383).

⁵⁸² Gillespie, p.157.

⁵⁸³ Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, p.281.

‘So if you weren’t thinking about a particular seascape, what did you intend this mark to be here?’ You draw your finger along a straight black line down the centre of the tile. ‘I had assumed it was a lighthouse.’

I look at the line. I remember painting it, sensing that the swirls of blue required an anchoring point.

‘I’m not sure I meant anything in particular by it, though of course I’ve no objection to you seeing it as a lighthouse.’

[...]

‘But if it isn’t a lighthouse – or anything specific – why is it there?’

[...]

‘The blue needed it, the pattern needed it. It gives the eye something to rest on.’

(106)

The exchange is underpinned by the arguments of Fry and Clive Bell, which Virginia interrogates and Vanessa symbolically defends. Virginia seeks in the ‘anchoring point’ amid the ‘swirls of blue’ what Fry called a ‘resemblance to natural form’, implicitly the lighthouse of the sisters’ childhood summers at St. Ives.⁵⁸⁴ Like Spalding, Bell’s biographer, Virginia thus analyses Vanessa’s ‘simple geometric shapes’ for signs of ‘a deeper significance’.⁵⁸⁵ This resonates amusingly with Clive Bell’s assertion that ‘the majority of [...] charming and intelligent people [...] appreciate visual art impurely’ and that ‘the appreciation of almost all great writers has been impure’.⁵⁸⁶

Conversely, Vanessa’s prioritising of ‘colour and pattern’ over the accurate representation of ‘a particular seascape’ recalls Clive Bell’s suggestion that any representative element in art ‘must do double duty; as well as giving information, it must create aesthetic emotion’ by being ‘simplified into significant form’.⁵⁸⁷ Vanessa insists of the “lighthouse” that ‘the blue needed it, the pattern needed it. It gives the eye something to rest on’. This attests to a concern with the ‘aesthetic’, rather than the ‘cognitive’ value of representative forms, a desire to ‘treat them as though they were not representative of anything’.⁵⁸⁸ Thus while the image has ‘cognitive’ interest as a lighthouse amid the waves, Vanessa is primarily concerned with what Fry called ‘the balancing of the attractions to the eye about the central line’, which gives the image its

⁵⁸⁴ Fry, ‘The French Post-Impressionists’, p.167.

⁵⁸⁵ Spalding, p.xiv.

⁵⁸⁶ Clive Bell, *Art*, p.35.

⁵⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p.225.

⁵⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

essential 'unity'.⁵⁸⁹ Significantly, her acknowledgment that 'I'm not sure I meant anything in particular by [the line in the centre]' is suggestive of Woolf's own insistence, in a letter to Fry, that she 'meant *nothing* by *The Lighthouse*. One has to have a central line down the book to hold the design together'.⁵⁹⁰ Along with Vanessa's earlier description of her painterly quest for 'a single joining line' that has no bearing on 'the world at large' (91), this resonance allows Vanessa to symbolically convert her sister to 'the Bloomsbury belief that art only achieves unity and completeness if it is detached'.⁵⁹¹

However, Sellers's description of the finished novel challenges this belief by defending the 'unity and completeness' of a work of art which reunites aesthetics with 'associated ideas'. Upon reading *To the Lighthouse*, Vanessa marvels at how Leslie and Julia Stephen become 'archetypal as well as vivid, instructional as well as real', emphasising the novel's status as a palimpsestic work which blends biographical and invented qualities' (76). For Vanessa, the affective power of *To the Lighthouse* lies in the way in which it manages to achieve aesthetic unity while at the same time reaching back into the sisters' pasts, 'bridg[ing] the gap between biography and art' (75). She notes how she 'began to see equivalent hurdles and prospects in my own work', that 'what you had achieved was so momentous it advanced us both' (76). Her subsequent attempts to paint Julia Stephen are initially hampered by comparison with 'the portrait of Mother you drew in your novel', a portrait

so convincing that I heard her voice, saw the perpendicular of her back, as I read. I gaze at my picture. The emptiness remains. I paint a random figure, hurriedly, haphazardly, to fill the space, then take the canvas down. It is only years later when I look at the picture again I realise the figure is my daughter. (134)

Like the novel itself, the portrait of Angelica inspired by *To the Lighthouse* reunites pure form with associative or biographical qualities. The subject is 'a random figure', painted

⁵⁸⁹ Fry, 'An Essay in Aesthetics', p.22.

⁵⁹⁰ Virginia Woolf to Roger Fry, 27 May 1927. *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, III, pp.385-7 (p.385).

⁵⁹¹ Spalding, p.xiv.

in an attempt ‘to fill the space’, echoing the way in which, for Clive Bell, ‘the subject [...] is of no consequence in itself. It is merely one of the artist’s means of expression or creativity’.⁵⁹² In accordance with the dictates of Fry and Clive Bell, the portrait aims not to represent life, but to satisfy the composition’s need for ‘certain forms and relations of forms’.⁵⁹³ Yet upon subsequent inspection, the figure is revealed to have a deep personal significance for the artist, confirming Bell’s suspicion that ‘the form and colour nearly always do represent life and I suppose any allusions may creep in’.⁵⁹⁴ Sellers thus represents *To the Lighthouse* and Vanessa’s painting of Angelica as mutually-inspiring, quasi-interdisciplinary works which reengage narrative elements with aesthetics, enabling a feminist abolition of the boundaries raised by Fry and Clive Bell.

Sellers’s attribution of personal significance to abstracted forms in Vanessa’s painting enables a new reading of *To the Lighthouse* itself, one that is particularly attentive to the way in which Lily Briscoe’s longing for intimacy with the Ramsays evolves into a perception of them as fading Victorian symbols. As Lily looks at Mr and Mrs Ramsay ‘standing close together watching the children throwing catches’, ‘suddenly the meaning [...] came upon them, and made them in the dusk standing, looking, the symbols of marriage, husband and wife’.⁵⁹⁵ Such a shift in perception ultimately enables Lily to move beyond her fascination with Mrs Ramsay’s physical beauty towards an artistic understanding of the couple’s potential as aesthetic symbols. Resuming work on her abandoned painting in the aftermath of the First World War, Lily is newly attentive to the importance of formal perspective to her artistic design, recognising that ‘so much depends on whether people are near us or far from us’.⁵⁹⁶ She recognises that her ‘feeling for Mr Ramsay changed as he sailed further and further

⁵⁹² Clive Bell, *Art*, p.68.

⁵⁹³ *Ibid.*, p.8.

⁵⁹⁴ Vanessa Bell to Julian Bell, 25 January 1946. *Letters*, pp.403-7 (p.406).

⁵⁹⁵ Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, p.99.

⁵⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

across the bay’, and ‘seemed to become more and more remote’.⁵⁹⁷ Finally, ‘‘He has landed,’ she said aloud. ‘It is finished’’.⁵⁹⁸ It is the recognition that Mr Ramsay has alighted on the island, has attained the furthest geographical distance from the bay, that enables Lily to finish her painting. The juxtaposition is suggestive of her need to distance herself from the familiar associations of the Ramsays in order for them to assume their place in her composition as abstracted forms. Yet the Ramsays are not abandoned or left behind, but are instead transformed into symbols; the ‘form and colour’ in Lily’s painting ‘do represent life’ while at the same time having aesthetic significance as abstract shapes.⁵⁹⁹ In this reading, enabled in part by Sellers, Lily’s painting represents, in microcosm, *To the Lighthouse*’s successful reunion of biographical elements with aesthetics and form.

Sellers’s presentation of Virginia’s writing and Vanessa’s painting as radical and interdisciplinary culminates in her interplay between *The Waves* (1931) and Bell’s lost painting, *The Nursery*. Bell’s letter to Woolf from Cassis describing moths ‘flying madly in circles round me and the lamp’ provided inspiration for the novel that was to become *The Waves*, and with it, one of Woolf’s most explicit corroborations of the mutual interplay between her sister and herself.⁶⁰⁰ She wrote to Bell that ‘perhaps you stimulate the literary sense in me as you say I do your painting sense’.⁶⁰¹ Sellers dramatises this mutual inspiration by reconstructing the scene described in Bell’s letter, transporting Virginia to Cassis to witness the moth at first hand. Virginia then elucidates the symbolic meaning of the scene through conversation with Vanessa, telling her that

‘You hold the light. Then there are lonely moths like me circling the lamp, searching for a way in.’

‘I knew you’d make a scene out of it! So what about all the other people sitting round the table tonight? How do they feature in your sketch?’

You lean back and gaze at me steadily.

⁵⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁹⁸ Ibid., p.280.

⁵⁹⁹ Vanessa Bell to Julian Bell, 25 January 1946. *Letters*, pp.403-7 (p.406).

⁶⁰⁰ Vanessa Bell to Virginia Woolf, 3 May 1927. *Letters*, pp.314-6 (p.314).

⁶⁰¹ Virginia Woolf to Vanessa Bell, 8 May 1927. *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, III, pp.369-72 (p.372).

‘They personify the different voices – emblematised by the moth.’
 ‘Sounds like the start for one of your novels.’ (143)

By locating the roots of one of Woolf’s most abstract, formally experimental works in a familial, domestic scene, this exchange once again emphasises the potential for aesthetic and biographical qualities to co-exist and complement each other. This is a significant departure from the representation of Virginia’s earlier work, in which a dependence on outside elements was perceived to hamper formal unity. Whereas *The Voyage Out* was dismissed as ‘mere journalism’ and therefore ‘not literature’, the attempt to reproduce lived experience is instead seen to catalyse the formal radicalism of this later work (75). From the clash of voices at a family dinner emerges the experimental polyphony of *The Waves*, in much the same way as Vanessa’s elimination of facial detail evolved from a piece of associative art.

Gillespie writes that *The Waves*, once completed, heralded ‘a new phase in [Bell’s] response to Virginia’s writing’, namely ‘an attempt to see in her sister’s work a creative struggle similar to her own’.⁶⁰² Writing to Woolf after her first reading of the novel, Bell ventured a tentative comparison to her current work-in-progress:

Will it seem to you absurd and conceited or will you understand at all what I mean if I tell you that I’ve been working hard lately at an absurd great picture I’ve been painting on and off for the last 2 years – and if only I could do what I want to – but I can’t – it seems to me it would have some sort of analogous meaning to what you’ve done. How can one explain, but to me painting a floor covered with toys and keeping them all in relation to each other and the figures and the space of the floor and the light on it means something of the same sort that you seem to mean.⁶⁰³

Bell’s letter significantly informs an understanding of her attitude to “literary” or interdisciplinary qualities in art. It emphasises her quest for an internal formal unity in *The Nursery*, a unity comprised of what Clive Bell called ‘pure forms in certain relations to each other’, in this case the toys, the figures, the space, and the light.⁶⁰⁴ Yet while preserving this sense of formal unity, Bell is at the same time able to reach out to

⁶⁰² Gillespie, p.159.

⁶⁰³ Vanessa Bell to Virginia Woolf, 15 October 1931. *Letters*, pp.367-8 (pp.367-8).

⁶⁰⁴ Clive Bell, *Art*, p.51.

Woolf's parallel project, *The Waves*. Bell's suggestion that the two works 'mean something of the same sort' is indicative of a different conceptualisation of interdisciplinarity to that suggested by Fry and Clive Bell. Here, interdisciplinarity is not a quality of a "literary", incomplete work which relies on external associations for its effect; rather it is a characteristic of self-contained works which, taken together, have an 'analogous meaning'. This new interpretation of interdisciplinarity enables Woolf and Bell's works to be experienced in dialogue, without diminishing the achievement of either.

Bell's suggested understanding of interdisciplinarity is corroborated in *Vanessa and Virginia*. Here, Sellers incorporates what can be seen as an ekphrasistic description of *The Nursery* into a scene in Vanessa's life:

You gesture towards the hearth, the ripe peaches and apricots I have worked round it. Your hand finds the pattern in the stems and leaves, connecting the fruit, weaving the chaos of my decoration into shape. I hear Julian and Quentin playing happily again in the garden. Soon Duncan will appear, and I will go into the kitchen and see to lunch. Gradually the scraps of my life – the debris from the party, the children's discarded clothes, my half-finished fireplace – coalesce into a whole. You have made a painting. (96-7)

As with her aforementioned description of Vanessa's portrait of Virginia, Sellers emphasises Vanessa's perception of the objects in her composition as 'means' rather than as 'pure forms' or 'ends in themselves'.⁶⁰⁵ Whereas Fry observed that 'the greatest art seems to concern itself most with the universal aspects of natural form, to be the least preoccupied with particulars', Vanessa is sensitive to the 'unaesthetic matter' or 'associations' of her chosen forms, the particularity of her own 'half-finished fireplace' and her 'children's discarded clothes'.⁶⁰⁶ Significantly, Sellers's description suggests that if *The Nursery* had survived, it would have derived some of its formal significance from these associative elements; the 'scraps' of the artist's life would, together, have 'made a painting'. This comprises an implicit feminist challenge to Fry's preoccupation with the 'universal aspects' of form, an assertion of the innate aesthetic potential of

⁶⁰⁵ Clive Bell, *Art*, p.52.

⁶⁰⁶ Fry, 'Retrospect', p.207; Clive Bell, *Art*, p.55.

women's lives.⁶⁰⁷ The interdisciplinary resonances that Bell perceived between *The Nursery* and *The Waves* are also represented, symbolised by Virginia having a 'hand' in Vanessa's art. By 'connecting the fruit, weaving the chaos of my decoration into shape', Virginia reveals *The Nursery*'s 'design', defined by Clive Bell as the way in which 'every form in a work of art [...] has to be made a part of a significant whole'.⁶⁰⁸ Rather than the formal unity of the work of art being hindered by the artist's interdisciplinary engagement, it is the hand of the writer that suggests how the forms 'coalesce into a whole'. This passage is therefore indicative of Sellers's overall approach, challenging the controlling assumptions of Fry and Clive Bell by revealing how formal significance can coexist with, even arise from, associative or interdisciplinary qualities in art.

To conclude, *Vanessa and Virginia* is exemplary of biofiction's unique potential to intervene in the popular representation of its subjects. Creating in the gaps and silences of Woolf and Bell's correspondence and autobiographical writings, Sellers uses biographical scholarship to inform her fictional portrait, troubling the oppositional portrayals that haunt the sisters' posthumous reputations. As exemplified by other works of biofiction, these include the opposition of Woolf's supposed sexual timidity and her periods of mental illness to Bell's fecundity and apparent ease of mind. Through a layering of historical and invented detail, Sellers bridges the dichotomy between 'the virginal, barren woman [and] the sensual, maternal one', and 'the mentally unstable versus the sane'.⁶⁰⁹ In doing so, she reveals how narrowly reifying are the taxonomies between the 'real' and the 'incomplete' woman, instead producing a more nuanced, synthesised, understanding of the interconnections between the sisters' lives. Sellers's fictional re-negotiating of her subjects' creation as opposite figures culminates in her revelation of the sustained interplay between their arts. Whereas, for instance,

⁶⁰⁷ Fry, 'Retrospect', p.207.

⁶⁰⁸ Clive Bell, *Art*, p.228.

⁶⁰⁹ Gillespie, p.5.

Cunningham's reference to 'the children and paints and lovers, the brilliantly cluttered house' presents Vanessa's art as an incidental spillover from her life, Sellers's use of ekphrasis enables sustained speculation into the details of her artistic process, and foregrounds Virginia's developing engagement with her work (169). Sellers thereby advances Gillespie's acknowledged aims: to 'shift the emphasis in the ongoing discussion of Virginia Woolf and the visual arts from Roger Fry to Vanessa Bell' and to 'reveal more fully the role of the visual arts in Woolf's writing'.⁶¹⁰ Sellers offers a companion achievement to Gillespie's, redistributing emphasis in the discussion of Vanessa Bell and the *literary* arts from Roger Fry to Virginia Woolf, and using ekphrasis to suggest the influence of literature on Bell's painting.

The first of the novels under consideration in this thesis to be written by a subject specialist, Sellers's creative work is demonstrably in dialogue with critical scholarship. This suggests the potential of biofiction to influence, as well as being influenced by, an academic mode of address. By embroidering moments of ekphrasis into a biographical narrative, Sellers suggests that appreciation of the formal elements of a work, be it visual or literary, may be enhanced rather than diminished by 'outside associations of character and story'.⁶¹¹ This represents a significant challenge to the scholarly tendency, noted by Spalding and Gillespie, to '*cherchez l'homme*', and to assume that the sisters' arts adhered uncritically to Fry and Clive Bell's opposition of 'pure form' and 'unaesthetic matter'.⁶¹² Sellers instead indicates moments in Virginia's writing and Vanessa's painting wherein attention to their subjects' real-life associations gave rise to formal significance, and asserts that art may have biographical resonances without sacrificing its inherent structural unity. As demonstrated by my analysis of Lily Briscoe's painting in *To the Lighthouse*, such reunion of an 'art of associated ideas' with Structural Design and Significant Form has the potential to generate new and intriguing

⁶¹⁰ Ibid., p.2.

⁶¹¹ Gillespie, p.2.

⁶¹² Fry, 'Giotto', p.92; Clive Bell, *Art*, p.55.

readings of the interrelationship between Woolf and Bell's lives and their work.⁶¹³ An autonomous novel, *Vanessa and Virginia* therefore simultaneously enters into a critical dialogue, drawing on and re-informing biography, comparative studies of the sisters, and Bloomsbury art criticism. Thus blending fiction with 'critical hypothesizing', the novel provides a unique insight into the work of 'the supreme (portrait) artist' and the 'mistress of the phrase'.⁶¹⁴

⁶¹³ Fry, 'The French Post-Impressionists', p.169.

⁶¹⁴ Sandra Gilbert, 'Dead Poet's Society', *The Women's Review of Books*, 20 (2003), 1+3-4 (p.3); Vanessa Bell to Virginia Woolf, 11 May 1927. *Letters*, pp.316-8 (p.316). Referring to Woolf's depiction of their parents in *To the Lighthouse*, Bell commented 'as far as portrait painting goes, you seem to me to be a supreme artist and it is so shattering to find oneself face to face with those two again that I can hardly consider anything else'; Virginia Woolf to Vanessa Bell, 5 March 1927. *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, III, pp.340-2 (p.340). Woolf wrote that '[t]he point about you is that you are now mistress of the phrase. All your pictures are built up of flying phrases'.

Chapter Five: Your story / My story / Her story: Authoring Sylvia Plath in Ted Hughes's *Occasional Prose* (1965-1988), *Birthday Letters* (1998), and Emma Tennant's *The Ballad of Sylvia and Ted* (2001)

The fifth poem in Ted Hughes's final collection *Birthday Letters*, 'Visit' describes Hughes's memory of himself and friend Lucas Myer in Cambridge, 'lobbing soil-clods up at a dark window', 'certain' it was Sylvia Plath's.⁶¹⁵ Hughes then recalls how 'Ten years after your death / I meet on a page of your journal, as never before, / The shock of your joy / When you heard of that' (l.37-40). For a brief, poignant moment, the journal becomes a conduit for Hughes's unmediated engagement with his wife, a means of accessing 'Your actual words, as they floated / Out through your throat and tongue and onto your page' (l.48-50). The vividness of Plath's words prompts a comparison with the voice of her daughter, asking, 'suddenly: / Daddy, where's Mummy?' (l.55-6); both text and child recall 'your voice / With all its urgent future' (l.64-5). The illusion then dissolves, leaving only 'the book of the printed words', and the realisation that 'it is only a story. Your story. My story.' (l.67-9).

Like Aspern's Juliana, Frieda Hughes figures in *Birthday Letters* as a means of accessing the "reality" of Plath, as her painfully living legacy. 'Your daughter's / Fingers', Hughes writes, 'remember your fingers / In everything they do'; they symbolically attest to Plath's real existence as Hughes's wife and the mother of his children.⁶¹⁶ In juxtaposing the voice of the journals with the voice of Frieda Hughes, Hughes thus attempts to read the journals as a 'representation' of Plath, an approach that, in Baudrillard's terms, relies on 'the principle of the equivalence of the sign and the real'.⁶¹⁷ Significantly, the line 'ten years after your death' locates the memory in 1973,

⁶¹⁵ Ted Hughes, 'Visit', in *Birthday Letters* (London: Faber, 1998), pp.7-9 (l.22-3). The first reference to each poem under consideration will be given in a footnote; subsequent references will appear parenthetically.

⁶¹⁶ Ted Hughes, 'Fingers', in *Birthday Letters*, p.194 (l.23-5).

⁶¹⁷ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. by Sheila Faria Glaser (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1994), p.6.

the year in which Hughes was rereading the manuscripts of Plath's journals while assisting Aurelia Plath with the preparation of *Letters Home* (1975). The description of the journals as 'printed', rather than handwritten words then reminds us that, in 1982, Hughes would oversee their abridged publication, intended in part as a 'corrective' to the letters.⁶¹⁸ As Anne Whitehead writes in a different context, 'Hughes does not have access to the past, as much as to a literary representation of the past'; the poem ends, in Baudrillard's terms, by 'substituting the signs of the real for the real'.⁶¹⁹ For when Plath becomes text, first by her own authorial hand and subsequently by Hughes's editorial one, her reality, here located in marriage and motherhood, becomes hopelessly lost and replaced by a simulation. In contrast to representation, the simulation frames the sign 'as the reversion and death sentence of every reference'; the journals, ultimately, do not translate into Plath's 'voice / with all its urgent future', but remain 'printed words', 'only a story'.⁶²⁰

'Visit' thus foregrounds 'the utopia of the principle of equivalence' between the sign and the referent, a point to which I shall shortly return.⁶²¹ Such a reading is radically at odds with the popular reception of *Birthday Letters*, which interpreted the collection in terms of depth and affect, as 'the unmediated love-letters of a dying man', released after a sustained and dignified silence.⁶²² As noted by Whitehead, the publication 'prompted a series of reviews which were remarkably similar in approach', framing the collection as 'vehicle' by which Hughes was at last able 'to repossess his own past and to tell his side of the story'.⁶²³ Sarah Churchwell concurred with this assessment, stating that *Birthday Letters* was 'sold as Hughes's "unknown side" of a thirty-five year battle

⁶¹⁸ Kate Moses, 'Whose Plath Is It Anyway?', *Salon* (2003) <http://www.salon.com/2003/10/17/plath_4/>[accessed 5 December 2011].

⁶¹⁹ Anne Whitehead, 'Refiguring Orpheus: The Possession of the Past in Ted Hughes's *Birthday Letters*', *Textual Practice*, 13 (1999), 227-241 (p.234). Baudrillard, p.2.

⁶²⁰ Baudrillard, p.6.

⁶²¹ *Ibid.*

⁶²² Susan Van Dyne, "'Your story. My story": Having the Last Word in Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes', in *Last Letters*, ed. by Crinquand, pp.85-99 (p.88).

⁶²³ Whitehead, p.227.

of the sexes'.⁶²⁴ The approach observed by Whitehead and Churchwell is exemplified in reviews by Alan Williamson and Carol Bere; Williamson suggested that *Birthday Letters* offered 'the other side of stories told and retold so often that they have become legends', while Bere framed the collection as an adversarial intervention, 'a grenade [tossed] into received Hughes/Plath mythology'.⁶²⁵ These views were confirmed in the final credits of Christine Jeffs and John Brownlow's biopic, which stated that, with the publication of *Birthday Letters*, Hughes 'broke a thirty-year silence about Sylvia'.⁶²⁶

Yet far from remaining silent, Hughes, the executor of Plath's literary estate, had since the appearance of *Ariel* (1965) published a series of introductions, essays, and lectures on her work. These pieces, which number six in total, were produced between 1965 and 1988. The first was 'Sylvia Plath: *Ariel*' (1965), a two-page response to Plath's collection written for the *Poetry Book Society Bulletin*.⁶²⁷ This was succeeded by 'Publishing Sylvia Plath' (1971), an interventional piece for the *Observer* in which Hughes defended his arrangement of *Ariel* and contested Al Alvarez's suggestion that he eked out Plath's other work to maximise the financial gain.⁶²⁸ There then followed introductions to his editions of Plath's *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* and *Collected Poems*, published in 1977 and 1981 respectively, and 'Sylvia Plath and Her Journals' (1982), an essay for the American literary quarterly *Grand Street* serving, in

⁶²⁴ Sarah Churchwell, 'Secrets and Lies: Plath, Privacy, Publication and Ted Hughes's *Birthday Letters*', *Contemporary Literature*, 42 (2001), 102-48 (p.104).

⁶²⁵ Alan Williamson, 'A Marriage Between Writers: *Birthday Letters* as Memoir and as Poetry', *The American Poetry Review*, 27 (1998), 11-13 (p.11); Carol Bere, 'Owning the Facts of His Life: Ted Hughes's *Birthday Letters*', *The Literary Review*, 41 (1998), 556-61 (p.556).

⁶²⁶ John Brownlow, *Sylvia: The Shooting Script* (New York: Newmarket Press, 2003), p.112. Hereafter referenced parenthetically. Where lines were modified in production, the revised version will be quoted, as above.

⁶²⁷ Ted Hughes, 'Sylvia Plath: *Ariel*', in *Winter Pollen: Occasional Prose*, ed. by William Scammell (London: Faber, 1995), pp.161-2 (p.162). Hereafter referenced parenthetically as SP:A.

⁶²⁸ Ted Hughes, 'Publishing Sylvia Plath', in *Winter Pollen*, ed. by Scammell, pp.163-9. Hereafter referenced parenthetically as PSP.

part, to publicise his edition of *The Journals of Sylvia Plath* (1982).⁶²⁹ Finally, Hughes wrote ‘Sylvia Plath: The Evolution of ‘Sheep in Fog’’ (1988), an illustrated lecture for the Wordsworth Trust commissioned by Sotheby’s Manuscripts Department.⁶³⁰

Just as these pieces were written for a variety of different purposes and forums, the writing to which Hughes responded was similarly various. The finished poetry, if one accepts Hughes’s assertion that Plath ‘was always scrupulous or unscrupulous about selling every word she wrote’, was intended for publication, whereas the journals and the drafts of ‘Sheep in Fog’ were private, provisional writings never intended for wider consumption (PSP 165). Five of Hughes’s six pieces, produced sporadically over twenty-three years, are collected in *Winter Pollen* (1994), his *Occasional Prose*. When these pieces are placed in sequence, as I shall go on to show, it is possible to trace an evolving narrative about Plath that bridges the supposed “silence” between her death in 1963 and the publication of *Birthday Letters* in 1998. This narrative provides vital context for biofiction about Plath, the equivalent, for my remaining chapters, of Woolf’s essays on life-writing, and the biographies and criticism about James.

Carol Bere, Susan Van Dyne, and Diane Hunter have all claimed a genesis for *Birthday Letters* of between twenty and thirty years, the period of the prose pieces collected in *Winter Pollen* wherein Hughes ‘was most intimately engaged with Plath’s work’.⁶³¹ Middlebrook countered the initial impressions of Hughes’s unmediated engagement by situating *Birthday Letters* as the product of this ‘repeated, intimate, troublesome contact’, not with Plath herself, but with ‘the voluminous pages of her

⁶²⁹ Ted Hughes, ‘Introduction’, in Sylvia Plath, *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams and Other Prose Writings* (London: Faber, 1979), pp.11-13. Hereafter referenced parenthetically as JP; Ted Hughes, ‘Collecting Sylvia Plath’, in *Winter Pollen*, ed. by Scammell, pp.171-6. Hereafter referenced parenthetically as CSP; Ted Hughes, ‘Sylvia Plath and Her Journals’, in *Winter Pollen*, ed. by Scammell, pp.177-90. Hereafter referenced parenthetically as SP: J.

⁶³⁰ Ted Hughes, ‘Sylvia Plath: The Evolution of ‘Sheep in Fog’’, in *Winter Pollen*, ed. by Scammell, pp.191-211. Hereafter referenced parenthetically as SIF.

⁶³¹ Bere, p.557; Van Dyne, p.86; Dianne Hunter, ‘Poetics of Melancholy and Psychic Possession in Ted Hughes’s *Birthday Letters* and Other Haunted Texts’, *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas*, 1 (2003), 129-50 (p.137).

manuscripts'.⁶³² Similarly, Churchwell perceived the volume as 'a citational intertextual account'; Van Dyne 'uncover[ed] in both [Hughes' and Plath's] poems a practice of insistent, [...] antagonistic intertextuality', and Heather Clark situated *Birthday Letters* as part of a 'revisionary dialogue', Hughes's way of "'creatively correcting'" Plath's work.⁶³³ But as these examples reflect, while critics often placed *Birthday Letters* in conversation with Plath's poetry, few emphasised the dialogue between *Birthday Letters* and Hughes's prose writings on Plath.

In what follows, I want to re-engage the text of *Birthday Letters* with the fruits of Hughes's sustained "husbandry", placing his poetry in dialogue with his six critical pieces on Plath's writing (1965-88), along with his edition of *Ariel*. Through a close reading and analysis of each of the prose pieces, I shall show how Hughes fashioned his own account of Plath, an interpretation which evolved in parallel with the different versions of her that emerged with the gradual publication of her poetry, stories, letters, and diaries. In Hughes's version, Plath's writing is closely aligned with, indeed inseparable from, her life, and this emphasis on the imbrication of Plath's work with lived experiences to which only he was privy was one means by which he maintained interpretative control. I shall then turn to *Birthday Letters*, which enabled Hughes to demonstrate a different kind of lyric expression to that of his previous writings on Plath. While, as demonstrated by my analysis of 'Visit', the individual "letters" are sufficiently self-contained to stand alone, their chronological arrangement produces a discernible narrative arc, one which begins with Plath's arrival in Cambridge in 1956 and finishes with the aftermath of her death. Furthermore, just as Hughes's re-ordering of the *Ariel*

⁶³² Diane Middlebrook, *Her Husband: Hughes and Plath – A Marriage* (London: Little, Brown, 2003), p.275.

⁶³³ Churchwell, 'Secrets and Lies', p.104; Van Dyne, p.88; Heather Clark, *The Grief of Influence: Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p.223. In an analysis of Hughes's commentary on 'Sheep in Fog', Clark did acknowledge that his prioritising of 'Plath's obsession with Otto Plath' over 'her feelings of marital betrayal' was something he 'would again make clear in *Birthday Letters*', but chose not to exploit this connection. See Heather Clark, 'Tracking the Thought-Fox: Sylvia Plath's Revision of Ted Hughes', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 28 (2005), 100-12 (p.110).

manuscript produced a radically different narrative from that suggested by Plath's arrangement, it is similarly possible to re-arrange the chronological narrative of *Birthday Letters* and to rebuild it in new and different ways. My intention is to isolate those poems that resonate with Hughes's established views on Plath and her writing, and to place them in dialogue with his prose pieces to form a different kind of interpretative narrative. This narrative has to do with the origin and the emergence of *Ariel*, with Hughes's introduction of the later poems, and with the unwanted intimacies of the collection's revelations.

Support for my adduction of a narrative that is in dialogue with Hughes's critical writings is provided by Keith Sagar, who argued that 'the very same images that constituted the positives in the prose' became, in *Birthday Letters*, 'the most irredeemably destructive and horrific elements of [Hughes's] vision'.⁶³⁴ However, I shall contest Sagar's assertion that the version of *Ariel*'s gestation set forth in *Birthday Letters* comprises a 'totally different account' from that developed in Hughes's prose.⁶³⁵ Instead, I shall suggest that *Birthday Letters* concurs with the prose until an advanced stage in its chronology, after which point, as Sagar suggests, 'the imperatives of [Plath's] poetry and those of survival' become 'mutually exclusive'.⁶³⁶ Rather than providing a 'totally different account', the narrative that emerges from *Birthday Letters*, when placed in a particular sequence, yields another rendering of the views Hughes had been expressing in his critical writing for more than twenty years: essentially that Plath's writing and her life were inseparable. My focus will then move to 'Night Ride on Ariel' and 'The Bee God', poems which I read as responses to Plath's 'Ariel' and her Bee sequence. I shall explore how Hughes overwrites the triumph and anger of Plath's *Ariel* poems, reinscribing them with repentance and sorrow. While in 'The Evolution of Sheep in Fog', Hughes made concessions to 'the masterful programme of *Ariel*' as arranged by

⁶³⁴ Keith Sagar, *The Laughter of Foxes: A Study of Ted Hughes* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000), p.69.

⁶³⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶³⁶ *Ibid.*, p.71.

Plath (SIF 205), the volume that famously ‘began with the word ‘love’ and ended with ‘spring’’, Hughes’s replies in *Birthday Letters* function to reconfirm the authority of his own arrangement, with its overwhelming narrative of despair (PSP 164-5).

Provocative as this might seem, I wish, then, to read against the grain of previous interpretations of *Birthday Letters*, and to consider it not as a mode of access to the reality of Plath, but as the product of an interrelation between different discursive levels: in short, as another manifestation of biofiction. In formulating this argument, I draw upon Baudrillard’s opposition of the simulacrum to the ‘wager on representation’ engaged in by ‘all Western faith and good faith’.⁶³⁷ As touched upon in my analysis of ‘Visit’, this ‘wager’ rests on the assumption

that a sign could refer to the depth of meaning, that a sign could be exchanged for meaning and something could guarantee this exchange – God of course. But what if God himself can be simulated, that is to say can be reduced to the signs that constitute faith? Then the whole system becomes weightless, it is no longer itself anything but a gigantic simulacrum – not unreal, but a simulacrum, that is to say never exchanged for the real, but exchanged for itself, in an uninterrupted circuit without reference or circumference. (Baudrillard, pp.5-6)

Oppositions do, however, prevent us from drawing the conclusion that Hughes’s writing is ‘pure simulacrum’ with ‘no relation to any reality whatsoever’.⁶³⁸ For Hughes’s writing has a demonstrable relation to reality; bluntly, Plath really did exist; Hughes really did know her. However, as I shall argue, it is only the critical writings collected in *Winter Pollen* that relate to what Baudrillard calls ‘an absolute level of the real’.⁶³⁹ For when Hughes retrieves his wife into the specialised discourse of poetry, he revises ideas previously advanced in his critical writing. The Plath of *Birthday Letters* thereby becomes a discursive construct, a version of a previous version rather than a representation of the real.

Reading *Birthday Letters* in this way has the advantage of enabling me to locate and to shape the further discursive lives that it produced, and to suggest answers to the

⁶³⁷ Baudrillard, p.5.

⁶³⁸ Ibid., p.6.

⁶³⁹ Ibid., p.19.

questions, both critical and ethical, which accrue around the production of those lives. For Hughes's lyric recuperation of Plath paved the way for Emma Tennant's novella *The Ballad of Sylvia and Ted*, John Brownlow's biopic *Sylvia*, and Kate Moses's novel *Wintering*.⁶⁴⁰ My view of the inseparability of *Birthday Letters* and these later biofictions is informed by Cardwell's framework for discussing film and television adaptations. Cardwell insists that the relationship between each new text (in this case Tennant, Brownlow, and Moses's works) and the original source (in this case, the extra-textual Sylvia Plath) is neither 'direct' nor 'unmediated'.⁶⁴¹ Rather, she suggests, the new work is inevitably informed by previous versions, as supported by the way in which Tennant, Brownlow, and Moses engage more demonstrably with Hughes's discursive constructions of Plath than with an abstract concept of her "reality".⁶⁴²

The Ballad of Sylvia and Ted has its roots in Tennant's intimate knowledge of Hughes, with whom she began a year-long affair in the summer of 1977, and is thus likely to have been enabled by Hughes's own adoption of an intimate focus in his final collection.⁶⁴³ I interpret the novella as a redress, and a highly adversarial one at that, to the revisions Hughes made in *Birthday Letters* to his evolving narrative about Plath. The publication of Tennant's *Ballad* then prompted another version of Plath: the biopic *Sylvia*, discussed in my final chapter. The film enters into obvious dialogue with Hughes's prior versions of Plath; its narrative concern with Sylvia's attempts to extricate herself from her husband's influence was reprised on a meta-textual level as the biopic evolved from page to screen, stripping off citations and echoes from *Birthday Letters* and Hughes's arrangement of *Ariel* and instead invoking public-domain texts and poems from Plath's original *Ariel* manuscript. The challenge to Hughes's authorial control

⁶⁴⁰ Emma Tennant, *The Ballad of Sylvia and Ted* (Edinburgh: Mainstream Publishing Company, 2001); *Sylvia*, directed by Christine Jeffs (USA: Focus Features, 2003); Kate Moses, *Wintering* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2003). All hereafter referenced parenthetically.

⁶⁴¹ Cardwell, p.25.

⁶⁴² *Ibid.*

⁶⁴³ For a description of the affair, see Emma Tennant, *Burnt Diaries* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1999). Hereafter referenced parenthetically.

implicit in the biopic was then made manifest in Kate Moses's *Wintering*, a scholarly biofiction with its roots in the archives of Indiana University and Smith College, and the final text under consideration in this thesis. Writing back to *Birthday Letters*, and to Ted Hughes's arrangement of *Ariel*, *Wintering* is as much 'an act of critical hypothesizing' as a work of fiction, published with the express purpose of reminding the Plath estate 'that it's still sitting on one unpublished manuscript of Sylvia Plath's [...] the *Ariel* poems in their proper order'.⁶⁴⁴

While each of these versions strives for authority, for possession of "The Real Sylvia Plath", none can ever yield an exclusive truth or a single, unified subject, like that of Roland Barthes's Author-God. For while Tennant, Brownlow, and Moses's production of successive versions of Plath might seek 'to restore the real that escapes [them]', their engagement with pre-existing textual constructs, *Birthday Letters* and the two *Ariel* manuscripts, foregrounds what Baudrillard calls 'the impossibility of rediscovering an absolute level of the real'.⁶⁴⁵ Yet the same is true of *Birthday Letters* itself, a poetic sequence that responds, I argue, to stories and defences already constructed in prose as much as to the reality of Plath. Thus reading *Birthday Letters* as a version of a version suggests a way of levelling the implicit hierarchies between Hughes and other writers of biofiction. One exemplification of these hierarchies is Diane Middlebrook's enumeration of Tennant's "illegitimate" quotations from Hughes's and Plath's poems, poems which she figures, in turn, as unassailable originals.⁶⁴⁶ Framing Hughes's poems as similarly discursive constructs, incorporating echoes and traces from Plath's poems and his own critical writings contests this distinction between original and copy. Furthermore, it exposes the value judgements that underlie the attempt to delineate

⁶⁴⁴ Gilbert, 'Dead Poet's Society', p.3; Kate Moses, 'The Last Plath', *San Francisco Bay Guardian*, 22nd October 2003 <http://www.sfbg.com/38/04/art_plath.html> [accessed 12 June 2013].

⁶⁴⁵ Baudrillard, pp.19, 23.

⁶⁴⁶ Diane Middlebrook, 'Misremembering Ted Hughes', in *The Ethics of Life Writing*, ed. by Paul John Eakin (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2004), pp.40-52 (p.47).

legitimate from illegitimate tissues of quotation. This mode of reading seeks not to dethrone Hughes, so much as to replace the reductive opposition of ‘Ted Hughes’s truths to other people’s fictions’ with a more democratic dialogue between successive literary constructs.⁶⁴⁷

My crafting of a dialogue between Hughes, Tennant, Brownlow, and Moses also provides a way of negotiating some of the ethical considerations that arise with Plath as a literary subject. If these questions are more palpably felt when Plath, rather than James or Woolf, is the object of recuperation, this is because the tragedy of her death is still in living memory, and members of her immediate family are still extant. The questions concern, firstly, the right of biofiction to invent or to imagine the most intimate and traumatic details of a person’s life? Hughes put a similar question to Al Alvarez regarding the publication of *The Savage God* (1971): ‘What makes you think you can use our lives like the text of a novel?’. He attempted to suppress Alvarez’s ‘slow-motion close-up movie’ of Plath’s suicide on the grounds that publication was tantamount to ‘sticking electrodes in her children’s brains’.⁶⁴⁸ Yet while Hughes and his children have an indisputable right to protect their memories of Plath as self, wife, and mother, problems emerge when the necessity of limiting emotional distress is used to obscure censorial acts that run counter to the democratising impulse of literary criticism. This raises a second ethical question: What right has Plath’s Estate, successively executed by Ted, Olwyn, and Frieda Hughes, to guard or to withhold her work from scholarship? Examples of such familial interventions include Hughes’s now-notorious attempt to circumscribe Jacqueline Rose’s interpretation of ‘The Rabbit Catcher’ on the grounds that Rose’s efforts to chart the ‘fluctuating’, ‘provisional [...] movements of sexuality’ in that poem represented a challenge to Plath’s embodied identity as a

⁶⁴⁷ Sarah Churchwell, ‘Ted Hughes and the Corpus of Sylvia Plath’, *Criticism*, 40 (1998), 99-132 (p.104).

⁶⁴⁸ Ted Hughes to Al Alvarez, November 1971. *Letters of Ted Hughes*, selected and edited by Christopher Reid (London: Faber, 2009), pp.321-6 (p.322-4).

heterosexual.⁶⁴⁹ Hughes used the spectre of Plath's children to reduce Rose's interpretation to 'speculation about somebody's mother's sexual life', speculation that in some countries, he intimated chillingly, would be 'grounds for homicide'.⁶⁵⁰ Further instances of the Plath Estate's controlling interventions include the stranglehold maintained by Olwyn Hughes over Anne Stevenson during the composition of Stevenson's biography *Bitter Fame* (1989), a control so tenacious that Stevenson called the text 'a work of dual authorship', and Frieda Hughes's refusal to grant quotation rights to the producers of *Sylvia*, resulting in a film that was 'only incidentally a story about two poets'.⁶⁵¹ By emphasising the distinctions between Plath as woman and Plath as discursive construct, this chapter shall provide ways of navigating these complex ethical questions. These negotiations balance respect for Hughes's memories of the reality of Plath with recognition of the inevitable, indeed desirable, diffusion of possession concomitant with Plath's entry into text.

Occasional Prose

In his two-page introduction to *Ariel*, Hughes began to construct the narrative that would, until the publication of *Birthday Letters*, shape his discussion of Plath's poetic development. He stated that

in two years, while she was almost fully occupied with children and house-keeping, she underwent a poetic development that has hardly any equal on record, for suddenness and completeness. The birth of her first child seemed to start the process. All at once she could compose at top speed, and with her full weight. Her second child brought things a giant step forward. All the various voices of her gift came together, and for about six months, up to a day or two before her death, she wrote with the full power and music of her extraordinary nature. (SP:A 162)

⁶⁴⁹ Jacqueline Rose, 'This Is Not a Biography', *London Review of Books*, 24 (2002), 12-15 <<http://www.lrb.co.uk/v24/n16/jacqueline-rose/this-is-not-a-biography?>> [accessed 20 May 2013]

⁶⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁶⁵¹ Anne Stevenson, *Bitter Fame: A Life of Sylvia Plath, with additional material by Lucas Myers, Dido Merwin, and Richard Murphy* (London: Viking, 1989), 'Author's Note' (n.pag.); Brownlow, p.vi.

The suggestion that Plath's development as a poet was 'contingent upon maternity' was reiterated by Al Alvarez, who stated in *The Savage God* that 'the real poems began in 1960, after the birth of her daughter, [...] as though the child were a proof of her identity, as though it liberated her into her real self'.⁶⁵² As will be discussed in the later part of this chapter, the impact of Hughes and Alvarez linking creativity to motherhood is variously felt in biofiction; in *The Ballad of Sylvia and Ted* and *Sylvia*, Plath's 'two children, two roses' are at best a distraction from her "real" work, whereas in *Wintering* 'the blood jet' of poetry has its source in Plath's bodily identity as woman and as mother.⁶⁵³ Yet for Hughes, Plath's 'poetic blooming', although catalysed by motherhood, was not simply, as Churchwell suggests, 'a happy by-product of childbirth'.⁶⁵⁴ Conversely, as delineated in 'Publishing Sylvia Plath' (1971), the voice of *Ariel* 'was at last the flight of what we had been trying to get flying for a number of years' (165). In explaining his decision to include 'The Hanging Man' in *Ariel*, Hughes stated that the poem 'describes with only thin disguise the experience which made *Ariel* possible', locating the genesis of Plath's *Ariel* voice not with the birth of Frieda Hughes in 1960, but with her suicide attempt and ensuing shock therapy in 1953 (PSP 167). For Hughes, the shock treatment was 'a definite event at a definite moment (like everything in her poems)' (PSP 167).

The suggestion that 'everything' in Plath's poems had an extra-textual referent is expanded upon in Hughes's introduction to *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* (1977). In this edition of Plath's prose, Hughes also included selections from her journals, for the express purpose of revealing 'the close correspondence between the details she took possession of in those pages and the details she was able to use subsequently in her poems' (JP 13). In indexing 'the solidity and truth of [Plath's] later

⁶⁵² Churchwell, 'Corpus', p.112; A. Alvarez, *The Savage God: A Study of Suicide* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1971), p.59.

⁶⁵³ Sylvia Plath, 'Kindness', in *Ariel* (1965), ed. by Ted Hughes (London: Faber, 2006), p.78 (l.18-20).

⁶⁵⁴ Churchwell, 'Corpus', p.112.

poems' to their 'limitation to actual circumstance', this piece represents something of an anomaly in relation to views that Hughes would go on to express about Plath's work and its inspiration (JP 12). Whereas Hughes's introduction to Plath's *Collected Poems* (1981) framed her writing as inward-facing, 'exclusively' dependent on 'a supercharged system of inner symbols and images, an enclosed cosmic circus' (CSP 174), the introduction to her stories provides a rare acknowledgement of her use of confessional writing. Plath herself claimed kinship with an American confessional tradition, speaking in an introduction to a recording of her poems of her excitement at Robert Lowell's 'intense breakthrough into very serious, very personal emotional experience', and of her admiration of Anne Sexton's success in creating 'wonderfully craftsmanlike poems' from 'private and taboo subjects'.⁶⁵⁵ Alvarez strongly championed the influence of Lowell on Plath's writing, suggesting that, in *Life Studies*, Lowell 'opened a door that had previously been bolted against her', and that ultimately Plath's 'domestic life fused with her imagination richly and without hesitation'.⁶⁵⁶ But Hughes actively resisted attempts to co-opt *Ariel* into an American confessional system, asserting in a letter to Aurelia Plath that 'Sylvia was not a poet of the Lowell/Sexton self-therapy, or even national therapy, school, but a mystic poet of an altogether higher – in fact of the very highest – tradition'.⁶⁵⁷ As will be discussed in relation to his introduction to Plath's *Journals*, self-protection undoubtedly played its role in Hughes's construction of Plath as a 'mystic' poet rather than one who enlisted her domestic circumstances as the subject of her art. However, as Clark notes, 'this is how Hughes thought of poetic inspiration generally', favouring a Romantic version of creativity in which poems, in his own words, 'come up from some other depths and they find a place on the page'.⁶⁵⁸ The

⁶⁵⁵ Plath, 'From an interview and reading of poems made by her for the British Council', quoted in A. Alvarez, 'Sylvia Plath', in *The Art of Sylvia Plath: A Symposium*, ed. by Charles Newman (London: Faber, 1970), pp.56-68 (p.62).

⁶⁵⁶ Alvarez, *The Savage God*, pp.21-2.

⁶⁵⁷ Ted Hughes to Aurelia Plath, 19 May 1966, quoted in Clark, *Grief*, p.182.

⁶⁵⁸ Clark, *Grief*, p.171; Ted Hughes, 'The Art of Poetry' No. 71, Interviewed by Drue Heinz, *The Paris Review*, 34 (1995)

introduction to *Johnny Panic* is therefore, as already suggested, anachronistic for that period in Hughes's writing. Not until his 1995 interview with the *Paris Review*, having himself embarked upon the intensely autobiographical *Birthday Letters*, would Hughes relinquish his Anglicisation of Plath as a 'British Romantic'.⁶⁵⁹ It was only then that he conceded a connection between 'Robert Lowell's most affecting pieces, some of Anne Sexton's poems, and some of Sylvia's'.⁶⁶⁰

In 'Sylvia Plath and Her Journals' (1982), the suggestion that Plath's poetry drew upon everyday detail is now no longer in evidence; instead Hughes asserts that 'the root system of her talent was a deep and inclusive inner crisis' (SP:J 179). This, he writes, 'seems to have been quite distinctly formulated in its chief symbols (presumably going back at least as far as the death of her father, when she was eight) by the time of her first attempted suicide' (179). Hughes states that Plath's 'three day' death, and that thunderbolt awakening, fused her dangerous inheritance into a matrix from which everything later seemed to develop – as from a radical change in the structure of her brain' (180). Her 'death' required 'a long 'gestation', or 'regeneration', which would ultimately lead to a 'birth' or a 'rebirth'' (179). It was the birth 'of this new self-conquering self' (190), first felt in 'The Stones' (1959; p.183) and 'Elm' (1962; pp.188), which 'proved itself so overwhelmingly in the *Ariel* poems of 1962' (190).

This commentary, in which 'Hughes for the first time puts Otto Plath [...] at centre stage' proves a significant forerunner to an argument that emerges in *Birthday Letters*, a psychodrama in which 'Prince Otto' plays an integral part.⁶⁶¹ In the essay, Hughes stitches together Plath's overdose in 1953 with the death of Otto Plath in 1940 by remarking that Plath 'would describe her suicide attempt as a bid to get back to her father' (180). By mapping onto Plath's life the efforts described in 'Daddy' 'to get back,

<<http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/1669/the-art-of-poetry-no-71-ted-hughes>> [accessed 7 December 2011].

⁶⁵⁹ Clark, *Grief*, p.171.

⁶⁶⁰ Ted Hughes, 'The Art of Poetry'.

⁶⁶¹ Sagar, p.67.

back, back to you', Hughes locates the seeds of the 'crisis' that would ultimately produce *Ariel* in Plath's early life, rather than her marital circumstances, diverting 'deeper into her internal furnace' attention that might otherwise be directed towards himself (SP:J 182).⁶⁶² This is compounded by his insistence that Plath's work 'was roots only', 'the biology of Ariel, the ontology of Ariel, the story of Ariel's imprisonment in the pine' (178). In contrast to Alvarez's assertion that 'the worst things got the more directly she wrote about them', Hughes asserts that 'details' from Plath's 'marriage' were used only as 'images to develop her X-rays' (179), relegating the deterioration of that marriage to a 'coincidence' which 'intensified her inner battle' (188).⁶⁶³ Just as Janet Malcolm asserts that Alvarez's memoir established the narrative of 'Plath as an abandoned and mistreated woman and Hughes as a heartless betrayer', Hughes's commentary set in motion a counter-narrative, reinforced in Anne Stevenson's *Bitter Fame*.⁶⁶⁴ Wearing the uneasy mantle of authorisation from the Plath estate, Stevenson reiterated that 'the *Ariel* poems emerged from an enclosed world – the crucible of Sylvia's inner being', held up a mirror to 'her traumatised childhood self'.⁶⁶⁵ Established in 'Sylvia Plath and Her Journals' and rehearsed in *Bitter Fame*, the vision of *Ariel* as the culmination of Plath's 'slow transformation of her inner crisis' is popularised in *Birthday Letters* (SP:J 180). Conversely, Alvarez's version of Plath's poetry as a 'powerful lens' for her 'ordinary life' is given greater credence in subsequent biofiction, as exemplified by Tennant's description of Assia Wevill as 'the story' that was 'about to come in the door'.⁶⁶⁶

Having developed his version of Plath's poetic inspiration across his introductions to *Ariel*, *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, Plath's *Collected Poems*,

⁶⁶² Plath, 'Daddy', in *Ariel* (1965), pp.48-50 (l.59).

⁶⁶³ Alvarez, *The Savage God*, p.22.

⁶⁶⁴ Janet Malcolm, *The Silent Woman: Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes* (London: Papermac, 1995), p.23.

⁶⁶⁵ Stevenson, pp.263-4.

⁶⁶⁶ Alvarez, *The Savage God*, p.23.

and her *Journals*, Hughes was able, by 1988, to summarise this narrative with remarkable concision:

the *Ariel* poems document Plath's struggle to deal with a double situation – when her sudden separation from her husband coincided with a crisis in her traumatic feelings about her father's death which had occurred when she was eight years old (and which had been complicated by her all but successful attempt to follow him in a suicidal act in 1953). Against these very strong, negative feelings, and others associated with them, her battle to create a new life, with her children and with what she regarded as her new, reborn self, supplied the extraordinary positive resolution of the poems that she wrote up to 2 December 1962 (SIF 191).

In turning from Hughes's prose to his poetry, it is helpful to indicate which elements of this narrative Hughes carries forward into *Birthday Letters*, and which of them he leaves behind. Generic difference inevitably also has its part to play in this development, with the greater intimacy offered by the poetic form enabling a lyric expressivity that is inhibited in critical prose writing. Notwithstanding the difference in genre, Hughes's insistence that *Ariel* had its genesis in Plath's suicide attempt at the age of twenty-one (caused in large part by her bereavement at eight) coheres across the ten years between his 1988 lecture 'The Evolution of Sheep in Fog' and *Birthday Letters*. Such cohesion allowed Hughes to reiterate in verse what he had long maintained in prose: that *Ariel* was inward-facing rather than confessional. This enabled *Birthday Letters* to similarly divert interpretations of *Ariel* away from Plath's contemporary circumstances, and to symbolically preclude her admission into a system of American confessional writing. *Birthday Letters* does, however, contain important deviations from the narrative Hughes developed in his prose, most of which cluster around the notion of 'extraordinary positive resolution'. As noted by Sagar, Hughes distinguishes in 'The Evolution of Sheep in Fog' between the 'escaped triumphant survivor' of the 1962 poems and the 'new voice, embittered and desperate', which emerged in 1963.⁶⁶⁷ It is only in the final poems that 'the premonitory note' of Plath's suicide is heard (SP:J 190); those

⁶⁶⁷ Sagar, p.68.

written prior to December 2nd are explicitly conceived as ‘a climb, not a fall’.⁶⁶⁸ Their differing inspiration is confirmed by Alvarez: if, in the poems of 1962, Plath ‘had called up these horrors partly in the hope of exorcising them, partly to demonstrate her omnipotence and invulnerability’, in the last poems ‘she was shut in with them and knew she was defenceless’.⁶⁶⁹ In *Birthday Letters*, conversely, Hughes does not differentiate between the two waves of inspiration; rather the ‘premonitory note’ is clearly audible from the moment Plath begins writing.

In his prose, as again observed by Sagar, Hughes’s insistence that the emergence of the *Ariel* voice ‘“was a process of integration start to finish’ involved making a complete separation between Plath’s poetry and her death, and consigning the latter to the realm of pure accident’.⁶⁷⁰ Thus the first wave of *Ariel* poems are the means by which Plath overcame, ‘by a stunning display of power, the bogies of her life’, while her suicide is the result of ‘a perverse number [...] of varied crises’: in short, of ‘chance’ (SP:J 188; 190). This was also the narrative eventually favoured by Alvarez: that of ‘an enormously gifted poet whose death came carelessly, by mistake, and too soon’.⁶⁷¹ *Birthday Letters*, by contrast, re-mythologises *Ariel* as a poetics of *disintegration* that would ultimately turn upon and destroy its creator. In transforming *Ariel* into the agent of Plath’s death, *Birthday Letters* confirms Alvarez’s notorious (and retracted) statement that ‘poetry of this order is a murderous art’.⁶⁷² It thereby reconfirms the authority of Hughes’s ordering of the *Ariel* poems, an ‘extended suicide note’ which made the author’s death appear ‘inevitable’, effectively silencing the transcendent narrative implicit in Plath’s arrangement of the poems.⁶⁷³

⁶⁶⁸ Ted Hughes to Keith Sagar, 1981, quoted in Sagar, p.69.

⁶⁶⁹ Alvarez, *The Savage God*, p.27.

⁶⁷⁰ Sagar, p.69.

⁶⁷¹ Alvarez, *The Savage God*, p.33.

⁶⁷² Alvarez, ‘Sylvia Plath’, p.67.

⁶⁷³ Kate Moses, ‘A Lioness in Winter’ [Interview with Laura Miller], *Salon*, 18 February 2003 <<http://www.salon.com/2003/02/18/moses/>> [accessed 12 June 2013].

Birthday Letters

The genesis of *Ariel* may be traced through a chain of poems in *Birthday Letters* that forms a sub-narrative within the collection's broader design. The poems are #6 'The Tender Place', #41 'Black Coat' (interpretable as a companion piece to #58 'The Table' and #85 'A Picture of Otto'), #44 'Remission', #45 'Isis', #49 'The Minotaur', #63 'Suttee', and #83 'The God'. Chronological though not sequential, the coherence of this subgroup is intensified by the collection's broader 'narrative line', and by the clusters of images that Hughes embeds 'between poems widely separated in the book'.⁶⁷⁴ In 'The Tender Place', Hughes re-imagines the shock treatment that is in the hinterland of 'The Hanging Man', confirming his stated belief that that poem, which he appended to Plath's arrangement of *Ariel*, 'describes with only thin disguise the experience which made *Ariel* possible' (PSP 167). He imagines Plath's traumatised body as 'an oak limb sheared at a bang / You your Daddy's leg', asking 'How many seizures / Did you suffer this god to grab you / By the roots of your hair?'.⁶⁷⁵ The juxtaposition of 'your Daddy' with 'this god' echoes Plath's own description of the speaker of 'Daddy': 'her father died while she thought he was God'.⁶⁷⁶ Behind the 'god' who 'got hold of' the speaker in the opening line of 'The Hanging Man', Hughes thus situates Otto Plath, symbolically reiterating his belief that the overdose that occasioned the shock treatment was 'an all but successful attempt to follow [her father] into death' (SIF 191). He then states that 'your voice dived inwards / Right through the bolt-hole basement. / Came up, years later' (l.30-32), confirming the link, first established in 'Publishing Sylvia Plath', between Plath's suicide attempt and the ultimate emergence of the *Ariel* voice.

⁶⁷⁴ Richard P. Sugg, 'Ted Hughes, Sylvia Plath, and *Birthday Letters*: Alchemical Symbols of Transformation', *South Atlantic Review*, 4 (2007), 109-27 (p.115).

⁶⁷⁵ Ted Hughes, 'The Tender Place', in *Birthday Letters*, pp.12-13 (l.18-21).

⁶⁷⁶ Sylvia Plath, 'Script for the BBC broadcast 'New Poems by Sylvia Plath'', Appendix II in *Ariel: The Restored Edition*, ed. by Frieda Hughes, pp.193-4 (p.194).

The reference to the ‘years’ in which Plath’s ‘voice dived inwards’ serves as a reminder of the long gestation of her mature poetic self, figured in ‘Sylvia Plath and Her Journals’ as ‘the most positive and healing of all involuntary responses to the damage of life’ (182). Yet here the healing element is no longer in evidence; when Plath’s voice does emerge, it is ‘Over-exposed, like an X-ray - / Brain-map still dark-patched / With the scorched-earth scars / Of your retreat’ (l.33-6). For Heather Clark, the significance of this ending lies in the implication that ‘electroshock therapy had lasting effects on [Plath’s] language’.⁶⁷⁷ Yet Hughes had, in 1982, already suggested that the shock treatment ‘occasioned a radical change in the structure of her brain’; the uniqueness of ‘The Tender Place’ lies rather in his pathological emphasis (SP:J 180). When Plath’s ‘words’ resurface, they no longer denote triumph over adversity but injury and trauma, their ‘Faces reversed from the light / Holding in their entrails’ (l.36-8).

The pathological emphasis established in ‘The Tender Place’ coheres between ‘Black Coat’, ‘The Table’, and ‘A Picture of Otto’, all of which explore the suggestion that Plath’s ‘sudden separation from her husband coincided with a crisis in her traumatic feelings about her father’s death’ (SIF 191). In each of these poems, Hughes develops coincidence into entanglement by ‘lift[ing] the plot’ of ‘Daddy’ and ‘offer[ing] it as the “true story”’.⁶⁷⁸ In ‘Daddy’, the speaker tells her father how she ‘made a model of you / A man in black with a Meinkampf look / And a love of the rack and the screw’ (l.64-6). These three poems serve to reiterate the “truth” of those lines, affirming that Hughes was ‘made a model’ of Otto rather than being personally identifiable as *Ariel*’s villain. In ‘Black Coat’, the title signals Hughes’s acceptance of ‘the association of himself with the man in black’.⁶⁷⁹ He recalls being observed by Plath while walking on a beach, ‘Set up like a decoy / Against that freezing sea / From which your dead father had just

⁶⁷⁷ Clark, *Grief*, p.234.

⁶⁷⁸ Churchwell, ‘Secrets and Lies’, p.124.

⁶⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p.128.

crawled'.⁶⁸⁰ In noting 'How, as your lenses tightened, / He slid into me' (l.46-7), Hughes claims to identify the exact moment at which he became 'a model' of Otto Plath.

Significantly, Plath's entanglement of husband and father is framed not as a conscious poetic strategy but a sign of physical pathology, the result of 'Your eye's inbuilt double exposure / Which was the projection / Of your two-way heart's diplopic error' (l.36-9).

What Clark writes of 'The Tender Place' is as true of this poem: it 'intimates that Plath's words, like her, are wounded or sick'.⁶⁸¹ By pathologising Plath as ill, and by suggesting that she 'had no idea' of her elision of himself and Otto (l.31), Hughes disassociates her from the personal attacks of 'Daddy', a poem he readily admitted he would have excised from *Ariel* 'if I'd been in time' (PSP 167).

Hughes again writes back to 'Daddy' in 'A Picture of Otto', in which the opening line, 'You stand at the blackboard: Lutheran' clearly echoes Plath's line 'You stand at the blackboard, Daddy / In the picture I have of you'.⁶⁸² Hughes writes of himself and Otto that 'She could hardly tell us apart in the end' (l.15), once again emphasising, as in 'Black Coat', that the deterioration of Plath's marriage was conflated with 'her traumatic feelings about her father's death' (SIF 191). Whereas 'Black Coat's concern is with the moment of association between Hughes and Otto that would inspire the composition of 'Daddy', 'A Picture of Otto' explores the lasting impact of that poem, how Otto's ghost would become 'inseparable from my shadow / As long as your daughter's words can stir a candle' (l.13-14). The line 'Your portrait, here, could be my son's portrait' then represents a more decisive break with the narrative of 'Black Coat' (l.16). While that poem constructed 'Daddy's' conflation of husband and father as a manifestation of Plath's unique pathology, this poem's image of the combined portrait as that of a 'son' suggests that Hughes himself had a hand in its creation.

⁶⁸⁰ Ted Hughes, 'Black Coat', in *Birthday Letters*, pp.102-3 (l.43-5).

⁶⁸¹ Clark, *Grief*, p.234.

⁶⁸² Ted Hughes, 'A Picture of Otto', in *Birthday Letters*, p.193 (l.1).

This acknowledgement of culpability is also present in 'The Table', which details Hughes's belated revelation that in crafting Plath a writing desk from 'coffin timber', 'I had made and fitted a door / Opening downwards into your Daddy's grave'.⁶⁸³ Hughes states that 'It did not take you long / To divine in the elm, following your pen, / The words that would open it', leaving 'your Daddy resurrected' (1.19-23). Just as, in 'The Evolution of Sheep in Fog', the *Ariel* vision was located in 'the inspirational form of [Plath's] inaccessible father' (201), here Otto becomes Ariel himself, freed from the pine by his daughter's poetic divinations. Once liberated, Otto insinuates himself into the marital bed, where he again becomes confused with Hughes: 'Turning to touch me / You recognised him' (1.29-30). There then follows the most significant deviation thus far from the narrative of coincidence set out in 1988. Hughes states that in response to Otto's apparition he 'woke wildly / Into a deeper sleep', that he 'embraced / Lady Death, your rival, / As if the role were written on my eyelids / In letters of phosphorus' (1.33-9). For the first time in Hughes's writing, Plath's 'traumatic feelings about her father's death' do not simply coincide with, but become the catalyst for 'the sudden break-up of her marriage' (SIF 191). Finally, Plath's suicide is conceived as a disappearance into her father's grave 'With your arms locked / Round him, in joy,' (1.39-40). 'The Table' thus situates Plath's feelings towards her father as the inspiration for *Ariel*, the impetus for Hughes's affair, and the central cause of her death, neatly eliding any link between the deterioration of her marriage and her self-destruction.

The next stage of the narrative advanced in Hughes's prose commentaries is revised in two consecutive poems, 'Remission' and 'Isis'. These revisit the association of childbirth with poetic rebirth that Hughes suggested in both the earliest and the most recent of the essays under consideration. In 'Sylvia Plath: *Ariel*' he foregrounded childbirth as the means by which Plath finally gained access to 'the full power and music of her extraordinary nature' (162), while in 'The Evolution of Sheep in Fog',

⁶⁸³ Ted Hughes, 'The Table', in *Birthday Letters*, pp.138-9 (1.5;1.12-13).

Plath's children symbolise the 'new, reborn self' that would supply the 'extraordinary positive resolution' of the *Ariel* poems (191). In 'Remission', Hughes's description of Plath's pregnant, labouring self as 'the you / You loved and wanted to live with. / The kernel of the shells' is consistent with the emphasis of the two commentaries, wherein, as Churchwell writes, Hughes insists upon 'the primacy of Plath's wifely, domestic, and physical identity [...] establishing a reductively gendered reading of her texts'.⁶⁸⁴ The description of how the midwife 'Folded you from yourself, lulled the passage / Of yourself from your bleeding self' similarly coheres with the essays by inflecting the act of childbirth with the concept of Plath's own rebirth (1.25-26).

A different note is, however, sounded by the line 'With monkey-fine dark fingers delivered you / In a free-floating crib, an image that sneezed' (1.29-30). This admits of at least two interpretations: either Plath is delivered *of* an image, that of her daughter, or delivered *as* that same image. The latter interpretation finds an analogue in Plath's poem 'You're', in which the speaker perceives the infant as herself reborn, 'A clean slate, with your own face on'.⁶⁸⁵ It is validated in the final lines of 'Remission', in which Hughes notes how he 'helped you / Escape incognito / The death who had already donned your features / The mask of his disguise' (1.32-5). This suggests that Plath's reborn self is none other than her daughter, and that her former self is now an emptied-out image, a shell occupied solely by death. 'Remission' marks the point at which the *Birthday Letters* sub-narrative begins to deviate significantly from the argument advanced in the prose pieces. Here, childbirth is not the catalyst for Plath's rebirth, it *is* her rebirth, the zenith of her recovery rather than the precursor to something greater. It marks the beginning of *Birthday Letters*' altered construction of Plath's *Ariel* voice, the emergence of which is not, as in the prose, a happy event associated with the birth of Plath's children, but is instead a prophesy of her self-destruction.

⁶⁸⁴ Ted Hughes, 'Remission', in *Birthday Letters*, pp.109-10 (1.5-7); Churchwell, 'Corpus', pp.100-1.

⁶⁸⁵ Plath, 'You're', in *Ariel* (1965), p.51 (1.18)

'Isis' promises a return to the path trodden in Hughes's prose by describing Plath's daughter as the fruits of a pact with Death, an agreement that 'He could keep your Daddy and you could have a child'.⁶⁸⁶ This echoes 'The Evolution of Sheep in Fog's' balancing of Plath's 'traumatic feelings about her father's death' against 'her battle to create a new life, with her children' (191). Hughes's critical voice resounds more strongly still in the following lines, 'it had cost you / Two years, three years, desperate days and weepings, / Finally you had stripped the death-dress off, / Burned it on Daddy's grave' (l.6-9). As in 'Sylvia Plath and her Journals', this emphasises that though Plath's 'transformation of her inner crisis' would be of long duration, she would ultimately 'come through' and be 'triumphant' (pp.180, 188). Yet as previously witnessed in 'Remission', a different narrative is suggested by the poem's ending, structured around a series of negations. Hughes states that 'It was not Death / Weeping in you then, when you lay among bloody cloths'; 'It was not poetic death' (l.44-7). The effect of these negations is to imply the exact opposite: that motherhood is indeed 'poetic death', but that it simultaneously offers the potential for rebirth in the body of an infant who 'has never died, never known Death' (l.55). This reading draws upon Clark's interpretation of motherhood in the collection as a whole: in contrast to the commentaries, it is 'no longer simply a metaphor for Plath's writing (and her "true self")' but 'the only state in which Plath was truly happy'.⁶⁸⁷ 'Isis' suggests that, had Plath not 'opened the channels of communication between herself and her dead father' but instead been willing to accept 'poetic death', she could, as in 'Remission', have 'escape[d] incognito' from her fate.⁶⁸⁸

'The Minotaur' represents a further deviation from Hughes's earlier constructions of Plath in reinscribing the 'extraordinary positive resolution' of Plath's emerging poetic voice as an aggressive, sinister force that would irrecoverably damage

⁶⁸⁶ Ted Hughes, 'Isis', in *Birthday Letters*, pp.111-12 (l.5) .

⁶⁸⁷ Clark, *Grief*, p.238.

⁶⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

her and those around her (SIF 191). The poem describes how, having witnessed Plath's destruction of his 'heirloom sideboard', Hughes exhorted her to 'Get that shoulder under your stanzas', to redirect her personal aggression into her writing.⁶⁸⁹ Whereas Clark interprets *Birthday Letters* as suggesting that Plath 'would have been more content had she not become a writer', 'The Minotaur' suggests that it was not the act of writing *per se* that was problematic, but the revelation that poetry could provide access to her deep-seated feelings of anger.⁶⁹⁰ Plath's use of poetry as a conduit for her rage is ultimately blamed for the 'unravell[ing]' of '[her] marriage', the damage to her mother and children, and her death, figured as 'your own corpse' at the centre of the Minotaur's labyrinth (l.18-24). The negative construction of Plath's nascent *Ariel* voice is developed across three subsequent poems, #55 'Sebetos', #57 'The Rag Rug', and #59 'Apprehensions'. In 'Sebetos', the *Ariel* voice is a 'bellow [...] That made my nape-hair prickle when you sang / How you were freed from the Elm'.⁶⁹¹ In 'The Rag Rug', its anger is associated with the image of a serpent, which, 'wherever it found its tongue, its fang, its meaning', 'survived our Eden', while in 'Apprehensions' it is a force contained within Plath's pen, soon to 'burst out and take from you / Your husband, your children, your body, your life'.⁶⁹² These dark premonitions are then realised in 'Suttee', in which Hughes is confronted with the precise nature of the *Ariel* voice.

'Suttee' opens with the lines 'In the myth of your first death our deity / Was yourself resurrected. / Yourself reborn', before proceeding to define Plath's reborn self as a thing 'begotten / By that savage act of yours committed / On your body'.⁶⁹³ By indexing Plath's rebirth to her suicide attempt of 1953, the poem comprises not only 'an extended metaphor of the couple's lifelong family myth', as Richard Sugg suggests, but encapsulates the beginning of the public narrative developed across the course of

⁶⁸⁹ Ted Hughes, 'The Minotaur', in *Birthday Letters*, p.120 (l.13) .

⁶⁹⁰ Clark, *Grief*, p.238.

⁶⁹¹ Ted Hughes, 'Sebetos', in *Birthday Letters*, pp.132-3 (l.36-9).

⁶⁹² Ted Hughes, 'The Rag Rug', in *Birthday Letters*, p.135 (l.87-8); Ted Hughes, 'Apprehensions', in *Birthday Letters*, p.140 (l.22-5).

⁶⁹³ Ted Hughes, 'Suttee', in *Birthday Letters*, pp.147-9 (l.1-3).

Hughes's critical essays.⁶⁹⁴ Hughes identifies himself as 'midwife', noting that 'the daily busyness of life / Was no more than towels, kettles / Of hot water, then the rubber mask / Of anaesthetic that had no gas in it' (l.21-5). In thus echoing how, in 'Remission', the 'Indian midwife' eased Plath's labour 'with the face mask of nitrous oxide that was empty' (l.27), Hughes reprises the association of childbirth with Plath's rebirth as a poet established in 'Sylvia Plath: *Ariel*' and 'The Evolution of Sheep in Fog'. The suggestion that Plath's reborn self might, like the infants in 'Thalidomide', be 'damaged, / Injured in that death-struggle conception' then revises the version of rebirth Hughes advanced in his commentaries (l.16-18). As in 'The Tender Place', Hughes suggests in 'Suttee' that Plath's incarceration in the crawl space and ensuing shock treatment resulted in imperceptible but lasting damage. These fears are made manifest in the poem's climax, which reveals the full horror of Plath's "delivery": 'Not the new babe of light but the old / Babe of dark flames and screams / That sucked the oxygen out of both of us' (l.81-3). Hughes realises that the *Ariel* voice does not issue from Plath's reborn self, but from 'a child-bride / On a pyre' (l.69-70), 'a psychic image of the eight-year-old Sylvia who had seen her father die'.⁶⁹⁵ In a stark contrast to his critical essays, Hughes thus situates Plath's rebirth as an abortive, regressive process, the antithesis of the act of childbirth. By figuring her newfound voice as a malevolent force that drained the couple of oxygen, he suggests that the breakdown of the marriage was caused by none other than *Ariel* itself.

'The God' then details Hughes's attempts to deal with the subject matter of *Ariel*, a poetics explicitly conceived as damaging and vengeful. As in 'Suttee', the *Ariel* voice is situated as an uneasy doppelganger to Frieda Hughes, the 'new babe of light'; it drinks from 'a drip-feed of blood' that 'oozed at your nipple'.⁶⁹⁶ Hughes states that 'the little god', once nourished, 'flew up into the Elm Tree' (l.51), an image which delivers

⁶⁹⁴ Sugg, p.117.

⁶⁹⁵ Ibid., p.117.

⁶⁹⁶ Ted Hughes, 'The God', in *Birthday Letters*, pp.188-91 (l.49-50).

up its full meaning only when placed in dialogue with Hughes's introduction to Plath's *Journals*. There, Hughes distinguished 'Elm' as the harbinger of 'the *Ariel* voice', which 'emerged in full, out of the tree' (188). Yet while the introduction stated that 'the subject matter didn't alarm [Plath]' (188), here she is said to have 'watched [...] in dismay' as her 'hands moved' autonomously, sacrificing 'Two handfuls of blood, your own blood, / And in that blood gobbets of me' (1.54-7). As in 'Suttee', wherein *Ariel* was depicted as a fire feeding on its author's 'cries for help' (1.71-2), Hughes's description of Plath's 'dismay' serves to disassociate her from the personal attacks of her verse. He emphasises his own helplessness 'As I sat there with blistering eyes / Watching everything go up / In the flames of your sacrifice / That finally caught you too till you / Vanished, exploding / Into the flames / Of the story of your God' (1.98-104). In these lines, to use Hughes's own words, are contained 'the epitaph and funeral cortege' of the narrative of triumphant rebirth sustained across twenty-three years of prose writing (SIF 207). In *Birthday Letters*, the *Ariel* voice is located, as in Hughes's prose, on the fault line between two conflicting forces. Plath's 'traumatic feelings about her father's death' ('Black Coat', 'A Picture of Otto', 'The Table'), crystallised by her suicide attempt and shock treatment ('The Tender Place'), are pitted against her 'battle to create a new life, with her children' ('Remission', 'Isis'). However, the *Ariel* voice is no longer the mouthpiece of Plath's 'new, reborn self' (SIF 191). Rather, as intimated in 'The Minotaur' and 'Suttee', and directly stated in 'The God', the *Ariel* voice becomes, in *Birthday Letters*, the very agent of Plath's self-destruction.

The version of *Ariel*'s genesis charted across the previous pages subjects Plath's two waves of inspiration to a strange alchemy, wherein the positive resolution of the 1962 poems combines with the despair of the last pieces to produce a single wave of self-destructive anger. The 'masterful programme' of Plath's arrangement of *Ariel* having thus been negated (SIF 205), two other poems in *Birthday Letters* function to confirm the supremacy of Hughes's own arrangement by rehearsing the editorial

decisions outlined in 'Publishing Sylvia Plath'. These included the appending to *Ariel* of nine of the poems written immediately before Plath's death 'because they seemed too important to leave out' (PSP 167). 'Night Ride on Ariel' reprises the effect of these appended late poems, revising the 'extraordinary positive resolution' encapsulated in 'Ariel' itself (SIF 191). The full impact of Hughes's additions then becomes apparent in #64, 'The Bee God', which clips the wings of Plath's concluding Bee sequence through quotation from 'Words', another late poem of Plath's, with which Hughes chose to end his arrangement.

Whereas Plath's 'Ariel', as Clark writes, 'has come to be associated with her struggle to achieve independence from the many "fathers" [...] out of whose shadow she struggled to emerge', 'Night Ride on Ariel' reinterprets her struggle as a flight from too many mothers.⁶⁹⁷ The mothers are Olive Higgins Prouty, who endowed Plath's scholarship to Smith College, her psychologist Dr. Ruth Beutscher, Mary Ellen Chase, who invited her back to teach at Smith in 1957, and Aurelia Plath; together they represent the 'Phases / Of your dismal-headed / Fairy godmother moon'.⁶⁹⁸ The introduction of the moon casts an uneasy light over the poem; not only is it the "other" of the 'red / Eye' of 'Ariel', it is also the central image of 'Edge', a poem written on the day of Plath's death and popularly read in terms of 'the act that she was about to perform'.⁶⁹⁹ The final lines of 'Night Ride on Ariel' explicitly re-engage 'Ariel' with 'Edge':

As you flew
They jammed all your wavelengths
With their criss-cross instructions,

⁶⁹⁷ Clark, 'Tracking the Thought-Fox', p.102.

⁶⁹⁸ Ted Hughes, 'Night-Ride on Ariel', in *Birthday Letters*, pp.174-5 (l.19-21).

⁶⁹⁹ Plath, 'Ariel', in *Ariel* (1965), pp.28-9 (l.30-1); Alvarez, 'Sylvia Plath', p.67. Reviewing responses to 'Edge' by Tim Kendall, Elizabeth Hardwick, Paul Alexander and Anne Stevenson, Annika Hagstrom writes that 'for all four, "Edge" is directly connected to Plath's suicide, as if she had written it posthumously. Their analyses are strictly biographical: the poem is a "prophesy" and Plath its "heroine", and for both Hardwick and Stevenson the poem itself seems to trigger the suicide.' See Annika J. Hagstrom, 'Stasis in Darkness: Sylvia Plath as a Fictive Character', *English Studies*, 90 (2009), 34-56 (p.42).

Crackling and dragging their blacks
 Over your failing flight,
 Hauling your head this way and that way
 As you clung to the sun – to the last
 Shred of the exploded dawn
 In your fist –

That Monday. (1.41-50)

The reference to Plath's moon-mothers 'crackling and dragging their blacks' serves to dramatically redirect 'Ariel's triumphant flight into the dawn. Rather than arriving at transcendence, Plath flies into a certain death, overseen by the moon from 'Edge' who 'is used to this sort of thing', whose 'blacks crackle and drag'.⁷⁰⁰ Plath is said to have 'clung to the sun', as though desperate, as Hughes wrote of the speaker of an earlier version of 'Sheep in Fog' 'to stay in the *Ariel* world of hope and a triumphant outcome' (SIF 198). Yet here the sun has changed; it is no longer 'the red / Eye, the cauldron of morning' (1.30-1) but 'the last / Shred of the exploded dawn / In your fist' (1.47-9). This trails the language, and the pathos, of 'Balloons', the other poem Plath wrote 'that Monday' 11 February, 1963.⁷⁰¹ Here, the speaker's infant son bites a balloon in pursuit of 'a funny pink world', and is left with only 'a red / Shred in his little fist'.⁷⁰² By thus re-engaging 'the quintessential Plath *Ariel* poem' with the language of her two final pieces, Hughes presents Plath's second wave of inspiration and, by extension, her suicide, as the natural culmination of *Ariel's* trajectory (SIF 199). His edition of *Ariel* did not, this poem insists, shackle Plath's 'dream horse' with a chain of poems intended as 'the beginning of a new book' (PSP 167).⁷⁰³ Rather, to foreground a passing reference buried in a paragraph of 'The Evolution of Sheep in Fog', it merely 'revealed what was always there' (198).

⁷⁰⁰ Plath, 'Edge', in *Ariel* (1965), p.80 (1.19-20).

⁷⁰¹ Moses, 'A Lioness in Winter'.

⁷⁰² Plath, 'Balloons', in *Ariel* (1965), p.75-6 (1.25-30).

⁷⁰³ 'Dream horse': Robert Anderson, *Little Fugue* (New York: Random House, 2005), p.249.

‘The Bee God’ serves to crystallise the authority of Hughes’s edition of *Ariel* by responding to ‘Stings’, the penultimate poem in Plath’s arrangement, in the voice of ‘Words’, the final poem in Hughes’s. In ‘The Bee God’, the bees become a metaphor for Plath’s writing, her ‘page a dark swarm’.⁷⁰⁴ Hughes states that the bees ‘had carried you off in a cloud of gutturals - / The thunderhead of your new selves’, lines which are interpretable as a reference to Plath’s identification with multiple dramatic personae in *Ariel* (1.20-2). The suggestion that ‘You did not want me to go but your bees / Had their own ideas’ then reprises a view expressed in ‘The Table’ and ‘Suttee’: that Plath’s *Ariel* voice was ultimately responsible for the destruction of her marriage (1.23-4). The literal swarm which exposes the guilty husband in ‘Stings’, ‘moulding onto his lips like lies / Complicating his features’, then becomes, in ‘The Bee God’, a metaphor for the “stings” of Plath’s words.⁷⁰⁵ The *Ariel* poems are bees that ‘planted their volts, their thudding electrodes / In on their target’ (1.35-6), echoing Hughes’s dawning realisation, described in ‘Publishing Sylvia Plath’, of ‘which way’ Plath’s voice ‘wanted to fly’ (165). His description of how he stood, ‘Clawing out of my hair / Sticky, disembowelled bees’ is then interpretable as an analogy for his editing of the *Ariel* manuscript (1.42-3), in particular his removal of the ‘more openly vicious poems’ and those which were ‘aimed too nakedly’ (PSP 167).

Hughes writes that while ‘I thought I was safe’ (1.41), another swarm was already gathering:

A lone bee, like a blind arrow,
 Soared over the housetop and down
 And locked onto my brow, calling for helpers
 Who came –
 Fanatics for their God, the God of the Bees,
 Deaf to your pleas as the fixed stars
 At the bottom of the well. (1.44-50)

⁷⁰⁴ Ted Hughes, ‘The Bee God’, in *Birthday Letters*, pp.150-2 (1.15).

⁷⁰⁵ Plath, ‘Stings’, in *Ariel* (1965), pp.60-3 (1.49-50).

The flight of the 'lone bee' clearly echoes that of the queen in 'Stings', a bridal flight evocative of the speaker's own escape from 'the engine that killed her- / The mausoleum, the wax house'.⁷⁰⁶ Yet here Hughes chooses not to identify Plath with the image of her rebirth, instead representing her as a grounded figure pleading for clemency. This raises the important question of what, exactly, the lone bee and her swarm of helpers might be taken to represent. Clark sees the bees as indicative of feminist scholars, taking her cue, perhaps, from Hughes's excoriation of the 'Plath Fantasia' in 'The Dogs are Eating Your Mother'.⁷⁰⁷ Yet while the dogs who 'Jerk their tail-stumps, bristle and vomit / Over their symposia' are an amorphous mass, Hughes's identification of 'a lone bee' is suggestive of a more precise extra-textual referent than 'feminist scholars' in general.⁷⁰⁸ The image can be placed in a productive dialogue with Marjorie Perloff's 'The Two *Ariels*: The (Re)Making of the Sylvia Plath Canon' (1984), the only work published in Hughes's lifetime to call him to account for his changes to Plath's *Ariel*, or to discuss 'why the differences between the two versions [...] matter'.⁷⁰⁹ The image of the first bee 'calling for helpers' then imagines Perloff's essay as the beginning of a critical trend, imagines that further devotees of Plath, 'the God of the Bees', would gather to attack Hughes for overwriting the authority of Plath's *Ariel* and its crowning bee sequence.

The lines 'Deaf to your pleas as the fixed stars / At the bottom of the well' then write back – or forwards – to these imagined scholars by echoing the final lines of 'Words'. Hughes's lines suggest that the 'fanatics', in attacking his arrangement, are 'deaf' to the true meaning of Plath, who was compelled by the 'fixed stars' that 'govern a life' to write the late, despairing poems that seemed so strongly to prefigure her

⁷⁰⁶ Marjorie Perloff, 'The Two *Ariels*: The (Re)Making of the Sylvia Plath Canon', *American Poetry Review*, 18 (1984), repr. in *Poems in Their Place*, ed. by Neil Fraistat (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986), pp.308-34; Badia, 1.59-60.

⁷⁰⁷ Clark, *Grief*, p.237.

⁷⁰⁸ Ted Hughes, 'The Dogs Are Eating Your Mother', in *Birthday Letters*, pp.195-6 (1.36-7).

⁷⁰⁹ Badia, p.162.

death.⁷¹⁰ In appending a paraphrase of the last lines of ‘Words’ to his own “bee poem”, Hughes reaffirms his commitment to his own ordering of Plath’s work, once again insisting ‘that he alone can author her accurately’.⁷¹¹ However, as my final chapter shall make clear, *Birthday Letters* could not ultimately silence the gathering voices calling for a restored edition of *Ariel*. Three years after Hughes’s death, Lynda K. Bundtzen published *The Other Ariel* (2001), a full-length monograph extending and developing Perloff’s work. The biopic *Sylvia* (2003), while denied permission by Plath’s estate to quote at length from her poetry, incorporated into its climatic montage a coded reference to the existence of *Ariel* in another form, while Kate Moses symbolically recalled that edition to existence by naming the forty-one chapters of her novel *Wintering* after the *Ariel* poems as arranged by Plath. Then, at the end of this flourishing of critical and popular interest, Frieda Hughes at last sanctioned the publication of *Ariel: The Restored Edition* (2004), ‘reinstating [Plath’s] original selection and arrangement’.⁷¹²

The Ballad of Sylvia and Ted

The intimate focus of *Birthday Letters* prompted Emma Tennant’s prose *Ballad*, which arose out of her own moment of intimacy with Hughes. A tripartite fictionalisation of the lives of Hughes, Plath, and Assia Wevill, *The Ballad of Sylvia and Ted*, like *Birthday Letters*, constitutes a “remembrance of things past”, extending and preserving Hughes’s lost relationships with Plath, Wevill, and Tennant herself. It is discernibly based on the revisions Hughes made in *Birthday Letters* to his version of the origin of *Ariel*; this dialogue, as will be demonstrated, furnishes much in the way of interpretation of the *Ballad*. However, reviewers of Tennant’s novella emphasised only one strand of its genesis, situating it as a testament of intimacy but underemphasising its intertextuality.

⁷¹⁰ Plath, ‘Words’, in *Ariel* (1965), p.81 (l.19-20).

⁷¹¹ Churchwell, ‘Corpus’, p.100.

⁷¹² Plath, *Ariel: The Restored Edition*, ed. by Frieda Hughes, cover material.

This reprised the focus, if not the tone, of the popular reception of *Birthday Letters*, a text invariably read by reviewers as a token of intersubjective rather than intertextual engagement. Like the narrator and the poet in ‘The Aspern Papers’, Tennant and Plath became two points in a Girardian triangle. The apex was variously occupied by Hughes, or by acquaintances common to Plath and Tennant, including the dedicatee of *The Ballad*, Elizabeth Compton Sigmund. Thus an unsigned review in the *Telegraph* suggested, with perhaps a hint of irony, that the affair meant that Tennant was ‘clearly an expert’ on Hughes, while Vanessa Thorpe in the *Observer* linked the novel’s ‘naïve honesty and pain’ to Tennant’s acquaintance with ‘some of the central characters’ as well as to ‘the intensity of her own brief encounter with Hughes’.⁷¹³ Sandra Gilbert, also making mention of Tennant’s ‘vaunted intimacy with Hughes’, explicitly opposed intersubjective to intertextual recuperation with the assertion that ‘Tennant’s sources – such as they are – seem to be people rather than books’.⁷¹⁴

Yet just as the construction of *Birthday Letters* as a breaking of silence negated Hughes’s twenty-plus years of comment on every work of Plath’s in which he had an editorial hand, locating the roots of *The Ballad* in ‘people rather than books’ suggests a wilful blindness to Tennant’s engagement with the proliferating versions of Plath that emerged in the last decades of the twentieth century. For Hughes’s was not, of course, the only construction of Plath in circulation between 1965 and 1998. Rather, these were years in which the figure of “Sylvia Plath” multiplied exponentially, with different versions of her emerging from a fascinating plethora of texts. Writing to Plath in 1950, her pen-friend and acolyte Eddie Cohen described his personality as a thing comprised of ‘ice-cream and pickles’, a metaphor which the seventeen-year-old girl immediately

⁷¹³ ‘Real Poets Don’t Gush’, Unsigned Review, *The Telegraph*, 2 July 2001 <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/4723861/Real-poets-dont-gush.html>> [accessed 27 May 2013]; Vanessa Thorpe, ‘Sylvia, Ted, and Emma, Too’, *The Observer*, 10 June 2001 <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2001/jun/10/fiction.tedhughes>> [accessed 27 May 2013].

⁷¹⁴ Gilbert, p.3.

identified as befitting her own ‘mercurial disposition’.⁷¹⁵ Plath’s early acknowledgement of both her saccharine and acerbic characteristics goes some way towards explaining the contradictions between the successive volumes of her autobiographical writings. As discussed by Moses, the chirpy “Sivvy” of Aurelia Plath’s edition of her daughter’s *Letters* (1975), itself issued as a ‘corrective’ to the ‘black-humoured malice’ of *The Bell Jar* (1963), was in turn at variance with the traumatised figure of Hughes’s edition of Plath’s *Journals* (1982).⁷¹⁶ The inconsistencies between these three texts reveal how, in the words of Plath’s most recent biographer, Andrew Wilson, ‘Sylvia didn’t have one coherent identity; rather her self was constituted of a number of different personalities’.⁷¹⁷ The number multiplied with the appearance of Plath’s *Collected Poems* (1981), in which she scripted still more versions of herself, tried on ever more conflicting personalities.

The years 1965-1998 also witnessed the recollection of Plath by her friends and contemporaries at Smith College, Cambridge, and Boston University, and in New York, Devon, and London. Their essays were collected in volumes including Charles Newman’s *The Art of Sylvia Plath* (1970), which includes a section that is ‘biographical and reminiscent in character’, and Edward Butscher’s *Sylvia Plath: The Woman and the Work* (1979).⁷¹⁸ The effect of these manifold glances is summarised by Clarissa Roche: they revealed how ‘most of [the people] who knew Sylvia knew a different Sylvia’.⁷¹⁹ Lois Ames titled her 1970 memoir ‘Notes Toward a Biography’, and the recollections provided by Ames and her contemporaries were indeed put to varying uses in the six

⁷¹⁵ Quoted in Andrew Wilson, *Mad Girl’s Love Song: Sylvia Plath and Life Before Ted* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2013), p.119.

⁷¹⁶ Moses, ‘Whose Plath Is It Anyway?’

⁷¹⁷ Andrew Wilson, p.14.

⁷¹⁸ Charles Newman, ed., *The Art of Sylvia Plath*; Edward Butscher, ed., *Sylvia Plath: The Woman and the Work* (London: Peter Owen, 1979).

⁷¹⁹ Clarissa Roche, ‘Sylvia Plath: Vignettes from England’, in *The Woman and the Work*, ed. by Butscher, pp.81-96 (p.89).

biographies published during the period.⁷²⁰ Like her own autobiographical writings, and like the memoirs of her acquaintances, the biographies produced competing versions of Plath. Nancy Hunter Steiner's *A Closer Look at Ariel* (1973) is based on Steiner's own acquaintance with Plath; Anne Stevenson's *Bitter Fame* is authorised; the others are unauthorised. Linda Wagner-Martin's *Sylvia Plath: A Biography* (1988) is sympathetic to its subject; Stevenson's bears the traces of "co-author" Olwyn Hughes's view of her sister-in-law as 'pretty straight poison'.⁷²¹

While it is beyond the scope of this study to trace its precise contours, these were also the years in which "Plath studies" exploded as a discipline. Starting with biographical and/or feminist readings, many of which demonised Hughes and sanctified Plath, the publication of Judith Kroll's *Chapters in a Mythology* (1976) marked a turning point, after which Plath was increasingly approached via 'a close reading and explication of her literary texts'.⁷²² This flourishing of interest is, then, marked by a succession of different voices – personal, biographical, feminist, critical – competing for dominance. Like those who repeatedly removed the word 'Hughes' from Plath's gravestone at Heptonstall, each attempted to liberate their "own" version of Plath from her husband's authority. Then, in 1998, Hughes published *Birthday Letters*, the effect of which was, in Churchwell's view, to reaffirm his "ownership" of Plath.⁷²³

While Tennant's decision not to cite her sources means that her engagement with these various myths and legacies cannot be precisely circumscribed, *The Ballad* contains clear textual traces from the memoirs of Anne Sexton, Elizabeth Compton

⁷²⁰ Lois Ames, 'Notes Toward a Biography', in *The Art of Plath*, ed. by Newman, pp.155-74; Nancy Hunter-Steiner, *A Closer Look at Ariel: A Memory of Sylvia Plath* (New York: Harper's Magazine Press, 1973); Edward Butscher, *Sylvia Plath: Method and Madness* (London: Peter Owen, 1979); Linda Wagner-Martin, *Sylvia Plath: A Biography* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1988); Stevenson, *Bitter Fame*; Paul Alexander, *Rough Magic: A Biography of Sylvia Plath* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1991); Ronald Hayman, *The Death and Life of Sylvia Plath* (London: William Heinemann, 1991).

⁷²¹ Quoted in Kate Moses, 'The Real Sylvia Plath' [Part Two], *Salon*, 1st June 2000 <<http://www.salon.com/2000/06/01/plath2/>> [accessed 19 June 2013].

⁷²² Badia, p.16.

⁷²³ Churchwell, 'Corpus', p.100.

Sigmund, and Al Alvarez, as well as those of Dido Merwin and Richard Murphy, appended to Stevenson's *Bitter Fame*.⁷²⁴ These traces coexist with echoes and allusions to *Ariel*, Plath's *Letters* and *Journals*, and the stories collected in *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*. Tennant's predominant source is, however, *Birthday Letters*; she takes the narrative of the evolution of the *Ariel* voice, developed by Hughes across his prose commentaries and subsequently revised in poetry, and subjects it to a further level of interpretative engagement. In *Burnt Diaries*, Tennant foregrounded the partiality of *Birthday Letters* by describing it as Hughes's 'own account' (229), and *The Ballad* is interpretable as a counter-narrative, one which disrupts Hughes's dichotomy of 'Your story. My story' with Tennant's own authorial shaping voice. We remember that in the prose pieces, Hughes's account of the first wave of *Ariel* poems was one of 'extraordinary positive resolution', erupting from the fault line where Plath's 'battle to create an new life, with her children' met with the twinned crises of marital separation and a resurgence in her traumatic feelings towards her father (SIF 191). Notably, Hughes's insistence that the emergence of *Ariel* was 'a process of integration start to finish' enabled his consignment of Plath's suicide to the realm of chance.⁷²⁵ A revised version of that narrative was presented in *Birthday Letters*, in which the act of childbirth became the zenith of, rather than the catalyst for Plath's rebirth, in which Plath's father-obsession was actively responsible for the destruction of her marriage, and in which her death was directly indexed to her rebirth as the *Ariel* poet. The relation of *The Ballad of Sylvia and Ted* to *Birthday Letters* reprises that of *Birthday Letters* to Hughes's prose

⁷²⁴ Anne Sexton, 'The Barfly Ought to Sing', in *The Art of Plath*, ed. by Newman, pp.174-81; Elizabeth Sigmund, 'Sylvia in Devon: 1962', in *The Woman and the Work*, ed. by Butscher, pp.100-10; Alvarez, 'Sylvia Plath'; Dido Merwin, 'Vessel of Wrath: A Memoir of Sylvia Plath', Appendix I in Stevenson *Bitter Fame*, pp.332-47; Richard Murphy, 'A Memoir of Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes on a Visit to the West of Ireland in 1962', Appendix III in Stevenson, *Bitter Fame*, pp.348-58.

⁷²⁵ Sagar, p.69.

writings on Plath; it is not a ‘totally different account’ but a revision of an earlier narrative to produce significantly altered conclusions.⁷²⁶

The first example of such a revision concerns the derivation of Plath’s apparent obsession with her father. By engaging directly with Hughes’s ‘A Table’, and by echoing ‘A Picture of Otto’, Tennant invokes Hughes’s account of an unhealthy absorption through which Otto ultimately became conflated with Hughes himself. In *The Ballad*, the narrator’s description of Sylvia’s writing desk as ‘a magic plank’, through which she ‘drops straight down [...] into a catacomb where Otto smiles’ (95) finds a textual analogue in ‘A Table’s’ image of ‘A door / Opening downwards into your Daddy’s grave’ (1.12-13). Similarly, the reference to Sylvia’s ‘sudden views of Ted as her father’ (108) echoes Hughes’s suggestion, in ‘A Picture of Otto’, that ‘She could hardly tell us apart in the end’ (1.15). As Sugg argues in relation to *Birthday Letters*, Tennant’s details suggest that Sylvia’s obsession with her father is ‘a vital thread in the undertexture of [her] marriage’.⁷²⁷ Yet while she describes Plath’s suicide attempt of 1953 in cinematic detail, Tennant does not, unlike Hughes, represent that early attempt as ‘a bid to get back to her father’ (SP:J 180). Instead, she locates the genesis of Sylvia’s father obsession in her meeting Ted in 1956, and frames that obsession as a narrative orchestrated by Ted himself.

The newly-wed Sylvia wonders why her husband ‘dwell[s] so long on death, on messages from her long-dead father’, ‘the father Ted tells her she loves more than she cares for him’ (71). Ted, rather than Sylvia, is the one for whom ‘death is always there’ (73), a suggestion which deviates starkly from the narrative of *Birthday Letters*, in which Hughes represented himself as Plath’s ‘nurse and protector’, as well as from the broader biographical understanding of Hughes as the healthier, saner party, forced to

⁷²⁶ Ibid.

⁷²⁷ Sugg, p.12.

breathe the suffocating air of his wife's Bell Jar.⁷²⁸ This enables Tennant's provocative suggestion that Ted, 'mired in a medieval past of devils and demons', nurtured Sylvia's obsession with death and her dead father in order to sabotage her competing literary efforts (78). Though this might appear far-fetched, and ironic in light of the way in which Plath's readership was ultimately swelled by her iconic representation as suicidal martyr, a related argument was advanced by Alvarez in 'Ted, Sylvia and Me', a piece written for the *Observer* in response to the biopic *Sylvia*. Alvarez stated that Hughes believed in 'a weird mishmash of astrology, black magic, Jungian psychology, Celtic myth and pagan superstition', and that, while 'it didn't come naturally to her', 'he encouraged Sylvia to do the same'.⁷²⁹ He also reiterated the argument advanced in *The Savage God*, that the couple's 'unrelenting competitiveness [...] helped precipitate her final breakdown', a line of reasoning which Hughes had previously dismissed as 'the crudest light-minded speculation'.⁷³⁰ While ultimately there is little persuasive evidence to suggest that poetic rivalry impelled Hughes to cultivate Plath's obsession with her father during her lifetime, both 'Sylvia Plath and her Journals' and *Birthday Letters* cast her firmly in the role of Electra after her death. Tennant's intervention, while biographically dubious in relation to Plath if not to her marriage, thus passes perceptive comment on the extent to which Hughes controlled this aspect of Plath's posthumous reputation.

The second element of Hughes's narrative reinterpreted by Tennant concerns the influence of Plath's children over the emergence of her poetic gift. Hughes, as suggested earlier, stated that only after the birth of their daughter could Plath 'compose at top speed, and with her full weight', while her subsequent delivery of a son united 'the

⁷²⁸ Katha Pollitt, 'Peering Into the Bell Jar', *New York Times*, 1 March 1998 <<http://www.nytimes.com/books/98/03/01/reviews/980301.01pollitt.html>> [accessed 2 June 2013].

⁷²⁹ Al Alvarez, 'Al Alvarez on Ted, Sylvia and Me', *The Observer*, 4 January 2004 <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2004/jan/04/poetry.highereducation>> [accessed 31 May 2013].

⁷³⁰ Alvarez, 'Ted, Sylvia and Me'; Ted Hughes to Al Alvarez, November 1971, in *Letters of Ted Hughes*, ed. by Reid, pp.321-26 (p.325).

various voices of her gift' (SP:A 162). Tennant reprises Hughes's conflation of physical and literary fecundity in her representation of Sylvia's belief that 'a child will make all the difference' to her inability to write, and in the narrator's comparison of the prolific Ted to 'a woman who has experienced multiple births' (82). This is developed in the suggestion that a child will inspire 'the love [Sylvia] still believes to be the opposite of pain' (88), which in turn echoes the opposition established by Hughes between Plath's grief for her father and her maternal feelings in both 'Sylvia Plath: *Ariel*' and 'Isis'. When Tennant's Sylvia does become pregnant, Hughes's narrative appears to be fulfilled; 'poems, obedient to changed rhythms and demands, races and pauses in the bloodstream of their maker, spoke at last more clearly of herself' (92). Yet Tennant's representation of the reality of childrearing is a decisive break from Hughes's version of simultaneous maternal and poetic fulfilment. Sitting up at night with the restless Frieda,

Ted thinks of love, and of the race the mythical Atalanta was not allowed to win. He muses, as he sits by the cradle, with its tiny rustlings and moans, on the handicaps his wife must carry with her throughout her life. For, however punctiliously he keeps to his timetable with the child, however much he loves and however often he comforts his wife, he knows she cannot win. Ted has thrown the first golden apple – the baby, innocent in its cot – to the running beauty, the Atalanta/Sylvia he must outstrip and conquer in the race for fame. And Sylvia has chased after the golden apple, searching in the crevices of sleepless nights, wandering, lost, in milky mists where words haven't even been invented. (98)

In framing Sylvia's child as an impediment rather than a catalyst to her poetry, this passage is at odds with Hughes's critical views. Of particular importance is the climax of the passage, which recasts Plath's habit of writing during 'that blue, almost eternal hour [...] before the child's cry' as a forlorn wandering in which the mother is lost in, rather than transcending, the infant's symbolic, wordless realm.⁷³¹ While in both 'Sylvia Plath: *Ariel*' and *The Savage God* the inspirational power of Plath's first child was magnified by the birth of her second, here the appearance of Nicholas exacerbates the problems caused by Frieda, leaving Sylvia 'injured', 'with two golden apples',

⁷³¹ Plath, 'New Poems by Sylvia Plath', p.193.

unable to win the race (131). Tennant's construction of motherhood as a fatal distraction from, rather than a liberation into, Sylvia's 'true self' is in turn a potential influence for the biopic *Sylvia*, the script of which was extensively rewritten the year after *The Ballad* was published.⁷³² Here, the distribution of childcare acknowledged by Tennant is dispensed with entirely, framing Plath, in Alvarez's words, as 'a household drudge, chained down by babies [...] while Ted was free to write'.⁷³³ Conversely, Moses's *Wintering* constructs motherhood in terms almost entirely positive, revising the narrative of 'Sylvia Plath: *Ariel*' and 'The Evolution of Sheep in Fog' by locating Sylvia's inspiration in the actuality, rather than simply the fact, of being a mother.

In contrast to Moses, Tennant locates the inspiration for the *Ariel* voice not in motherhood but in marital betrayal, which in turn summons Sylvia's painful memories of feeling usurped from her father's affections after the birth of her brother Warren. Just as Hughes stated that the deterioration of the marriage coincided with a crisis in Plath's 'traumatic feelings about her father's death' (SIF 191), Tennant similarly suggests that the separation reawakened a trauma in Sylvia's childhood, which sharpened its impact and transformed it into an all-consuming psychological struggle. Yet while several poems in *Birthday Letters* suggested that the emergence of Plath's *Ariel* voice pre-empted, indeed caused, the destruction of her marriage, Tennant inverts Hughes's narrative of causality. Her narrator states that 'a fleck of gravy lands on Sylvia's writing hand, the hand Ted says will tell her story, if she can only find it one day. But the story is about to come in the door' (110). Whereas Hughes in *Birthday Letters* framed the *Ariel* poems as inward-facing, forged within a 'chamber' 'Where I could not find you, or really hear you, / Let alone understand you', the suggestion that Sylvia's 'story' only emerged with the appearance of Assia represents her poetry as a direct response to the break up of her marriage.⁷³⁴ This is further suggested by the proliferation of references to

⁷³² Clark, *Grief*, p.238; Brownlow, p.x.

⁷³³ Alvarez, 'Ted, Sylvia and Me'.

⁷³⁴ Ted Hughes, 'The Rabbit Catcher', in *Birthday Letters*, pp.144-6 (1.45-6).

Sylvia's writing following Ted's flight from Devon to London, including a biographical reading of 'The Rabbit Catcher', 'the poem that tells of killing, [Ted's] need and love for killing, and her own death, deep in the snare, to come' (132).

Hughes's suggestion, in *Birthday Letters*, that Plath's suicide was caused by her *Ariel* poems necessitated a redoubling of his resistance to biographical readings of those poems, in order that a further connection should not be made between *Ariel*'s extra-textual referents and its author's self-destruction. In choosing to read 'The Rabbit Catcher' biographically, Tennant raises the question of whether Plath's suicide was actually caused by the excesses of the *Ariel* voice, or whether it was on some level occasioned by Hughes's marital betrayal, his 'need and love for killing'. The latter interpretation is suggested in Sylvia's dream of 'Procne, wife of Tereus', who exhorts her that:

you are fated for the time that remains to you to seek out the other - for it is only when you find and come to terms with her that you will be yourself again. [...] Even if it means the committing of an act of desperation, of self-immolation or the harming of another, you cannot live beside yourself as marriage has taught you to do. (118)

The remainder of the novel's pages detail Sylvia's attempts to bring her rival to terms, culminating in an encounter at Assia's Soho flat on the evening of Sylvia's death, and another meeting that night at Fitzroy Road. Tennant's invention of these meetings comprises her final, most decisive revision to the narrative of *Birthday Letters*, enabling the suggestion that Plath was killed not, as in 'Suttee' and 'The God', by her own *Ariel* voice, but by the shocking revelation that Wevill was pregnant with Hughes's child. In having Ted speak Hughes's oft-cited admission that 'it doesn't fall to many, to murder a genius', Tennant conclusively suggests that the blame for Plath's death should be laid not at the altar of the muses, but at the door of her unfaithful husband (162). Perhaps on account of its greater dramatic potential, Tennant's interpretation of Plath's final impetus was favoured over Hughes's in subsequent works of biofiction, though neither Brownlow nor Moses pointed the finger of blame quite so unequivocally in Hughes's

direction. The biopic gave the couple a tender reconciliation shortly prior to Sylvia's death, which turned sour with the revelation of Assia's pregnancy, while Moses suggested that the determining factor to prompt Sylvia's death was her discovery of Assia's inscription in Ted's *Complete Works of Shakespeare*, a testament to the continuing affair.

Just as *Birthday Letters* revised the narrative developed by Hughes across his six prose pieces, Tennant takes that revision and subjects it to further critical alterations. The tone of these alterations is one of unrelenting hostility to Hughes, who, Tennant suggests, fuelled Plath's father obsession; who shackled her with children that hampered, rather than inspired, her writing; whose infidelities were transcribed for all to see in *Ariel*, and who, try though he might to blame poetry for the tragedy, was ultimately responsible for Plath's suicide. Given the extent of Tennant's redress to *Birthday Letters*, it is, then, surprising that the arrangement of *Ariel* invoked in *The Ballad* should be Hughes's, rather than Plath's. Sylvia's poems, the narrator states, evoke a 'perfected landscape', 'the landscape before the edge' (140); they are 'buried in perfection, stiff and cold' (132). As in Hughes's own 'Night Ride on Ariel', these references confirm the authority of 'Edge', the penultimate poem in Hughes's ordering, in which 'the woman is perfected'.⁷³⁵ Despite her treatment of *Birthday Letters* as a living, breathing thing, full of spaces for creative reinterpretation, these echoes suggest that for Tennant, Hughes's arrangement of *Ariel* is itself 'perfected', unassailable, authoritative. Tennant's account is, however, contradictory, as her final paragraph hints at the existence of a different version of *Ariel* by invoking the metamorphosis of Sylvia/Procne, Assia/Philomela, and Ted/Tereus into 'a swallow, a nightingale, and a hoopoe' (176). In describing the flight of these transformed creatures 'in the month of May' (176), Tennant concludes her narrative on a similar note of 'spiritual rebirth' to Plath's arrangement of *Ariel*, rather than with the 'mournful dissolution' of Hughes's

⁷³⁵ Plath, 'Edge', in *Ariel* (1965), p.80 (l.1).

(SIF 199). In ending her novel just as the birds ‘are flying’, as they ‘taste the spring’, Tennant not only looks back to *Birthday Letters*, but prompts the further re-visionings of *Sylvia* and *Wintering*, in which the ordering of Plath’s own version of *Ariel* is restored.⁷³⁶

The Ballad of Sylvia and Ted indicates the potential of biofiction about Plath to stage a creative intervention into narratives authored by Hughes, and to foreground the partiality of those narratives. Hughes’s version of Plath began shortly after her death with the publication of ‘Sylvia Plath: *Ariel*’; it spanned twenty-three years and encompassed five further works of criticism, culminating in ‘Sylvia Plath: The Evolution of ‘Sheep In Fog’’. When these various prose pieces are placed in dialogue, an evolving version of Plath is collated, a counterpart to the self-fashionings that emerged with the posthumous publication of her own public and private writings. Developed over a long period through his careful husbandry of those writings, Hughes’s version of Plath’s work is inseparable from her life, an account founded on his own privileged access to Plath herself. He located the roots of Plath’s *Ariel* voice in specific biographical events: the birth of her children, in ‘Sylvia Plath: *Ariel*’; her suicide attempt and shock therapy, in ‘Publishing Sylvia Plath’; the death of her father, in ‘Sylvia Plath and her Journals’. Each successive prose piece situated the *Ariel* inspiration ever deeper in Plath’s ‘internal furnace’, relegating the breakdown of the marriage to the realm of coincidence and her suicide to the realm of chance (SP:J 182). In prioritising an ‘inner crisis’ that began with the death of Plath’s father, Hughes mounted a growing defence against an emergent body of feminist, critical, and biographical writings that shone a searchlight into Plath’s marital circumstances, and demonised him for his role in her death (SP:J 179).

As a collection of poetry, ordered chronologically to comprise a lyric memoir, *Birthday Letters* appeared to be a radically different entity to Hughes’s critical writings

⁷³⁶ Plath, ‘Wintering’, in *Ariel* (1965), pp.63-4 (1.50).

on Plath, and tended to be read in terms of a mode of access to the reality of Plath, rather than as a discursive construct. However, as my analysis has shown, when individual poems are isolated and placed in dialogue, a narrative emerges which retrieves into lyric discourse the account of Plath that Hughes had been constructing critically since her death. This narrative, when excavated, coheres with the prose pieces' attribution of the *Ariel* inspiration to an 'inner crisis' beginning in Plath's childhood, but inflects that inspiration with a pathological emphasis. For the first time in Hughes's writing, Plath's suicide was indexed to the emergence of her *Ariel* voice, an account that supported Hughes's decision to re-order her manuscript chronologically to culminate in poems written on the day of her death. Hughes's defence of his own arrangement was then clinched in poems responding to the late poems of Plath's that he appended, symbolically confirming the appropriateness of his editorial decisions.

Just as the popular response to *Birthday Letters* emphasised Hughes's familial over his editorial relationship to Plath, reviewers of *The Ballad of Sylvia and Ted* situated it as an intersubjective rather than an intertextual response to Hughes. This reception discounted Tennant's potential engagement with the various myths and legacies about Plath that emerged in the years leading up to the publication of her novella. It also denied her discernible engagement with *Birthday Letters*. My analysis has redressed this oversight, charting the stages of Tennant's adversarial dialogue with Hughes's "final word" on the subject of Plath. Just as *Birthday Letters* is interpretable as Hughes's ultimate revision to an account that he began constructing in 1965, Tennant subjects *Birthday Letters* to a further level of response. She recasts the defining stages of the narrative I adduced from *Birthday Letters*, suggesting that Hughes used Plath's father obsession and her children to sabotage her literary efforts. She also severs the link established in *Birthday Letters* between the *Ariel* inspiration and Plath's suicide, indexing both to Hughes's marital betrayal.

In charting this trajectory, I have revealed how Hughes's incremental, critical version of Plath produced a more lyrical, personal, but nonetheless critically engaged version in *Birthday Letters*, to which Tennant then responded with her own conflicting version. Through this process of continual revisioning, Plath herself becomes almost hyperreal, a phenomenon defined by Baudrillard as 'the generation of models of a real without origin or reality'.⁷³⁷ We have a variant, *The Ballad's* Plath, based on another variant, the Plath of *Birthday Letters*, based in turn on another variant, the Plath of Hughes's criticism. However, in the case of Hughes's criticism, there does exist a point of origin, of reality: that writing responds to a referent, not to another image. While the presence of an extra-textual source does restore a level of depth and affect to the comparison of textual versions, Plath's reality is lost when Hughes retrieves his wife into the specialised discourse of poetry. For he thereby revises ideas circulated in his own critical writings, a mode of engagement reprised by Tennant's subsequent dialogue with *Birthday Letters*. Such a re-visioning functions, in Baudrillard's terms, to erase the 'distinction between the real and the imaginary, leaving room only for the orbital recurrence of models and for the simulated generation of differences'.⁷³⁸

This acknowledgement enables me to suggest answers to the complex ethical questions raised at the beginning of this chapter. These questions were, on the one hand, What right has biofiction to invent or to imagine the most intimate and traumatic details of a person's life? (what right has Tennant, for instance, to speculate about what prompted Plath's final act?) and, on the other, What right has Plath's estate to maintain possession of her work and to thereby circumscribe the limits of interpretation? While there remain ways in which Plath and work by or about her are necessarily and painfully imbricated, at the heart of this chapter is the following distinction. While Plath's family have an indisputable right to protect their wife, sister-in-law, mother, they should not, cannot, have the right to maintain exclusive control over an implied author or textual

⁷³⁷ Baudrillard, p.1.

⁷³⁸ Ibid., p.3.

construct, which is what Plath necessarily becomes when she enters literary discourse. In reading the Plath of *Birthday Letters* as the product of a dialogue with Hughes's critical writings rather than a privileged representation of "The Real Sylvia Plath", I provide ways of starting to separate out the two personae, Plath as woman and Plath as text. 'The impossibility of discovering an absolute level of the real' is not, then, a criticism unique to Tennant, Brownlow, and Moses's iconic representation of a subject whose reality is owned by Hughes.⁷³⁹ Instead, it is a problem native to Hughes's own transformation of his wife into a discursive construct.

The recognition that Plath, having 'disappear[ed] in the epiphany of representations', exists only 'in a past that no-one now can share' ultimately opens up a more democratic approach to analysing successive literary versions of her.⁷⁴⁰ In place of the tired hierarchy between 'Ted Hughes's truths and other people's fictions', it enables discursive constructions of Plath to be assessed on their respective merits, irrespective of whether or not their authors had access to her extra-textual reality.⁷⁴¹ It is this approach that underlies my sixth and final chapter. Here, questions of the "truthfulness" or "reality" of Brownlow and Moses's representations of Plath are less pressing than the critical issues they provoke. *Sylvia* and *Wintering* renew attention to the textuality of Plath's text[s], to 'why the differences between the two versions of *Ariel* matter'.⁷⁴² They thus demand a corresponding shift in my critical attention, from issues of representation to those of canon reformation.

⁷³⁹ Baudrillard, p.23.

⁷⁴⁰ Baudrillard, p.5; Philip Larkin, 'Lines on a Young Lady's Photograph Album', in *Collected Poems* (London: Faber, 2003), pp.43-7, 1.41.

⁷⁴¹ Churchwell, 'Corpus', p.104.

⁷⁴² Badia, p.162.

Chapter Six: ‘Her Own Words Describe her Best’?: Resisting Ted

Hughes’s Authoring of Sylvia Plath in John Brownlow/Christine

Jeffs’s *Sylvia* (2003) and Kate Moses’s *Wintering* (2003)

My mother’s poems cannot be crammed into the mouths of actors in any filmic representation of her story in the expectation that they can breathe life into her again, any more than the literary representation of my mother’s life [...] achieves any purpose other than to parody the life she actually lived. Since she died my mother has been dissected, analysed, reinterpreted, reinvented, fictionalized, and in some cases completely fabricated. It comes down to this: her own words describe her best.⁷⁴³

Writing in her introduction to the Restored Edition of Sylvia Plath’s *Ariel*, Frieda Hughes intimates that biofiction has held up a mirror to the Janus-face of Plath studies, a face comprised of both biography and literary criticism. As suggested in the above quotation, the critical face of Plath studies often fears that biographical narratives, whether conventional or overtly fictional, function to divert attention from Plath’s “own words”. As Badia has argued, such fears are in part responsible for the hostility, ongoing since the publication of Judith Kroll’s *Chapters in a Mythology*, towards reading Plath’s poems biographically, and for the concurrent favouring of formalist reading practices judged to carry greater critical legitimacy.⁷⁴⁴ But, the biographical face has argued, is popular interest in Plath’s poetry not catalysed by the notoriety of her life and death? Ought critics not, then, on some level, to be grateful for the “‘soap opera’ life story” for generating the interest in Plath that has kept work by and about her consistently in print, in turn making “Plath studies” a sustainable discipline?⁷⁴⁵ Or is the effect of such biographical interest merely to ‘shape [...] and distort’?⁷⁴⁶

⁷⁴³ Frieda Hughes, ‘Foreword’, p.xvii.

⁷⁴⁴ Badia, p.11.

⁷⁴⁵ Tracy Brain, ‘Fictionalizing Sylvia Plath’, in *Representing Sylvia Plath*, ed. by Sally Bayley and Tracy Brain (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp.183-202 (p.188).

⁷⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p.11.

Such questions have long been circulating, and eddy around the publication of *Ariel: The Restored Edition* (2004). In her introduction to the edition, Frieda Hughes defends the rightness of the decision to hang the blue plaque commemorating Plath's life at 3 Chalcot Square, where Plath had written *The Bell Jar*, published *The Colossus*, and birthed her first child, rather than at 23 Fitzroy Road, where she died. In words certain to haunt any literary pilgrim squinting up at the second-floor window of the flat where Plath took her own life, Hughes asserted 'We already have a gravestone. We don't need another.'⁷⁴⁷ Yet as worthy as the scholarly desire to read the *Ariel* poems as selected and arranged by Plath undoubtedly is, no small part of the Restored Edition's allure lies in its unprecedented resemblance to the manuscript on the desk 'when she died'.⁷⁴⁸ Hughes exploits this resemblance by turning the Restored Edition into a simulacrum, from the cover photograph of the original manuscript, bundled together with an elastic band, to the facsimile of Plath's typewritten pages which, with the exception of her few handwritten corrections, serves merely to duplicate the printed *Ariel* which follows. The *Restored Edition* has, then, a tension between form and content; its sensationalist presentation belies its immense critical value as a document Ted Hughes had suppressed for more than forty years.

I want to suggest that the 'filmic' and 'literary representation(s)' of Plath's life criticised by Frieda Hughes have the opposite tension between form and content, and that by focussing on their content, and overemphasising their attempts to 'breathe life into' Plath, Hughes understates the critical significance of their form. The works in question are the biopic *Sylvia*, which Hughes anticipated would screen 'a monster', a 'Sylvia suicide doll', and Kate Moses's novel *Wintering*, the 'idea' of which Hughes was said to have 'disliked', as 'the subject was private'.⁷⁴⁹ On the surface, *Sylvia*

⁷⁴⁷ Frieda Hughes, 'Foreword', p.xvi.

⁷⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁴⁹ Frieda Hughes, 'My Mother', in *Stonepicker and The Book of Mirrors: Poems* (London: Harper Collins, 2009), pp.100-1 (1.43-4); Moses, 'Whose Plath Is It Anyway?'

prioritises Plath's life over her work; its chronological rendering of a seven-year love affair was, as scriptwriter John Brownlow acknowledged, 'only incidentally a story about two poets' (vi). While *Wintering*, like *The Master*, has an associative narrative that extends deep into its subject's past, at the heart of the novel is a chronological account of 12-29 December, 1962. Falling between the two "waves" of *Ariel* poems, these were weeks in which Plath was 'wintering in a dark without window', the creation of new work sacrificed in favour of her 'courageous motherly struggle to stay alive'.⁷⁵⁰ Accordingly, Moses's Sylvia is frequently represented as prioritising her children over her writing, as evinced by the juxtaposition of '[her son] needs her now. She leaves the poems where they are' (141).

But while the content of *Sylvia* and *Wintering* appeared to 'breathe life into Plath' as wife or as mother, rather than as poet, their forms enable textual resuscitations of her through her unpublished *Ariel* manuscript. The climax of *Sylvia* is a montage of the subject writing, delivering seemingly disconnected lines from *Ariel* in voice-over. The lines, when unravelled, represent a coded challenge to Ted Hughes's arrangement of the manuscript. Moses stages a more explicit critical intervention, naming the forty-one chapters of *Wintering* after the *Ariel* poems as arranged by Plath, and reminding readers of her Author's Note that this 'manuscript has never been published in its intended form' (336). She also uses Plath's daily calendar, which she consulted in the Lilly Library, to reimagine the events described in Plath's final, destroyed journal, drawing attention to the gaping holes in *Ariel*'s context created by Ted Hughes. Ultimately, my reading of *Sylvia* and *Wintering* will demonstrate that certain biographical readings of Plath can yield significant critical implications. Rather than the sensationally 'fabricated' pieces that Frieda Hughes feared, each speaks eloquently, and publicly, of the need for its subject's 'own words', in her own order.

⁷⁵⁰ Plath, 'Wintering', in *Ariel* (1965), pp.63-4 (l.6); Kate Moses, 'Baking With Sylvia', *The Guardian*, 15 February 2003 <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2003/feb/15/fiction.sylviaplath>> [accessed 11 June 2013].

By choosing not to represent the second wave of *Ariel* poems, both texts mount a powerful resistance to Ted Hughes's arrangement of the collection, with its overwhelming narrative of despair. As previously suggested, Moses's narrative breaks off at the end of 1962, when Plath was still 'chasing after the idea of transcendence', while *Sylvia* represents its subject's death in 1963 but not, significantly, any of the poems that immediately preceded it.⁷⁵¹ In both cases, the omission of the late poems functions to sever the link fostered in *Birthday Letters* between Plath's writing and her death. Whereas Hughes's premise confirmed the authority of his own arrangement of *Ariel*, an 'extended suicide note' which made the author's death appear 'inevitable', both Brownlow and Moses refuse any connection between a life that ended in suicide and a volume that ended in 'spring'.⁷⁵² By focalising popular attention on the difference, long debated by scholars, between Plath's ordering of *Ariel* and Hughes's ordering of it, *Sylvia* and *Wintering* ultimately helped to bring about the publication of *Ariel: The Restored Edition*. The texts guide our readings of Plath's 'original selection and arrangement' and, in doing so, have the potential to alter and add to our readings of Plath herself.⁷⁵³ Most crucially, they emphasise her optimistic pursuit of transcendence over her "inevitable" drive towards self-destruction.

Throughout this project, I have returned to the metaphor of the border or threshold to describe biofiction's liminal relationship to its subjects' own works. This chapter will continue to explore how biofiction might variously function as a mode of entry or as a means of return to Plath's poems, but will also discuss how *Sylvia* and *Wintering* utilise their own borders and thresholds, conceptualised by Gerard Genette as the 'paratext'. Genette defines the paratext as 'comprising those liminal devices and conventions, both within the book (*peri text*) and outside it (*epitext*) that mediate the

⁷⁵¹ Moses, 'The Last Plath'.

⁷⁵² Moses, 'A Lioness in Winter'.

⁷⁵³ Plath, *Ariel: The Restored Edition*, cover material.

book to the reader'.⁷⁵⁴ Given that most of the facets of the peri text are medium specific, the biopic's epitext provides greater scope for discussion. It includes *Sylvia: The Shooting Script*, published in book form and containing significant differences from the film as shot, Frieda Hughes's poem 'My Mother', and *Birthday Letters*, with which the film betrays an uneasy engagement. *Wintering*, conversely, exploits the peritextual features of intertitles, author's note, postface, and dedicatees, while the interviews and autocommentaries that make up its epitext also reward careful analysis. *Sylvia* and *Wintering* utilise these paratextual features to claim for Plath a different representational narrative from those developed by Hughes in his edition of *Ariel*, in his critical essays, and in *Birthday Letters*. If, then, the previous chapter demonstrated the influence of Hughes, this chapter reveals biofiction's striking resilience to that influence, and its capacity to significantly alter our readings of *Ariel*.

Sylvia

In the March 2003 issue of *Tatler*, Frieda Hughes published 'My Mother', a free-verse polemic against the ongoing production of *Sylvia*. Opening with the line 'They are killing her again', the poem reimagines Plath's 'Lady Lazarus', figuring the adaptive process as an endlessly perpetuated act of grave-robbing through which Hughes's 'buried mother / is up-dug for repeat performances' (1.11-12).⁷⁵⁵ Whereas one of the most popular metaphors for biographical representation is that of resuscitation, through which the subject is "brought back to life", Hughes anticipates that the film's sensational presentation of Plath's suicide will serve instead to kill her anew. It was prurience, Hughes implies, that prompted the filmmakers to approach her for the rights to Plath's work, and the poem's climax conveys her horror at being asked 'to give them

⁷⁵⁴ Genette, *Paratexts*, p.xviii.

⁷⁵⁵ Plath, 'Lady Lazarus', in *Ariel* (1965), pp.8-11 (1.1-3): 'I have done it again. / One year in every ten / I manage it -'.

my mother's words / To fill the mouth of their monster' (1.42-3). While Hughes's relational ownership of her mother is unassailable, her implicit distinction between legitimate and illegitimate forms of adaptation and quotation warrants further examination in light of the themes of the previous chapter. The accusations Hughes levels at the biopic are, ironically, pertinent to her own poem: by forcing them to 'imagine the body, head in oven, / Orphaning children', 'My Mother' turns its audience members into voyeurs, and it engages only superficially with Plath's words (1.15-16). Thus while Hughes protests at the filmmakers' wish to use Plath's poetry 'as stitching and sutures' (1.38), 'My Mother' itself splices together echoes of 'The Applicant' with images from 'Lady Lazarus'.⁷⁵⁶ Yet as both family member and literary executor, Hughes occupies the position of dual inviolability formerly enjoyed by her father. In criticising *Sylvia*'s poor taste and dubious literary merit from a position of indisputable authority, 'My Mother' reveals, in microcosm, the unquestioned hierarchies that governed the popular characterisation of Emma Tennant's novella as the illegitimate "other" to *Birthday Letters*.

If *The Ballad of Sylvia and Ted* gained readers through the notoriety of its author's affair with Plath's husband, *Sylvia* benefited in a related manner from its association, however vexed, with her daughter. Rather than displacing popular attention from *Sylvia* onto alternative, familiarly approved interpretations of Plath and her work, 'My Mother' became, as Badia has noted, 'a publicity generator for the film [...] receiv[ing] coverage by media as wide ranging as CNN and the Montreal Gazette'.⁷⁵⁷ A less obvious benefit was gained from Hughes's withholding of the rights to both her parents' works, meaning that these could only be quoted in isolated, decontextualised fragments. This decision was part of a long tradition of withholding permission to quote 'when "The Estate" did not agree with the point of view being expressed', a (mis)use of

⁷⁵⁶ Plath, 'The Applicant', in *Ariel* (1965), pp.6-7.

⁷⁵⁷ Badia, p.163.

copyright control that was frequently regarded as a form of censorship.⁷⁵⁸ Yet, as will now be discussed, Hughes's interdict forced the filmmakers to devise creative strategies to maintain the "literary" aspect of their biopic, strategies which included quoting from texts in the public domain, co-opting Plath's writing into a biographically focalised struggle for agency, and creating a bricolage of those fragments of *Ariel* which could be used legally. Whereas Brownlow's shooting script relied heavily on *Birthday Letters*, incorporating scenes reprising the narratives of 'Ouija', 'Epiphany', and 'A Table' and others utilising fragments from 'The Minotaur' and 'Life After Death', the filmmakers' failure to secure the required permissions resulted, ironically, in a stronger film which largely transcended the influence of Ted Hughes. In the finished film, the influence of *Birthday Letters* is detectable mainly on the level of image, the use of costume in the wedding scene, for instance, mirroring Hughes's 'cord jacket' and Plath's 'pink wool knitted dress' in Hughes's poem of the same name.⁷⁵⁹ The film's development from page to screen mirrors the trajectory of its narrative, which charts Sylvia's attempts to establish a poetic identity distinct from that of her husband. The way in which *Sylvia* "outgrew" Ted Hughes's influence is also coherent with the filmmakers' troubling of the authority of his edition of *Ariel*. The end result is reflective of Pamela Matthews's prognosis for the future of conventional Plath criticism in the aftermath of *Birthday Letters*: 'Sylvia Plath will emerge more powerfully on her own'.⁷⁶⁰

The scarcity of direct quotation from Hughes and Plath's poetry in *Sylvia* prompted a mixed response from both reviewers and critics. The *New York Times* reviewer was critical of 'the skimpy use of Plath's own words', whereas Nev Pierce of the BBC was encouraged by the absence of 'relentless scenes of reading and writing', noting that 'the power of [Hughes and Plath's] work is such that you will want to seek it

⁷⁵⁸ Churchwell, 'Secrets and Lies', p.112.

⁷⁵⁹ Ted Hughes, 'A Pink Wool Knitted Dress', in *Birthday Letters*, pp.34-5 (1.9; 1.1).

⁷⁶⁰ Pamela R. Matthews, 'Sylvia Plath Hughes: The Middle Ground in the New Millennium', *South Central Review*, 23 (2006), 89-93 (p.93).

out'.⁷⁶¹ For critic Rand Richards Cooper, the scarcity of such scenes was symptomatic of the literary biopic's generic difficulty in screening the writer writing, thematically necessarily yet visually problematic in having nothing, really, 'to look at', while for Kate Moses the film would implicitly have been stronger had the filmmakers been permitted to use their sources 'in a significant way'.⁷⁶² There is an intriguing tension between Moses and Pierce's responses: whereas Moses conceives the sparse coverage of Hughes and Plath's work as an irresolvable loss, Pierce situates *Sylvia* as what Cardwell calls a 'study aid or advertisement' with the potential to 'send readers back to the book'.⁷⁶³ Yet the potential of literary biopics to 'refer back to and revitalise the source of their geneses' must be balanced against their contrasting potential to function, like James's Prefaces to the New York Edition, as 'Derridean supplements' which substitute the revised version of the work for the work itself.⁷⁶⁴ This is compounded in *Sylvia* by Brownlow's substitution of public-domain texts for Hughes and Plath's unobtainable originals.

Sylvia: The Shooting Script numbers among its references Chaucer's 'The Wife of Bath's Tale', the 1665 Anglican Book of Common Prayer, Shakespeare's *King Lear*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Tempest*, and *Richard II*, John Donne's 'Elegy XIX: To His Mistress Going to Bed' and Yeats's 'The Sorrow of Love'. Brownlow states that he found 'a biographical meaning in every line of every poem of *Ariel* and *Birthday Letters* (134); whereas extended quotation from these sources was prohibited, lines from the aforementioned texts could be incorporated with a similar eye to their biographical resonance. Many of these references facilitate an engagement with Hughes and Plath's work without the homage implied by direct quotation: *Sylvia*'s recitation of lines from

⁷⁶¹ A. O. Scott, 'A Poet's Death; A Death's Poetry', *The New York Times*, 17 October 2003 <<http://www.nytimes.com/2003/10/17/movies/film-review-a-poet-s-death-a-death-s-poetry.html>> [accessed 13 June 2013]; Nev Pierce, 'Sylvia (2004)', 29 October 2004 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/films/2003/12/03/sylvia_review.shtml> [accessed 13 June 2013].

⁷⁶² Rand Richards Cooper, 'Daddy's Girl?', *Commonweal*, 130 (2003) 17-18 (p.17); Moses, 'The Last Plath'.

⁷⁶³ Cardwell, pp.38, 13.

⁷⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p.38; Rundle, p.72.

Ariel's song, 'Full Fathom Five', stands in for 'Ariel' itself, while her declamation of 'The Wife of Bath' to a field of cows returns Hughes's poem 'Chaucer' to its source. Similarly, Ted's quotation of Donne's 'Oh, my America! My new-found land!' replaces the final lines of Hughes's '18 Rugby Street': 'So this is America, I marvelled. Beautiful, beautiful America' (119), while his lines 'Shall I believe / That unsubstantial death is amorous / And that the lean abhorred monster keeps / Thee here in dark to be his paramour' evokes not only *Romeo and Juliet* but also Hughes's 'A Picture of Otto' (14).⁷⁶⁵ In this poem, the speaker, in a manner suggestive of Romeo, descends into Plath's 'family vault' to discover her 'like Owen, after his dark poem, / Under the battle, in the catacomb, // Sleeping with his German as if alone'.⁷⁶⁶ As Rundle writes of James's Prefaces, these acts of exchange substitute the filmmakers' own reading for the viewers' independent experience of Hughes and Plath's texts.⁷⁶⁷ Given that *Birthday Letters* is the text most frequently substituted with works in the public domain, the exchanges also support the film's thematic preoccupation with the evasion of Ted Hughes's literary influence.

By presenting Sylvia's writing as part of a struggle for dominance with her husband, the film bucks a trend detected by Matthews in conventional biographical studies of Plath published in the immediate aftermath of *Birthday Letters* and Plath's unabridged journals. The studies, Matthew observed, emphasised 'Hughes and Plath's co-operation rather than their opposition', using 'marriage' as the prevailing metaphor.⁷⁶⁸ In *Sylvia*, a more appropriate metaphor for the subject's poetic development would be that of divorce, a thematic bias suggestive of Matthews's prediction that Plath will begin to be considered more autonomously once 'the intertextuality of the relationship' is exhausted.⁷⁶⁹ The film's concern with distinguishing Sylvia's poetic

⁷⁶⁵ Ted Hughes, '18 Rugby Street' in *Birthday Letters*, p.20 (l.141-2).

⁷⁶⁶ Ted Hughes, 'A Picture of Otto', in *Birthday Letters*, p.193 (l.28-30).

⁷⁶⁷ Rundle, p.72.

⁷⁶⁸ Matthews, p.90.

⁷⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p.93.

identity from that of her husband is apparent when comparing scene twelve-A with scene fifty-five. In the former scene, set in the aftermath of the party at Falcon's Yard, Sylvia bounces a ball against the ceiling of her room while chanting 'Edward Hughes, Edward Hughes, Ted Hughes, Ted Hughes, Sylvia Plath, Ted Hughes', catching the ball on the line 'Mrs. Sylvia Hughes' (8). In the latter scene, Al Alvarez visits Chalcot Square for the first time and greets Sylvia with 'you must be Mrs. Hughes'. She replies 'Night Shift?', and adds 'it's a poem you printed in the *Observer*', prompting Alvarez's realisation that 'you're Sylvia *Plath!* (55)' These scenes, which recall the defacement of Plath's gravestone to remove the 'Hughes' from 'Sylvia Plath Hughes', articulate Sylvia's desire to reassert an autonomous nominal identity, not as the wife of a poet but as a poet in her own right.⁷⁷⁰ The former scene indicates Sylvia's creation of Hughes as 'Ted', rather than 'Edward', and her desire for assimilation into his newly-made identity, while her subsequent insistence on being 'Sylvia Plath' articulates the struggle for independent poetic recognition that provides the through-line of the film's narrative.

Sylvia's pursuit of a poetic identity not solely defined in relation to her husband is demonstrated in a series of scenes in which the camera catches her in the act of writing. Close analysis of these scenes contests Annika Hagström's assertion that *Sylvia* screens only the 'anguished Plath', a subject 'more concerned with her husband's supposed infidelities than with her writing', and Tracy Brain's criticism of the film's 'failure to say anything interesting or important about the poetry'.⁷⁷¹ The scenes comprise a sub-narrative akin to that which I excavated in *Birthday Letters*; they afford Plath's writing due prominence without extensive quotation and ultimately say something of great critical import about her poetry. The first scene in the sequence, number twelve, is directly juxtaposed with the party at Falcon's Yard, which in turn follows Sylvia's discovery of 'Fallgrief's Girlfriends' in the *St. Botolph's Review*. Ted

⁷⁷⁰ See Ted Hughes, 'Letters to Editor: The place where Sylvia Plath should rest in peace', *The Guardian*, 20 April 1989.

⁷⁷¹ Hagström, p.34; Brain, 'Fictionalizing Sylvia Plath', p.188.

takes Sylvia's earring, declaring 'this I'll keep', and disappears into the crowd, whereupon we cut to the platen of Sylvia's typewriter, with lines twenty-five to twenty-eight of 'Pursuit' centre screen (7).⁷⁷² The movement of the camera emphasises the physical particulars of typewriting, cutting rapidly between the paper, the typebars, and Sylvia's neatly manicured fingers, a focus which will prove significant in light of her later transition to writing longhand. While the line we see being imprinted onto the page reads 'on fluent haunches, keeps my speed', Sylvia speaks the words 'black marauder [...] one day I'll have my death of him', thereby contravening the filmic convention wherein 'what is conveyed in voice-over speech is stipulated or implied as isomorphic with the written page'.⁷⁷³ The disjunction suggests that Sylvia's mind is working overtime, moving faster than her hands, while also incorporating the most biographically sensational line in the poem. 'One day I'll have my death of him' is then repeated by Sylvia's friend, prompting Sylvia to confirm that 'he's my black marauder' without a noticeable pause in her typewriting.⁷⁷⁴ The hammering of the keys, rapid camerawork, and Sylvia's invulnerability to distraction combine to suggest an outpouring of inspiration, which the dialogue and editing credits entirely to 'Pursuit's real-life dedicatee, Ted Hughes'.⁷⁷⁵

The next incidence of Sylvia writing occurs in scene forty-one, which similarly opens with a close-up shot of the platen of her typewriter, but this time bearing a covering letter for the manuscript of *The Hawk in the Rain*. Ted's voice is heard off-screen reading from a rejection letter, before the camera pans back to reveal that the wall above the desk is papered with similar letters. This provides a visual cue that Sylvia's

⁷⁷² Sylvia Plath, 'Pursuit', in *Collected Poems*, ed. by Ted Hughes (London: Faber, 2002), pp.22-3. The lines quoted are: 'Now hills hatch menace, spawning shade; / Midnight cloaks the sultry grove; / The black marauder, hauled by love / On fluent haunches, keeps my speed.' (l.25-8).

⁷⁷³ Paul Arthur, 'The Written Scene: Writers as Figures of Cinematic Redemption', in *Literature and Film*, ed. by Stam and Raengo, pp.331-42 (p.333).

⁷⁷⁴ *Sylvia*, directed by Christine Jeffs (USA: 2003). The lines are not in the original screenplay.

⁷⁷⁵ Plath, 'Journal entry for February 25 1956', in *Journals*, pp.214-5 (p.214): 'It ['Pursuit'] is dedicated to Ted Hughes'.

role as Ted's literary agent is a long-standing one, confirmed by her subsequent assurance that the two copies of the manuscript returned that day 'went straight back out again' (22). She adds that 'I typed up four more copies of your manuscript, so now there are seven in circulation' (22). The composition of the scene mirrors that of scene twelve, in which Sylvia is also seen typing in the presence of a third party; the visual echo implies that Ted's writing has by now eclipsed Sylvia's own. The filmmakers' suggestion that Plath initially prioritised Hughes's work is confirmed in Plath's journals; when *The Hawk in the Rain* secured publication through the New York Center Poetry Prize in February 1957, she claimed to be 'so glad Ted is first [...] his rejections more than double my sorrow & his acceptances rejoice me more than mine'.⁷⁷⁶ Yet *Sylvia* underemphasises Plath's simultaneous pursuit of publication for her own work while advancing her husband's career: 'I have piles of poems and stories out. Not to mention my book of poems', she wrote the following month while awaiting the details of Hughes's award.⁷⁷⁷ From this point onwards, *Sylvia* rewrites Hughes and Plath's concurrent advancement of their literary careers as a narrative in which Ted is 'the real poet in the house' and Sylvia the much-put-upon appendage (78). This means that the *Ariel* inspiration, when it finally emerges, is framed as a triumphant return of the repressed rather than the culmination of a lifetime's steady labour. Ironically, given the film's contestation of his editing of the collection, this confirms Hughes's view of Plath's pre-*Ariel* poems as 'nothing more than 'impurities', 'by products' of a process of transformation'.⁷⁷⁸

A third re-contextualised appearance of the typewriter serves to emphasise the inverse relationship between Sylvia's ability to write and her husband's mounting success. Scene sixty-one opens with Sylvia preparing her writing materials while vacationing on Cape Cod, aligning her typewriter to be perfectly foursquare on the desk

⁷⁷⁶ Plath, 'Journal entry for February 25 1957', in *Journals*, pp.268-72 (p.271).

⁷⁷⁷ Plath, 'Journal entry for March 4 1957', in *Journals*, pp.272-5 (p.273).

⁷⁷⁸ Andrew Wilson, p.11.

and arranging pencils beside a copy of *Sonnets to Orpheus*. This title hints at the influence of Hughes, who would translate the Orpheus myth in his *Tales from Ovid* (1997). We cut to a shot of the ocean through the adjacent window, with *Roget's Thesaurus* clearly visible in the foreground, and hear the sound of the carriage return lever. The next cut reveals that Sylvia is not in fact writing, as this aural cue suggests, but idly flicking the lever back and forth with her bare foot. Inching out a sheet of paper with great care not to disarrange the materials neatly arrayed on top of it, she loads the carriage 'and stares at the blank page. And stares' (36). The composition of this scene once again demands comparison with scene twelve, in which the words of 'Pursuit' 'pour onto a page' (7). Subsequent scenes in the Cape Cod sequence reveal Sylvia scribbling with a pencil over a truncated stanza before resting her head on the page in despair, and Ted cycling back from a fishing trip to boast that he 'got a poem. A good one' (37). The juxtaposition of Sylvia typing, indoors, with a thesaurus to hand, with Ted handwriting in the natural landscape frames her writing as mechanised and forced, while his is 'the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings'.⁷⁷⁹ The typewriter also has powerfully gendered associations; it connotes bureaucracy and, more specifically, Aurelia Plath's abortive attempts to teach her daughter shorthand so that she might shore up her financially untenable career with other work.⁷⁸⁰ It functions in the film as a synecdoche for writing as (feminised) labour, in keeping with Alvarez's suggestion that Plath's earlier poems 'seemed to build up grudgingly, word by word, like a mosaic'.⁷⁸¹ Sylvia's subsequent transition to handwriting is then revealed as a gesture of feminist

⁷⁷⁹ William Wordsworth, 'Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*', in Wordsworth and Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads and Other Poems* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 2003), pp.5-25 (p.8).

⁷⁸⁰ See Sylvia Plath, *Letters Home: Correspondence*, ed. by Aurelia Plath (London: Faber, 1999), p.124. Aurelia Plath writes that '[Sylvia's] plan was that I should teach her shorthand for an hour each morning so that she could "get a job to support my writing [...]"]'.

⁷⁸¹ Alvarez, *The Savage God*, pp.18-19. Brownlow's familiarity with this text is suggested in scene 175, in which he quotes Alvarez's description of Plath as 'a priestess emptied out by the rites of her cult' (p.69).

resistance, enabling the *Ariel* poems to flow ‘effortlessly [...] destructive, volatile, demanding’.⁷⁸²

An important stage in the transition from writing-as-mosaic to writing splashed across a canvas is conveyed in the final scene in the Cape Cod sequence, in which Ted, having forced Sylvia to admit that her novel *Falcon’s Yard* is autobiographical, insists that ‘you’ve already got your subject. It’s you’ (39). Set in 1957, this scene is anachronistic given that Hughes did not acknowledge Plath’s use of the confessional until his *Paris Review* interview almost forty years later. It elides the influence, ultimately acknowledged by Hughes, of Lowell and Sexton, instead framing Sylvia’s discovery of confessional poetry as the culmination of her marital apprenticeship.⁷⁸³ In the screenplay, though not in the finished film, it is suggested that Sylvia’s relationship with her father will form the nucleus of her poetic self-analysis. This is supported by Ted’s assurance, in the same scene, that ‘nothing of him doth fade, but has suffered a sea-change, into something rich and strange’, and by a subsequent scene in which Sylvia is seen ‘HAMMERING the typewriter keys with an intensity and concentration we have not seen before’, Otto Plath’s *Bumblebees and Their Ways* (1934) at her side (pp.41-2). This book forms a leitmotif in the screenplay, a visual synecdoche for Hughes’s assertion that ‘the root system of [Plath’s] talent was a deep and inclusive inner crisis [...] going back at least as far as the death of her father’ (SP:J 179). The loss of the scene, as well as facilitating the aforementioned visual contrast between pedestrian typewriting and inspired handwriting, effectively streamlines the narrative, prioritising the disintegration of the marriage over the death of the father as the catalyst for *Ariel*. This represents a break with Hughes’s construction of the *Ariel* inspiration, delineated in the preceding chapter, instead rehearsing the emphasis on marital deterioration previously seen in *The Ballad of Sylvia and Ted*.

⁷⁸² Alvarez, *The Savage God*, p.21.

⁷⁸³ Ted Hughes, ‘The Art of Poetry’.

No further scenes of Sylvia writing occur until she embarks upon the *Ariel* poems, seventy minutes into the film. The intervening scenes exponentially increase the tension as Ted's writing becomes more and more celebrated, his sexual attractiveness seeming to rise concurrently, while Sylvia's work continues to be overlooked. Sylvia's latent tension becomes explicit in her explosive 'You've made a fool out of me! Typing your poems, wasting my time teaching instead of writing, all so I can bask in your reflected glory!' (91), and in her bitter observation that while *The Colossus* received a single review, from Alvarez, *The Hawk in the Rain* 'won prizes' (58). The domestic scenes in London and Devon also represent Sylvia as taking sole responsibility for the childcare, struggling to concentrate at her desk in Chalcot Square as Frieda screams in her playpen, and bathing Nicholas at Court Green while Ted flirts with Assia on the telephone. Throughout, Paltrow emphasises Sylvia's maternal detachment, often seeming to look through, rather than at, the children. This performance resonates with Jillian Becker's intimations that Plath was a negligent mother, 'burdened with children she could not cope with however much she loved them'.⁷⁸⁴ Yet the representation of Sylvia as a harried mother relies on the elision, acknowledged in turn by Tennant, of Hughes and Plath's equitable division of the child-raising in order to allow each partner time in which to write. That this arrangement enabled Plath, albeit temporarily, to balance her triangulated desire for 'Books & Babies & Beef stews' is borne out by Alvarez, who criticised these scenes on the grounds that 'a household drudge [...] is not how I remember her, in Devon or anywhere else'.⁷⁸⁵ The filmmakers' emphasis on Sylvia's domestic subservience frames the breakdown of the marriage as equal parts tragedy and creative liberation; Sylvia, while devastated, 'can finally write' (Brownlow, p.87).

⁷⁸⁴ Jillian Becker, *Giving Up: The Last Days of Sylvia Plath* (London: Ferrington, 2002), p.41.

⁷⁸⁵ Plath, 'Journal entry for 25 February 1957', in *Journals*, pp.268-72 (p.269); Alvarez, 'Ted, Sylvia and Me'.

With the exception of a moment in which Sylvia speaks, in voice-over, the final four lines of 'The Moon and the Yew Tree', the biopic presents just one remaining scene of the subject writing. In the immediate aftermath of Ted's desertion, Sylvia sits at her desk at Court Green and handwrites the word 'Daddy' at the top of a blank page. The poem, among those that Plath felt confident 'will make my name', is written in fountain pen, with its associations of tradition and permanence, while the typewriter's position at the periphery of the shot confirms that Sylvia has outgrown her reliance on a mechanical intermediary between mind and page.⁷⁸⁶ The screenplay reveals that the quotation originally chosen for this scene was lines fifty-one to fifty-six of 'Daddy', a poem which 'seems to be falling full-formed onto the page, as if she were not a writer but a medium, as if a wormhole had opened to another world and the fabric of reality were tearing apart, letting whatever lies on the other side of the mirror gush into reality' (85). Brownlow's direction is redolent of what Rose called the 'hystericising' of Plath by 'a male literary tradition'.⁷⁸⁷ It alludes to Robert Lowell's introduction of Plath, in the American edition of *Ariel*, as 'an oracular poet writing as though taking dictation', as well as to Hughes's calmer assertion, in 'The Evolution of Sheep in Fog', that 'the final wording of the poem does arrive, whenever it arrives, fully-formed' (211).⁷⁸⁸ By concurring with Lowell and Hughes's intimations that the *Ariel* poems effectively wrote themselves, Brownlow is complicit in their act of "de-skilling" Plath. This prioritising of the medium over the writer belies the 'hard-earned skill and discipline' insisted upon by Alvarez, who asserted that while the *Ariel* poems may have 'flowed effortlessly', Plath 'still rewrote and rewrote'.⁷⁸⁹

While the following scene has Sylvia reading the final lines of 'Daddy' to Alvarez, the lines previously spoken in voiceover are actually taken from eleven of the

⁷⁸⁶ Sylvia Plath to Aurelia Plath, 16 October 1962. *Letters Home*, p.468.

⁷⁸⁷ Jacqueline Rose, *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* (London: Virago, 1991), p.28.

⁷⁸⁸ Robert Lowell, 'Foreword' to Sylvia Plath, *Ariel* [1961] (New York: HarperCollins, 1999), p.xiii.

⁷⁸⁹ Alvarez, *The Savage God*, pp.18-19.

other *Ariel* pieces, a problematic decision given Brownlow's stated unwillingness to rely on his audience already being 'interested in Sylvia Plath' (v). Since there is no indication that any time has elapsed, viewers unfamiliar with Plath's work could be forgiven for thinking that eleven of the *Ariel* poems were completed in a single night, or, alternatively, that 'Daddy' was a product of the cut-up technique popularised by William Burroughs. Similar misconceptions propagated by the editing of a literary biopic were Stephen Daldry's suggestion that 'it is possible to die' was a line from *Mrs. Dalloway*, and that 'Woolf committed suicide just after finishing' that text.⁷⁹⁰ While such compromises are inevitable when attempting to appeal to audience members with varying degrees of familiarity with the subject's work, they were, in the case of *Sylvia*, exacerbated by the Estate's sanction on quoting from the *Ariel* poems in their rightful context. For Alvarez, 'Plath, however, gains by the restriction'; for him, the aforementioned juxtaposition of disconnected lines convincingly represented 'a creative mind working flat-out'.⁷⁹¹ The resultant "poem" does indeed appear to 'fall full-formed onto the page', in keeping with the spirit, if not the letter, of the screenplay. Transcribed, it reads as follows:

This is the light of the mind,⁷⁹²
 If the moon smiled, she would resemble you. ('The Rival', 1.1)
 Their redness talks ('Tulips', 1.39)
 she would drag me
 Cruelly, being barren. ('Elm', 1.22-3)
 Thick, red and slipping. ('Getting There', 1.36)
 your nakedness
 Shadows our safety. ('Morning Song', 1.5-6)
 Whose is that long white box in the grove, ('The Bee Meeting', 1.55)
 I need feed them nothing, I am the owner. ('The Arrival of the Bee Box', 1.25)
 I sizzled in his blue volts⁷⁹³
 Our cheesecloth gauntlets neat and sweet, ('Stings', 1.3)
 Bare-handed, I hand the combs.
 The man in white smiles, ('Stings', 1.1-2)
 so I can't see what is in there. ('The Arrival of the Bee Box', 1.9)

⁷⁹⁰ Lee, *Virginia Woolf's Nose*, p.55.

⁷⁹¹ Alvarez, 'Ted, Sylvia and Me'.

⁷⁹² Plath, 'The Moon and the Yew Tree', in *Ariel: The Restored Edition*, ed. by Frieda Hughes, p.64 (1.1). Poems from this edition hereafter referenced parenthetically with line numbers.

⁷⁹³ Plath, 'The Hanging Man', in *Ariel* (1965), p.65 (1.1).

some god got hold of me⁷⁹⁴
 Lightly, through their white swaddlings, ('Tulips', l.28)
 I cannot undo myself, and the train is steaming. ('Getting There', l.38)

With the sole exception of 'The Hanging Man', an early poem selected, perhaps, for its presentation of a speaker of whom some higher power has 'got hold', the lines selected are all from the wave of poems written in 1962 and arranged by Plath under the title *Ariel*; none of the late poems appended by Hughes are represented. The ending of the "poem" also reveals a decided prevalence of fragments from the Bee sequence, the five poems with which Plath concluded her collection. This implicit privileging of Plath's arrangement is emphasised when comparing the ending of the screenplay to that of the finished film. Whereas the screenplay incorporates lines and images from 'Edge', the penultimate poem in Hughes's arrangement of *Ariel*, the final poem quoted in the finished film is 'The Arrival of the Bee Box', the third-to-last poem in Plath's. Scene 235 as scripted sees Ted visiting St. Pancras Mortuary, lifting 'a WHITE SHROUD to reveal Sylvia's body' as Paltrow speaks, in voice over, lines one to five of 'Edge': 'The woman is perfected. / Her dead / Body wears the smile of accomplishment, / The illusion of a Greek necessity / Flows in the scrolls of her toga' (111). Brownlow writes that 'As we GLIDE AROUND, we see that the white shroud does indeed seem like some kind of toga', while a shot of 'her bare feet' summons the final lines of the film: 'Her bare / Feet seem to be saying: / We have come so far, it is over' (111). The use of lines from 'Edge' to overlay shots of Sylvia's dead body renders visual a critical trend noted by Hagström: the poem 'is directly connected to Plath's suicide, as if she had written it posthumously'; it 'is a "prophesy" of which Plath is the "heroine"'.⁷⁹⁵ This interpretation is confirmed in the previous scripted scene in which Ted responds to a policeman's remark that 'they usually leave a note' with 'she did', opening the *Ariel* manuscript at 'a poem called EDGE' which 'fills the screen' (111).

⁷⁹⁴ Ibid., l.2.

⁷⁹⁵ Hagström, p.42.

In this scene, 'Edge' becomes metonymically representative of *Ariel* as a whole, a collection often discussed, as Brain writes in a different context, as though it 'prefigured and caused [Plath's] death'.⁷⁹⁶ Philip French takes credit for the inception of this 'fallacious link between Plath and her work', citing a 1965 episode of *New Comment*, his weekly review on the *Third Programme*, in which 'her suicide was introduced as an essential way of understanding these late poems'.⁷⁹⁷ Yet regardless of whether extra-textual knowledge of Plath's suicide aids interpretation of poems such as 'Contusion', 'Edge', and 'Words', the fact remains that neither the death nor these poems has anything to do with 'the finished manuscript she left when she died', which was essentially completed by the end of 1962.⁷⁹⁸ For French and others writing twenty years before Hughes's revelation of Plath's original ordering of *Ariel* in an appendix to his edition of her *Collected Poems*, *Ariel* was irrevocably tainted by the addition of the late poems. The addition recast Plath's preceding narrative as moving inexorably towards death, and *Sylvia* as scripted perpetuates this link, presenting 'Edge', horribly, as though it were part of Plath's original manuscript.

The 'dead hands, dead stringencies' of Hughes's arrangement are, however, 'unpeel[ed]' in the finished film, which dispenses entirely with 'Edge' and the mortuary scene, showing only a fleeting glimpse of Sylvia's body as Ted kisses the manuscript and imagines her peaceful face.⁷⁹⁹ The final lines from *Ariel*, spoken in voice-over as the kitchen door swings shut, are instead from 'The Arrival of the Bee Box': 'The box is locked, it is dangerous. / [...] There are no windows, so I can't see what is in there. / There is only a little grid, no exit' (l.6; l.9-10). The context admittedly permits us to read this poem as 'Edge' as been read, as a prophesy of Plath's death. This is further

⁷⁹⁶ Brain, 'Fictionalizing Sylvia Plath', p.190.

⁷⁹⁷ Ibid.; Philip French, "It was very pleasant meeting you," wrote Sylvia. A week later she was dead... Philip French remembers Plath's last days', *The Observer*, 4 January 2004 <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2004/jan/04/poetry.highereducation>> [accessed 31 May 2013].

⁷⁹⁸ Brain, 'Fictionalizing Sylvia Plath', p.190.

⁷⁹⁹ Plath, 'Ariel', in *Ariel* (1965), pp.28-9 (l.20-1).

suggested by the title of the scene, ‘No Exit’, and by Brownlow’s assertion that ‘the audience had to feel that every door had closed on her’ (viii). Yet the remainder of the poem promises that its locked box ‘is only temporary’, that its speaker ‘will be sweet God, I will set them free’ (l.35). It is, then, possible to interpret this moment in the film as a move towards transcendence, as suggested by the scene transition from the closed door to an earlier, reprised, shot of Sylvia’s face, ‘seraphic, bathed in light’ (107). The development of the final minutes of *Sylvia* from page to screen thus reflects, in microcosm, the tonal contrasts between the two *Ariels*, and their perceived relationship to their author’s death. The screenplay ends on a note of despair, which perpetuates the connection, arbitrarily fostered by Hughes’s appending of the late poems, between *Ariel* and Plath’s suicide. The film severs this ‘fallacious link’, privileging *Ariel*’s intended drive towards renewal and transcendence, and allowing its subject to ‘taste the spring’ (‘Wintering’, l.50).⁸⁰⁰ What is implied in the film becomes explicit in Kate Moses’s *Wintering*, the subject of my final section. Moses’s novel, structured around the *Ariel* poems as arranged by Plath, is framed as a critical intervention, intended to remind the Plath Estate that *Ariel* remained unpublished in its intended order.⁸⁰¹

Wintering

The remainder of this chapter will approach Kate Moses’s *Wintering* through its paratext, defined by Genette as ‘a threshold [...] or “vestibule” that offers the world at large the possibility of either stepping inside or turning back’.⁸⁰² As previously explained, the ‘inward side’ of the paratext, or ‘peritext’ is comprised of those elements which are materially appended to the text proper; the most significant features of

⁸⁰⁰ Brain, ‘Fictionalizing Sylvia Plath’, p.190.

⁸⁰¹ Moses, ‘The Last Plath’.

⁸⁰² Genette, *Paratexts*, p.2.

Wintering's peritext include its title, dedication, intertitles, postface, and author's note.⁸⁰³ In Moses's case, these features work in harmony with the outward side of the paratext, or 'epitext', which incorporates 'any paratextual element not materially appended to the text within the same volume but circulating [...] in a virtually limitless physical and social space'.⁸⁰⁴ *Wintering*'s epitext includes Perloff's 'The Two *Ariels*' and Catherine Thompson's 'Dawn Poems in Blood' (1990), the two texts highlighted by Moses as 'key to my understanding of Sylvia Plath' (340). It is also comprised of the numerous interviews and autocommentaries through which Moses engaged with scholarly debates surrounding Plath and, most crucially, Plath's original *Ariel* manuscript and *Birthday Letters*. By placing *Wintering*'s peritext and epitext in dialogue with the main body of prose, I shall reveal how Moses exploits these thresholds to complicate her novel's generic status as fiction. *Wintering* makes explicit the 'critical hypothesizing' that was latent in *Sylvia*, marshalling a body of evidence to dispute the connection, fostered by Hughes, between *Ariel* and Plath's death, and illuminating the contrasting narrative enabled by restoring Plath's poems to 'their proper order'.⁸⁰⁵ Together, *Sylvia* and *Wintering* renewed public attention to the question of 'why the differences between the two versions of *Ariel* matter', contributing to the gathering popular-critical agitation that ultimately secured the publication of *Ariel: The Restored Edition*.⁸⁰⁶

Moses's commitment to Plath's version of *Ariel* becomes increasingly apparent as readers progress through the two halves of the peritext that enclose her narrative, from the title page, dedication, and list of contents that precede the text proper, to the postscript and author's note that follow. While Genette suggests that the purpose of quotation titles is to 'provide the text with the indirect support of another text', Moses's choice of the title 'Wintering' is suggestive of more than just the desire for 'the prestige

⁸⁰³ Ibid., p.345.

⁸⁰⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁰⁵ Gilbert, p.3; Moses, 'The Last Plath'.

⁸⁰⁶ Badia, p.162.

of a cultural filiation'.⁸⁰⁷ As with Brownlow's selection of quotations for the writing montage in *Sylvia*, Moses's title is an implicit testament of support for the bee sequence with which Plath concluded her volume, just as Paul Alexander's play *Edge* (2003) nominally affirmed Hughes's decision to append the late poems. Moses's inscription, 'for my children, my roses', is more equivocal; not only does it symbolically merge the 'private dedicatees', her own son and daughter, with the 'public dedicatees', Frieda and Nicholas, to whom Plath addressed *Ariel*, it also invokes the 'two children, two roses' of 'Kindness'.⁸⁰⁸ Moses's decision to cite this late poem initially seems opaque in light of her title's suggested commitment to the authority of Plath's 'original selection and arrangement'.⁸⁰⁹ As shall be revealed, it is, however, coherent with Moses's thematic concern with the relationship between fertility and creativity, the link between 'the blood jet' and 'poetry'.⁸¹⁰ Any suspicions of Moses's vacillation between Hughes and Plath's arrangements are then laid to rest by the intertitles of her forty-one chapters, which mirror the original order of the *Ariel* poems as revealed in Hughes's notes to Plath's *Collected Poems*. Genette states that thematic titling invariably suggests 'a demonstrative – indeed insistent – stance on the part of the author towards his work', and Moses's decision to thus inhabit Plath's table of contents was an eloquent reminder that *Ariel* was then unpublished in its envisaged form.⁸¹¹

Moses's reconstruction of Plath's original contents page frames her text as an implicit 'curative, or corrective' to the image of Plath created by Hughes's arrangement of *Ariel*.⁸¹² This image is suggestively invoked in her postface, which enumerates the eleven late poems from which Hughes selected when revising Plath's manuscript for publication, and juxtaposes this litany with the statement 'On February 11, 1963, Sylvia

⁸⁰⁷ Genette, *Paratexts*, p.98.

⁸⁰⁸ Plath, 'Kindness', in *Ariel* (1965), p.78 (1.20); Brain, 'Fictionalizing Sylvia Plath', p.183.

⁸⁰⁹ Plath, *Ariel: The Restored Edition*, cover material.

⁸¹⁰ Plath, 'Kindness', in *Ariel* (1965), p.78 (1.18-20).

⁸¹¹ Genette, *Paratexts*, p.315.

⁸¹² *Ibid.*, p.239.

Plath took her own life' (336). The implication that Hughes fostered a relationship between the late poems and Plath's death is made explicit in Moses's *Salon* article 'The Real Sylvia Plath', and in an interview entitled 'A Lioness in Winter'. In the former, she accuses Hughes of 'changing [Ariel's] tone and theme from one of transformative rebirth to one of inevitable self-destruction', while in the latter she unequivocally frames Hughes's *Ariel* as 'an extended suicide note'.⁸¹³ These statements frame Hughes's re-ordering of, and additions to, the *Ariel* manuscript as acts of critical overwriting, supported by the postface's suggestive detail that 'Edge' was 'composed on the back of a draft of 'Wintering'' (n.pag.). The novel itself is then interpretable as a feminist recovery of Plath's original arrangement, one which sees, conversely, Sylvia typing the final draft of 'Wintering' on the reverse of her husband's manuscript: 'She wants a woman's story, not a man's. She wants her fingerprints all over his page, her page, her words, her survival. His manuscript was right there, under her desk, to reinscribe' (193). Echoing the suggestive juxtaposition of 'Your story. My story' in Hughes's poem 'Visit', Sylvia's triumphant reclamation of 'her page' is a synecdoche for *Wintering's* pervasive insistence that Hughes's *Ariel* be 'reinscribe[d]' to reveal 'the woman's story, not the man's'.⁸¹⁴

That Moses intended this intervention to have real-world implications is conclusively suggested by her author's note, a form of addendum 'used most often with texts whose fictionality is very "impure"'.⁸¹⁵ *Wintering's* ambiguous status was exacerbated by the loss of the 'genre indication' 'A novel of Sylvia Plath' between the American and British editions, corroborating Gilbert's assertion that Moses 'define[s] her task not just (or even principally) as the crafting of a fiction but as a sort of critical

⁸¹³ Kate Moses, 'The Real Sylvia Plath' [Part 1], *Salon*, 30 May 2000 <<http://www.salon.com/2000/05/30/plath1>> [accessed 17 June 2013]; Moses, 'A Lioness in Winter'.

⁸¹⁴ Ted Hughes, 'Visit', in *Birthday Letters*, pp.7-9 (l.69).

⁸¹⁵ Genette, *Paratexts*, p.332.

hypothesizing'.⁸¹⁶ Moses's author's note explicitly frames her novel as a scholarly undertaking, detailing her independent research in the archives of Indiana University and Smith College, and foregrounding her dialogue with numerous biographical and critical works. The essays of Perloff and Thompson are singled out as particularly crucial to Moses's understanding of Plath, while a final paragraph awards the mantle of 'most essential source' and 'ultimate inspiration' to Plath's own manuscript, 'which has never been published in its intended form' (341). Having signalled her commitment to Plath's arrangement of *Ariel* through the peritextual features explored above, Moses reaches beyond the thresholds of her own text to engage in a productive dialogue with those of Perloff, Thompson and Plath and, ultimately, with Hughes's *Birthday Letters*. Through conversation with these four major components of *Wintering*'s epitext, Moses exploits the ontological implications of her ostensibly fictional narrative, catalysing the publication of *Ariel: The Restored Edition* and helping to sever the 'fallacious link' between *Ariel* and Plath's death.⁸¹⁷

Badia cites Perloff's comparative study as the first work to '[make] clear why the differences between the two versions of *Ariel* matter', suggesting that it paved the way for Bundtzen's *The Other Ariel*, another intertext for Moses.⁸¹⁸ The citation of these critical works in the appendix to a novel is indicative of the 'spilling over into the public domain of so many scholarly projects attentive to Plath's version of [her] manuscript', forming a trans-genre dialogue which, for Helle, 'contributed to the momentum to publish Plath's version of *Ariel*'.⁸¹⁹ Moses indeed noted that, following the publication of *Wintering*, Frieda Hughes for the first time consulted the "other" *Ariel* in the Smith College archive, and Hagström situates Hughes's subsequent publication of the manuscript, 'with an introduction loyally defending her father's choices', as a corrective

⁸¹⁶ Ibid., p.97; Gilbert, p.3.

⁸¹⁷ Brain, 'Fictionalizing Sylvia Plath', p.190.

⁸¹⁸ Badia, p.162.

⁸¹⁹ Anne Helle, 'Lessons from the Archive: Sylvia Plath and the Politics of Memory', *Feminist Studies*, 31 (2005), 631-53 (p.646).

to Moses's focus on '[Ted] Hughes's much-criticised editing of Plath's texts'.⁸²⁰ Hagström's framing of the publication as an adversarial reaction to *Wintering* may be too teleological, and was denied by Frieda Hughes herself, who credited the impetus to publish to the editor at Harper Collins who, she claimed, 'first suggested that my mother's original arrangement of poems might make a good book'.⁸²¹ Yet, as Badia observes, Hughes's statement elides the work of Perloff, Bundtzen, and Moses, not to mention the intervening reviewers and scholars who 'demonstrated so powerfully not simply an interest in but a need for a restored edition'.⁸²² At the time of publication, *Wintering* was the latest manifestation of this ongoing need, and, along with Moses's autocommentaries, served to renew popular attention to debates first formally articulated by Perloff. *Wintering* should therefore be understood as a catalyst, if not the cause, for the publication of *Ariel: The Restored Edition*, demonstrating the real-world implications of biofiction's cross-pollination between criticism and fiction.

If Moses's popularisation of debates set in motion by Perloff had ontological implications, her similar rehearsal of Thompson's findings has epistemological consequences, helping to trouble the link fostered by Hughes between his arrangement of *Ariel* and Plath's death. The fundamental arguments of Thompson's uncollected essay 'Dawn Poems in Blood: Sylvia Plath's *Ariel* poems' were relayed in Moses's *Salon* article 'The Real Sylvia Plath'. The reproduction afforded for Thompson a readership both wider and less specialised than she may otherwise have reached, thereby continuing the conversation between criticism and popular culture previously demonstrated in Moses's engagement with Perloff. Thompson's suggestion of a relationship between Plath's physical and artistic fertility was not, in itself, unique: Hughes was himself attuned to the way in which her two deliveries allowed her to 'compose at top speed and with her full weight' as 'all the various voices of her gift came together' (SP:A 162).

⁸²⁰ Hagström, p.51.

⁸²¹ Frieda Hughes, quoted in Badia, p.162.

⁸²² Badia, p.162.

Reproduction was also, as demonstrated in the previous chapter, Hughes's preferred metaphor for the development of Plath's *Ariel* voice, 'that inner gestation and eventual birth of a new self-conquering self' (SP:J 190). In 'A Lioness in Winter', Moses demonstrates her familiarity with these 'thoughtful critical writings', in which Hughes 'stressed the vital importance of understanding [Plath's] creative development within the context of her domestic life during her last two years'.⁸²³ The influence of Hughes's arguments is palpable in *Wintering*, in which Sylvia perceives the birth of Frieda as 'the beginning of her real existence', 'the galvanising moment of her life' (11), and records the appearance of 'a spurt of good poems' after the birth of each child (231). The art of writing is then symbolically conflated with the act of labour to form a unique bodily poetic: 'the plates of the skull folding, slipping tectonically like a world, to get through her bones' (126). The effect is to confirm in fiction what Moses had previously iterated in her interview: that motherhood provided Plath with a direct line to 'the material that she had always needed'.⁸²⁴

Yet while these details reflect Hughes's emphasis on the nine-month cycles of Plath's respective pregnancies, Thompson adopts a narrower focus. She excavates a relationship between, on the one hand, the *Ariel* poems' vacillation between 'metaphorical renewals and optimistic transformations' and 'jagged, seething accusations and aggression', and, on the other, the phases of Plath's menstrual cycle.⁸²⁵ Along with Plath's well-documented cycles of insomnia, Thompson sees these poetic oscillations as symptomatic of premenstrual dysphoric disorder, for which Plath was being referred for treatment at the time of her death. Furthermore, she posits that 'this suicide attempt was directly precipitated by hormonal disruption during this late luteal phase of her menstrual cycle'.⁸²⁶ Moses corroborated Thompson's findings against Plath's unabridged journals, which confirmed that her menstrual cycles did indeed

⁸²³ Moses, 'A Lioness in Winter'.

⁸²⁴ Ibid.

⁸²⁵ Moses, 'The Real Sylvia Plath', [Part Two].

⁸²⁶ Thompson, quoted in Moses, 'The Real Sylvia Plath' [Part Two].

correspond with ‘the ‘cycles’ of the *Ariel* poems’.⁸²⁷ Moses stated that she found the possibility of a bodily “explanation” for Plath’s changes in poetic tone ‘breathtaking’, insofar as it integrated her ‘life as a woman and as a writer, [...] without diminishing [her] achievement in any way’.⁸²⁸ The impact of Thompson’s work is readily felt in *Wintering*, in which Moses suggests that ‘twenty-one’ of the *Ariel* poems were completed in ‘twenty-eight days’, conflating the ‘agony drag’ of menstruation with ‘the mother lode’, ‘the richest vein’, the ‘real red thing’ of poetry (125).

When situated in dialogue with Perloff’s essay, Thompson’s findings inflect Moses’s project of feminist recovery in two important ways. Firstly, they provide physiological evidence for the thematic differences between Hughes’s arrangement of *Ariel* and Plath’s, explaining the abrupt change in trajectory occasioned when Hughes appended poems written at the nadir of Plath’s menstrual cycle to the ‘optimistic transformations’ of the bee sequence.⁸²⁹ Such division of her work into contrasting cycles supports Moses’s underlying suggestion that Plath’s *Ariel* was a radically different entity to Hughes’s, deserving of, indeed, demanding, excavation. Secondly, the suggestion that ‘Plath’s true demon was not something of her own making but a force, or forces, she was quite powerless against’ disputes the connection between Plath’s writing and her death that was implicit in Hughes’s arrangement of *Ariel* and directly stated in *Birthday Letters*.⁸³⁰ Her suicide, unnarrated in *Wintering*, is instead situated as the result of physiological imbalances, contesting Hughes’s ‘hystericising’ of Plath, and liberating her writing to tell ‘the story of her own survival’.⁸³¹

For Moses, the *Ariel* manuscript as arranged by Plath was nothing less than an ‘encoded autobiography’, with a narrative ‘embedded almost anagrammatically within

⁸²⁷ Moses, ‘The Real Sylvia Plath’ [Part Two].

⁸²⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸²⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸³⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸³¹ Rose, *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath*, p.28; Moses, ‘The Real Sylvia Plath’ [Part Two].

the [...] poems if you put them back in their order'.⁸³² When restored to their original arrangement the poems have, she suggests,

a logical sequence, a narrative cohesion that amounted to a mythic performative utterance. She was putting them in an order that would tell her the story of her own survival, her phoenixlike eruption from the ashes of her destroyed marriage and the shed skin of her "false" selves.⁸³³

Yet this highly poetic mythologizing of the subject belies a problematic suggestion that the "other" *Ariel* must be read biographically, that the reader's proper task is to excavate a 'parallel track to what was going on in [Plath's] life at the time'.⁸³⁴ Such a mode of reading has the potential to do a disservice to Plath, for reasons that are outlined by

Brain:

to treat Plath's writing as invariably self-dramatising is to belittle it. The implication of such an exercise is that the ever-confessional Sylvia Plath was too unimaginative to make anything up, or too self-obsessed to consider anything of larger historical or cultural importance.⁸³⁵

Conversely, for Badia, such 'preoccupation, even obsession, with repairing the damage that has allegedly resulted from the author's association with the label "confessional poetry"' is unhelpfully reductive, closing down autobiographical and feminist approaches to Plath's oeuvre instead of encouraging 'the diversity of interpretations surely made possible by the impressive nature of Plath's body of work'.⁸³⁶ Plath herself included biographical approaches among the legitimate interpretations of her writing. While she was adamant that 'personal experience shouldn't be a kind of shut-box and mirror-looking narcissistic experience' but must be 'generally relevant, to such things as Hiroshima and Dachau, and so on', she acknowledged that her poems 'come immediately out of the senseless and emotional experience that I have'.⁸³⁷

⁸³² Moses, 'A Lioness in Winter'.

⁸³³ Moses, 'The Real Sylvia Plath' [Part Two].

⁸³⁴ Moses, 'A Lioness in Winter'.

⁸³⁵ Tracy Brain, 'Dangerous Confessions; The Problem of Reading Sylvia Plath Biographically', in *Modern Confessional Writing: New Critical Essays*, ed. by Jo Gill (London: Routledge, 2006), pp.11-32 (p.28).

⁸³⁶ Badia, pp.10-15.

⁸³⁷ Plath, quoted in A. Alvarez, 'Sylvia Plath', p.64.

Moses's awareness of this tension between the general and the personal is suggested by the image that "occurs" to Sylvia to describe her breast milk leaking into the bath water. She describes it as 'a tiny Hiroshima as it penetrated the surface', dissolving into 'spreading grayish lacework' (16). Just as Alvarez suspected Plath of trying, in an early draft of 'Lady Lazarus', to 'hitch an easy lift by dragging in the atomic victims', this introjection of historical event into personal experience arguably denudes the atrocity of the event itself.⁸³⁸ Despite this, however, the image is suggestive of a new and different kind of biographical reading to that criticised by Brain, one which acknowledges Plath's own commitment to engaging her lived experiences as a female body with events of international significance. As shall now be demonstrated, Moses's emphasis on productive, open-ended biographical readings is revelatory of biofiction's potential to make positive interventions into criticism. It suggestively re-opens interpretative avenues closed down in the 1970s, when the publication of Kroll's *Chapters in a Mythology* effectively discredited biographical readings in favour of more 'legitimate critical concerns'.⁸³⁹

Far from suggesting that Plath was 'too unimaginative to make anything up', the biographical readings prioritised in *Wintering* subtly trouble the distinction between lived and narrated experience, ultimately suggesting that writing enabled Plath to 'imagine a future' rather than simply to record a past.⁸⁴⁰ This is first indicated in the passage describing the arrangement of the *Ariel* poems:

She knows the story she wants them to tell. It is her story. It is where she wills herself to go; it is an incantation. She's giving shape to her life, past and future, with these poems. Like the arrangement of cards in a Tarot deck as they are turned up, it is not just the poems but their relation to each other that matters. (10-11)

The description of *Ariel* as an 'incantation', a way of shaping a future or willing the self towards a particular fate inverts the conventional dynamics governing biographical

⁸³⁸ Alvarez, *The Savage God*, p.15.

⁸³⁹ Badia, p.11.

⁸⁴⁰ Moses, 'A Lioness in Winter'.

readings, wherein the work is situated exclusively as a record of lived experience, never as a blueprint. For Sylvia, the sequencing of the poems is integral to the success of the incantation, allowing the subject to authorise Moses's belief in the necessity of publishing *Ariel* in its intended order. These twinned concerns with writing as prolepsis and with the importance of poetic sequencing converge in the chapter detailing the composition of the eponymous poem in Plath's collection. This chapter functions as a synecdoche for Moses's attitude to *Ariel* as a whole. It relies for its effect on pagination and sequencing, thereby demonstrating what has thus far been merely stated by her: that the ordering of poems in Plath's collection was as fundamental to its character as the poems themselves.

The chapter is dated 'October 27, 1962', which was Plath's thirtieth birthday, and takes as its point of departure her introduction to 'Ariel' for the BBC (153). Here, with an enigmatic reserve that is typical of her introductions, she described the piece simply as 'another horseback riding poem', and added that it was named in honour of a mount that she was 'especially fond of'.⁸⁴¹ While citing Sylvia's grandiose plans of riding to the highest point of Dartmoor, 'arriving with the sun on [...] the morning of her rebirth, the start of another life' (156), Moses takes pains to emphasise the prosaic physical particulars of a novice rider hacking out on an elderly horse, mind occupied with the beginners' litany of 'heels up, toes down, weight on stirrups' (159). Ariel herself, until recently 'dozing in oak straw and crumbly fresh manure', exists in pathetic counterpoint to the 'God's lioness' of the poem, promising appropriate emphasis on Sylvia's imaginative transformation of lived experience into verse (154).⁸⁴² While lines and images from the finished poem "occur" to Sylvia as she rides, they appear in an altered form suggestive of a previous draft. Her vision of 'stripping off expectations, the dead rules, the hands of all who would hold her back' is a looser, more discursive

⁸⁴¹ Plath, 'New Poems by Sylvia Plath', p.194.

⁸⁴² Plath, 'Ariel', in *Ariel* (1965), pp.28-9 (1.4).

version of ‘White / Godiva, I unpeel – / Dead hands, dead stringencies’ (158).⁸⁴³

Similarly, her image of herself as an ‘arrow [...] come through a *kesselschlaft*, a burning cauldron of hell’ rehearses ‘Ariel’s breathtaking ‘drive / Into the red // Eye, the cauldron of morning’ (158).⁸⁴⁴ These paraphrased images suggestively belie Hughes’s construction of Plath as a poet of ‘effortless inspiration’, whose ‘wording arrives, wherever it arrives, fully formed’. Instead, they allow the reader to witness her phrases being ‘hammered visibly out of some cruder ore’ (SIF 211). Whereas the effect of Hughes’s construction is, as previously suggested, to “de-skill” Plath, *Wintering’s* prioritising of the crafts(wo)man over the visionary suggestively grants her full ownership over the finished poem.

In light of these subtleties, the penultimate paragraph of the ‘Ariel’ chapter appears both reductive and redundant, transforming the poem’s climax into a lived experience that Sylvia has only to transcribe:

Ariel rears. Sylvia lets her go, striking off in a bounding canter, a gallop, all four feet in the air at once, momentum snatching her, propelling her forward. The rush, the drive, the *muscular inevitability* of it, the *throb of the horse’s motion under her too late to stop*, her body lit, sparking at every nerve, flying – her body, this *heedless pounding speed*. She believes in what she feels. She belongs to no one. (167; emphasis added)

In contrast to the details previously noted, this paragraph rehearses not only the narrative of ‘Ariel’, but also its symbolic emphasis. As was the case with Tóibín’s faithful reproduction of a passage in *What Maisie Knew*, the effect is to deny the subject’s literary authority, here suggesting that both the sexualised inflection of the poem and the events described therein were experienced rather than imagined. Yet the unlikelihood that a rider of two-months’ experience would attain anything approaching ‘this heedless pounding speed’ is confirmed over the page, in a passage which suggests that any or all of the previous events were illusory:

She is thirty years old. She is sitting at her desk, her toes buried in the red wool plush of an Oriental rug, a cup of hot black coffee smoking at her wrist. Free.

⁸⁴³ Ibid., 1.19-21.

⁸⁴⁴ Ibid., 1.30-1.

Daylight rises like a curtain beyond the curtains of her study. Her children sigh in their sleep, stir under their blankets, in the room beyond the wall. A purple dawn, a toppled graveyard, a vision she bows her head before. Blue cornflowers, red poppies mouth her name, cascade across the stage at her feet. (168)

Having constructed the climax of Sylvia's vision from a narrative perspective of complete immersion, Moses cuts back to reveal the foundations on which it was constructed. The 'cauldron of morning' was 'a cup of hot black coffee'; the 'red Eye' was suggested by the rug and the poppies; the night ride was an implicit composite of past experiences. This reading is confirmed in a subsequent chapter, 'Poppies in October', in which Sylvia remembers her birthday flowers, 'their truth in her cells, pumping through her veins', and is unwilling to accept that they had 'only been flowers, not what she'd made of them' (205). Moses's biographical reading thus ends by placing the utmost emphasis on the symbolic play of Sylvia's imagination. The imagistic resonance between 'her children stir in their sleep, in the room beyond the wall', and 'the child's cry / Melts in the wall' then transcends the boundaries of the novel to inform a reading of 'Ariel' itself. It works to situate the speaker in a similar position to Sylvia, not on horseback but seated at a desk, her children in the next room. This conclusively emphasises the metaliterary over the biographical, framing 'Ariel' as a poem less about riding than about writing, as 'a comment upon the imaginative ascent engendered by poetic inspiration'.⁸⁴⁵

The 'Ariel' chapter demonstrates, in microcosm, Moses's belief that Plath's life did not simply provide 'her greatest material as an artist' but that ultimately, 'she turned the whole idea on its head by using her art to imagine her way into a new life'.⁸⁴⁶ The chapter's two final paragraphs effectively demonstrate this inversion, allowing Moses to suggest that 'Ariel' rehearsed a longed-for experience rather than recalling past triumphs. Her reliance on pagination and sequencing to effect this revelation symbolises

⁸⁴⁵ Clark, 'Tracking the Thought-Fox', p.105.

⁸⁴⁶ Moses, 'A Lioness in Winter'.

how the arrangement of poems in *Ariel* allowed Plath to ‘place herself in the position of imagining a future’:⁸⁴⁷

Her book begins with ‘love’. It ends with ‘spring’. The bees will fly from their combs past winter, housekeeping at the door of the hive, sipping the roses. The hellebore, the snow rose, will bloom out of the darkest months - the legend of a simple faith. (327)

The declarative structure of this passage offers a hopeful answer to the questions Plath herself posed in the final stanza of ‘Wintering’: ‘Will the hive survive, will the gladiolas / Succeed in banking their fires / To enter another year? / What will they taste of, the Christmas roses?’ (1.46-9). Building on the optimism implicit in the manuscript’s final line, ‘The bees are flying. They taste the spring.’, Moses suggests that Plath used the trajectory of *Ariel* to envisage a future at Court Green and, implicitly, a marital reconciliation (1.50).

In the biopic, Sylvia imagines a similar ending to her story, telling Ted that ‘in the spring we should go back to Devon. [...] The summer, and the fall, and this awful winter, it’ll all fade by the time the leaves come out. And it’ll just seem like some nightmare that was never real’ (205). Yet just as, in the biopic, the viewer knows that Sylvia’s dreams will come to naught even before Ted reveals that Assia is pregnant, Moses must find a way of balancing Sylvia’s belief in the narrative of *Ariel* with the reader’s awareness of her ‘ultimate fate’.⁸⁴⁸ She once again uses her text’s internal structure to hold these conflicting elements in harmony, while also reaching beyond the thresholds of her text to enter into dialogue with *Birthday Letters*. In the poem ‘Robbing Myself’, Hughes describes how he returned to Court Green midwinter to retrieve for Plath potatoes and apples that ‘exhaled the sweetness / Of the hopes I’d dug into them. It was a nest / Secret, living, the eggs of my coming year’.⁸⁴⁹ This is a textual analogue for the passage in which Sylvia invests her hopes for the future in the ‘six jars of honey’ mentioned in ‘Wintering’:

⁸⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁴⁸ Moses, ‘Baking With Sylvia’.

⁸⁴⁹ Ted Hughes, ‘Robbing Myself’, in *Birthday Letters*, pp.165-7. (1.15-17).

[O]ne she'd already used; Ted, if he's remembered it, should have one in his custody this minute at Montagu Square. The last four are in the wine cellar: the tangible promise of her return to springtime. Four more jars - four months left until she plans to go home. A jar for each of them: herself, Ted, Frieda, Nicholas. Her honey is waiting for her, for all of them, at Court Green. Her hive would make it through winter's dumb chill, enough honey to last until spring, hoarded, secreted away. A hope she can cling to, shimmering in the dark of the cellar. (332)

Sylvia's hopes are poignantly undermined by Moses's provision, two chapters previously, of a summary of the events described in 'Robbing Myself'. She adds one crucial detail: Ted retrieves, in addition to Sylvia's apples, potatoes, and curtain material, 'all of this honey; there was no telling when she might get back. He withdraws from the house and turns his key, leaving the cellar empty' (324). The dramatic irony of *Wintering* places Sylvia, in the above passage, in the position occupied by Hughes at the culmination of 'Robbing Myself', 'peer[ing] awhile, as through the keyhole, / Into [her] darkened, hushed, safe casket / From which ([she] did not know) / [She] had already lost the treasure'.⁸⁵⁰ Moses's intertextual engagement with 'Robbing Myself' thus complements her text's internal structure, effectively undermining Sylvia's hopes that 'her honey is waiting for her, for all of them, at Court Green'. It is a powerful moment, a synecdoche for our readerly awareness that her projected future can only ever be imagined.

Moses similarly uses poems from *Birthday Letters* in conjunction with her own textual patterning to foreshadow and undermine the final paragraph of *Wintering*. Walking to meet Ted, to retrieve what she still believes to be a single jar of honey, and to attempt reconciliation, Sylvia

can imagine her family on the sand near Appledore, at the northern mouth of the Taw, the Atlantic sun edging her daughter, her son, and Ted in gold – their shoulders, the crowns of their heads – and the loud pounding and sighing of the waves. If she could stand where the sun stands, would they be fronted entirely in gold, their souls exposed? [...] And when they turn to her, carrying shells and pebbles to her, running ahead of the foaming waves, they are still golden in the late light. Snowflakes catch in her eyelashes at each step. There is no more waiting. It's here. Here, now, her moment of truth. And it falls like grace, only for her. (334)

⁸⁵⁰ Ibid., 1.59-62.

The imagistic emphasis on the play of light echoes Hughes's poem 'Perfect Light'. Here, Hughes uses ekphrasis to recreate a poignant photograph of Plath with her children at Court Green, 'your only April on earth / Among your daffodils'.⁸⁵¹ Moses's familiarity with this poem is suggested by her previous description of the composition of the photograph, and by her direct quotation of the phrases 'perfect light' and 'moated fort hill' (229, 50). She also engages, in her penultimate chapter, with Hughes's poem 'The Inscription', foreshadowing the shattering of Sylvia's hopes for reconciliation upon reaching Ted's flat. While in 'The Inscription', Plath's pleas for assurance that 'we shall sit together this summer / Under the laburnum' redouble after her discovery of an *Oxford Shakespeare* inscribed by Wevill, 'like the running animal that receives the fatal bullet without a faltering check in its stride', Moses suggests that Sylvia will be utterly undone by 'the letters swimming up from this replacement and its inscription. The anagram will read *you are ash.*' (330).⁸⁵² Moses's textual patterning loads her novel's final paragraph with a weight of readerly foresight equal to that described by Hughes at the end of 'Perfect Light':

And the knowledge
 Inside the hill on which you are sitting,
 A moated fort hill, bigger than your house,
 Failed to reach the picture. While your next moment,
 Coming towards you like an infantryman
 Returning slowly out of no-man's land,
 Bowed under something, never reached you –
 Simply melted into the perfect light.⁸⁵³

Our readerly knowledge that the wine cellar is stripped bare of honey, and that Sylvia's hopes for reconciliation will turn to 'ash' in the face of Ted's continued infidelity denote the full weight of extra-textual awareness surrounding *Wintering*, as impossible to ignore as Hughes's approaching infantryman. Moses herself

⁸⁵¹ Ted Hughes, 'Perfect Light', in *Birthday Letters*, p.143 (1.6-7).

⁸⁵² Ted Hughes, 'The Inscription', in *Birthday Letters*, pp.172-3. (1.21-2; 1.44-6).

⁸⁵³ Hughes, 'Perfect Light', 1.14-21.

acknowledged this tension between ‘the story I was creating for my fictional Sylvia’ and ‘the true story of Plath’s life, the ending of which is all too well known’.⁸⁵⁴ Through its narrative structure and engagement with *Birthday Letters*, *Wintering* foregrounds this contextual knowledge, emphasising that Sylvia’s ‘moment of truth’ is necessarily ‘only for her’ (*Wintering*, p.334). Yet the novel ends on a moment of infinite deferral; in the words of poet Kate Clanchy, Sylvia ‘is stubborn, that girl / that hopeful one, still walking’.⁸⁵⁵ Moses thus creates a readerly effect not unlike that experienced by readers approaching *Ariel: The Restored Edition* having previously experienced Hughes’s arrangement. For while *Wintering* may have catalysed the publication of Plath’s *Ariel*, the collection read very differently as a restored text in 2004 than it would have as an original edition in 1965. What Matthews wrote of the Restored Edition is as true of *Wintering*: it ‘restores not just Plath’s original arrangement of her book, but also the presence of Hughes in the act of his earlier editorial rearrangement of it – the very act that necessitates a restoration’.⁸⁵⁶ Both *Ariel: The Restored Edition* and *Wintering* thus require of their readers a bifurcated mode of attention. Such attention acknowledges the spectre of Hughes’s *Ariel*, with the associations of Plath’s death implied by its arrangement and subsequently confirmed in *Birthday Letters*, but refuses to allow it to negate the optimism of Plath’s. By ending on a note of plurality, which holds together in a single moment both the hope with which Plath concluded the Bee sequence and the retrospective knowledge that informed Hughes’s appending of the later poems, *Wintering* summons not only Plath’s original arrangement but also the doubled gaze necessary to comprehend it. It anticipates a moment in which the two *Ariels* may be placed in dialogue, each valued ‘for its own significance’.⁸⁵⁷

⁸⁵⁴ Moses, ‘Baking With Sylvia’.

⁸⁵⁵ Kate Clanchy, ‘Slattern’, in *Slattern* (Basingstoke and Oxford: Picador, 2001), p.47 (1.15-6).

⁸⁵⁶ Matthews, p.91.

⁸⁵⁷ Frieda Hughes, ‘Foreword’, p.xvii.

In drawing this chapter to a conclusion, it is useful to revisit the dichotomy established by Frieda Hughes between subsequent writers' attempts to 'breathe life' into Plath, and Plath's own words which, Hughes claims, 'describe her best'.⁸⁵⁸ Her statement situates Brownlow and Moses's attempts at resuscitation as a harmful distraction from the "real business" of attending critically to Plath's textual corpus. This corpus will, in 'describ[ing] her best', lead to a truer representation of Plath than biofiction can hope to offer. Hughes's suggestion was, ironically, echoed by Moses, one of her most prominent detractors. Shortly after the publication of *Wintering*, Moses acknowledged that 'all secondary Plathian roads, whether biographical or critical or fictional or celluloid, will lead surely and inevitably back to the genuine article'.⁸⁵⁹ Hughes and Moses's statements are reflective of the ideology that, as Badia has demonstrated, governs the 'vast majority of Plath scholarship written today'.⁸⁶⁰ Situated in direct opposition to biographical readings, this ideology dictates that 'the only responsible way to discuss Plath is through a close reading and explication of her literary texts'.⁸⁶¹ It implies the possibility of recovering a pure, unmediated *Ariel*, a work that exists in isolation from the life, and which has somehow survived, uncorrupted, a succession of biographical reading practices.

The problem with the application of this ideology to Brownlow and Moses is that Plath's 'own words' were, at the time both were writing, neither pure nor unmediated, but heavily regulated by Ted Hughes. As revealed first in 'Publishing Sylvia Plath' (1971) and then in an appendix to Plath's *Collected Poems* (1981), *Ariel* was not the 'genuine article' that it appeared upon publication in 1965; rather, it was Hughes's own highly personal orchestration of Plath's body of poems. In reordering the manuscript and appending the late poems, Hughes made *Ariel* seem both to anticipate and to explain Plath's death. He thereby inextricably united the life with the work,

⁸⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁵⁹ Moses, 'Whose Plath Is It Anyway?'

⁸⁶⁰ Badia, p.10.

⁸⁶¹ Ibid.

establishing the biographical reading practices that would dominate Plath scholarship for the next decade, and haunt it thereafter. Biofiction about Plath does not, then, as Frieda Hughes implies, force the life into an unproductive engagement with the untarnished text, but engages the life with the text *differently*, and in such a way as to resist the dominant narrative established by her father.

Both Brownlow and Moses refuse the connection, first suggested in Hughes's arrangement of *Ariel* and subsequently confirmed in *Birthday Letters*, between Plath's final collection and her death. Brownlow does this by prioritising 'The Arrival of the Bee Box' over 'Edge' as Sylvia's final word, Moses by attributing Plath's late poems to a separate cycle, and by advocating a physiological, rather than a poetic explanation for the death that she refuses to describe. In place of Hughes's version, both Brownlow and Moses prioritise Plath's own orchestration of her poems, revealing what Moses refers to as 'the woman's story, not the man's' (193). The montage scene at the culmination of *Sylvia* pays homage to the Bee sequence with which Plath ended her manuscript, while Moses affirms the authority of Plath's arrangement through her use of intertitles, her engagement with Perloff's 'The Two *Ariels*', and the explicit statements made in her autocommentaries. Plath's life and her work are still made to interact in *Sylvia* and *Wintering*, but this interaction functions differently from that fostered by Ted Hughes. Whereas Hughes's arrangement of *Ariel* made the text seem as though it were written posthumously, Moses frames the original manuscript as the means by which Plath 'imagine[d] her way into a new life'.⁸⁶² Gilbert writes that the revelation of her original sequencing enables us to '(re)imagin[e] a Plath who might have been, in some part of herself, more reliant on the fabled Power of Positive Thinking than her reputation as a suicidal depressive would suggest'.⁸⁶³ Although glib, Gilbert's statement encapsulates how Brownlow and Moses's creative interventions add to our understanding of Plath,

⁸⁶² Moses, 'A Lioness in Winter'.

⁸⁶³ Gilbert, p.3.

balancing Hughes's image of a poet whose art foreshadowed her death against the image of a poet who used her art to imagine a way through the difficulties of her life.

In situating *Ariel* as the template for, rather than the record of, a life, Moses inverts the conventional dynamics governing biographical readings. This inversion is paralleled on a broader level by both texts' subversion of the relationship of the original to the appropriation. In adding their voices to the call for a restoration of Plath's manuscript, both *Sylvia* and *Wintering* helped, on some level, to call their "original" into being. In *Wintering*, this process is rehearsed on a smaller scale: Moses's inhabiting of Plath's table of contents encourages her audience to read the novel with Plath's *Collected Poems* to hand, and to place the relevant poem in dialogue with its respective chapter. This is further suggested by her use of a call-and-response structure, wherein images from Plath's poems occur in both eponymous and successive chapters, thereby establishing a contrapuntal dialogue between *Wintering* and *Ariel*. The reader is thus invited to participate in the excavation of Plath's intended sequence, reconstructing her original manuscript as s/he progresses through the appropriation.

This symbolic reconstruction was ultimately made literal with the publication of *Ariel: The Restored Edition* (2004). Its appearance so nearly in the wake of *Sylvia* and *Wintering* demonstrates that biographical readings may have significant critical consequences, that readings of the life may have a positive, in this case a creative, impact on the text. In terms of Frieda Hughes's insistence that Plath's 'own words describe her best', Brownlow and Moses's attempts to 'breathe life into' Plath resulted, even if indirectly, in the publication of her 'own words' in a form that better 'describe[d]' her than any before. Yet the restoration of Plath's 'original selection and arrangement' still does not result in a pure, unmediated *Ariel*. Like the "Real Sylvia Plath" towards which each new version of her strives, such a manuscript must remain, for two important reasons, an irresolvable loss.⁸⁶⁴ Firstly, as Matthews has implied, the

⁸⁶⁴ Plath, *Ariel: The Restored Edition*, cover material.

need for a Restored Edition of *Ariel* was generated by the same editorial interventions – Ted Hughes’s – that it set out to unwrite. This, unavoidably, makes Hughes ‘more present than ever’ in the reconstructed text.⁸⁶⁵ Secondly, in anticipating the publication of the Restored Edition, *Sylvia* and *Wintering* inflect a reading of it in subtly pervasive ways. To cite just one example, Moses’s suggestion that Plath viewed her text as a whole, and ‘Ariel’ in particular, as a prophesy for the future has the potential to ‘solidif[y] into an absolute truth through which that text can be understood’.⁸⁶⁶ Yet the same is true of any reading; it is as true of Frieda Hughes’s suggestion, in her Foreword to the Restored Edition, that *Ariel* unearthed ‘everything that must be shed in order to move on’, and of Ted Hughes’s contrasting assertion, in *Birthday Letters*, that the manuscript ‘sucked the oxygen out of both of us’.⁸⁶⁷ In the end, then, it comes down to this: how would we prefer *Ariel* to be presented? ‘Perfected’, like its creator, a synecdoche for ‘her dead body’ – or flying ‘over the engine that killed her’?⁸⁶⁸ ‘Each version’, as Frieda Hughes writes, ‘has its own significance, though the two histories are one’.⁸⁶⁹

⁸⁶⁵ Matthews, p.91.

⁸⁶⁶ Brain, ‘Dangerous Confessions’, p.22.

⁸⁶⁷ Frieda Hughes, ‘Foreword’, p.xii; Ted Hughes, ‘Suttee’, in *Birthday Letters*, pp.147-9 (1.83).

⁸⁶⁸ Plath, ‘Edge’, in *Ariel* (1965), p.80 (1.1-2); Plath, ‘Stings’, in *Ariel* (1965), pp.60-3 (1.59).

⁸⁶⁹ Frieda Hughes, ‘Foreword’, p.xvii.

Conclusion

With the analysis of my three subjects complete, it is now possible to offer summative responses to the underlying questions indicated at the start of this project. The first of these queried the level of knowledge presupposed by biofiction, and its accessibility to the general reader as well as to the subject-specialist. The second asked whether biofiction might be viewed as a form of literary criticism, not only borrowing from but also contributing to its subjects' ongoing cultural reception. My third interest was to consider *how* the author was reinstated in the works of biofiction under consideration: as a recovered, totalised subject, or as 'an illusion constructed in discourse'?⁸⁷⁰ Without wishing to reduce biofiction's heterogeneity to a series of authoritative statements, it is useful, given the scope and breadth of the project, to now provide an overview of its implications for the three areas indicated above.

Many of the novels under consideration presuppose some knowledge of their subject, with whose works they engage using the three modes of intertextuality indicated by Genette: quotation, plagiarism, and, most frequently, allusion. Allusion in particular requires familiarity with a prior 'enunciation' to be fully comprehensible, as suggested by Tóibín's allusion to a passage in *What Maisie Knew*, which read differently without foreknowledge of James's text.⁸⁷¹ Like James's own Prefaces to the New York Edition of his novels, biofiction often thereby assumes a prior acquaintance with the material that it ostensibly introduces.⁸⁷² In such cases, it may perform the seemingly conservative role of *aide-memoire*, functioning, as Cardwell writes of television adaptations of classic novels, to 'send viewers back to the book'.⁸⁷³ However, as I have argued, biofiction's emphasis on particular interpretative approaches precludes a naïve or 'pure' return to

⁸⁷⁰ Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), p.132.

⁸⁷¹ Genette, *Palimpsests*, pp.1-2.

⁸⁷² Armstrong, p.125.

⁸⁷³ Cardwell, p.13.

what Moses refers to as ‘the genuine article’.⁸⁷⁴ Instead, as foregrounded in my reading of *The Master* and of *Wintering*, biofiction symbolically revises its subjects’ works; the ‘genuine article’, as I shall reiterate shortly, reads differently in light of biofiction’s revelations.

Several of the authors under consideration also express a desire to engage readers with no prior acquaintance with their subjects’ works. Thus Cunningham stated that *The Hours* must ‘work both ways’, appealing to general readers as well as to Woolfians, a sentiment borne out by his incorporation of an appropriation of *Mrs. Dalloway* into his own text.⁸⁷⁵ Cunningham’s attitude was echoed by Tóibín, who asserted that *The Master* must, as well as appealing to Jamesians, be accessible to ‘someone who’s never read a word of James and who knows nothing about him’, and by Brownlow’s express unwillingness to rely on his audience already ‘being interested in Sylvia Plath’ (v).⁸⁷⁶ For such readers and audience members, I have suggested, the work of biofiction becomes what Stam calls the ‘experiential original’, regardless of what the “true” original might be.⁸⁷⁷

The complex readerly dynamics thus foregrounded have promising implications for the field of adaptation studies. Specifically, biofiction offers a challenge to the ‘return to fidelity criticism’ implicit in the valuing of appropriative works solely for ‘their potential to refer back to and revitalise the source of their geneses’.⁸⁷⁸ For, assuming that biofiction does not sate readers’ appetites for the subject’s works, that their attention, in other words, flows onwards rather than eddying, the genre also has the potential to send readers *forwards* to the book. This is supported by a question asked of Tóibín in an interview: ‘people are going to want to read Henry James’s own work after

⁸⁷⁴ Moses, ‘Whose Plath Is It Anyway?’.

⁸⁷⁵ Michael Cunningham, quoted in Levenback, p.201.

⁸⁷⁶ Weich.

⁸⁷⁷ Stam, ‘Introduction’, p.14.

⁸⁷⁸ Cardwell, p.13.

they finish *The Master*. Where would you recommend starting?’⁸⁷⁹ For such a reader, the work of biofiction becomes the practical hypotext, which the subject’s own works follow and extend. This reversal of the conventional course of readerly attention was made literal in the case of *Sylvia* and *Wintering*, whose publication predated that of *Ariel: The Restored Edition*. Such inverted temporality challenges what Stam refers to as the ‘a priori valorisation of historical anteriority and seniority’.⁸⁸⁰ This is ‘the assumption [...] that older arts are necessarily better arts’, a prejudice exacerbated by the ‘specific priority of novels to their adaptations’.⁸⁸¹ In troubling the ‘priority’ of its subjects’ works, by sending readers forwards, as well as back, biofiction may radically determine the terms on which the ‘originals’ are read. It thereby functions as a potent form of literary criticism, opening up avenues of interpretation that I shall summarise below.

As demonstrated in my first chapter, biofiction about James suggests ways of uniting two discontinuous modes of enquiry emergent in recent James studies. On the one hand, there is the ‘biographical imperative’ to establish James’s ‘homosexual identity’, and, on the other, the queer formalist understanding of that identity as a discursive construct.⁸⁸² In my readings of Tennant, Maguire, Heyns, and Ozick’s works, I provided ways of thinking about James’s fiction in relation to his life while remaining attentive to the textuality of the texts themselves. This is a mode of reading rooted in an understanding of James’s writing as performative, rather than expressive of his identity. It liberates us to attend to the discursive queerness of his texts, while neither extrapolating about, nor deducing from, his gay subjectivity.

Biofiction’s successful negotiation of this fraught bio-formalist legacy places it in symbiotic relation with literary criticism, which it both feeds on and informs. This relationship was further illuminated and defined by my second chapter’s juxtaposition of

⁸⁷⁹ Weich.

⁸⁸⁰ Stam, ‘Introduction’, p.4.

⁸⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸⁸² Savoy, ‘*Entre Chien et Loup*’, p.109.

Liebmann-Smith, Lodge, Tóibín, and Yoder's texts with James's Prefaces and the scholarship that they inspired. James's invention of a mode of criticism that combined imaginative freedom with close textual engagement enabled me to locate and to shape biofiction, and to legitimise it as a comparable "reading" of James's works. In the Prefaces, as I have demonstrated, the extra-textual signified invariably disappears within the field of representation. This leaves the writer of the Prefaces in a position comparable to the writer of biofiction, able to recover only the version of the author suggested by the text, rather than 'the living, breathing author who held pen and book in hand'.⁸⁸³ The dialogue with biofiction thus reinvigorates James's Prefaces by highlighting their engagement with concerns of continuing relevance to the postmodern, namely their recognition of subjectivity as discursively produced.

The interrelation between biofiction and literary criticism was continued and complicated in turning to Woolf as a subject. Nunez, Cunningham, and Sellers extend the insights of the New Biographers, Strachey, Nicolson, and Woolf herself, who developed techniques of synthesis and focalisation intended to transmit the personality of the biographical subject with greater persuasiveness than their predecessors. As I have shown, biofiction instigates related strategies to achieve this end, synthesising multiple perspectives of Woolf as a subject, imagining her thoughts, and combining, with a gymnastic versatility, elements that Woolf deemed ultimately incompatible. These were the 'granite' and 'rainbow' of truth and personality, fiction and fact (NB 149). The engagement, in biofiction, of Woolf's views about the representation of a life offers a unique perspective on her own. It provides an alternative to the thesis-driven biographies of Woolf that interpreted her life and work through an often-arbitrary narrative shape, and frequently in opposition to Vanessa Bell's. In their place, it offers something of the complexity of an identity.

⁸⁸³ Rundle, p.73.

Both Cunningham and Sellers suggest further ways of revisiting the life of the creator in relation to the work. Whereas Cunningham's engagement with author, reader, and character provides a means of imagining the biographical subject behind the published text, Sellers similarly suggests ways of "reading" the work of art, be it visual or literary, for its biographical and interdisciplinary resonances. In neither case, however, does this mark a return to the deadening causal relationship criticised by Barthes, wherein 'the author' – or artist – 'has been found, the text is 'explained''.⁸⁸⁴ For Cunningham, the author is but one third of an interpretative trinity with reader and character; for Sellers, biographical readings comprise one half of a dialogue with formal and structural approaches. In Sellers's case, the recovery of biographical approaches has further critical implications, offering a feminist "reply" to Roger Fry and Clive Bell's insistence on pure form.

While biofiction about James is in dialogue with the biographies, formalist criticism, and the Prefaces, and while biofiction about Woolf responds to Bloomsbury art theory and to the work of the New Biographers, biofiction about Plath is similarly critically engaged. It writes back to Hughes's arrangement of *Ariel*, and to the revised version of *Ariel*'s origin suggested in *Birthday Letters*, wherein Plath's newfound voice both prefigures and causes her death. Indeed, as I have shown, *Birthday Letters* can itself be read as a kind of biofiction, the product of an interrelation with Hughes's previous critical versions of Plath as much as a response to the real. By reading Hughes, Tennant, Brownlow, and Moses's works as various discursive constructs, I suggested ways of levelling the hierarchies between Hughes and his successors, emphasising that the "reality" of Plath is lost as she is revised into text. This approach has implications for disentangling some of the questions with which writing about Plath has long been entwined. Specifically, it acknowledges Hughes's ownership of the "real Sylvia Plath", without automatically privileging his textual representation.

⁸⁸⁴ Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, p.147.

Perhaps the best example of a metafictional troubling of the boundaries between fiction and criticism, *Wintering* also helped to raise the public profile of Plath's arrangement of *Ariel*. Along with the biopic *Sylvia*, it thereby continued and popularised the work of Plath scholars Perloff and Bundtzen. My analysis of Moses's narrative has suggested ways of interpreting this manuscript biographically, without necessitating a naïve return to reading the poems as 'residues of real events'.⁸⁸⁵ This reopens avenues of interpretation circumscribed by Hughes, whose arrangement of the collection to lead up to Plath's death risked implicating him in that death if the poems were received as confessional. My adoption of Moses's "revised" view of confessional writing as prolepsis rather than analepsis advances Badia's critical endeavour to recover biographical readings of Plath. These, she suggests, have been rejected indiscriminately by critics after Judith Kroll. Reading *Ariel: The Restored Edition* as a template as well as a record of a life in turn suggests a "restored version" of Plath herself. Taking its cue from the tone of her own arrangement, this version resists the association fostered by Hughes between Plath's writing and her death, emphasising her strength and optimism over her self-destruction.

As suggested above, while the lines of approach opened up by biofiction are different for each subject, they converge around a common theme. This addresses the possibility of revisiting the role played by the author in the interpretation of the text, without, as Barthes feared, viewing that author as the unilateral source of truth or meaning. This suggests answers to my third and final research question, which concerned the ways in which biofiction's reinstating of the author might be reconciled with postmodernism's troubling of subjectivity. As hinted at by Kaplan, 'Barthes's proleptic boast, [that] the author as an absolute monarch became one of the 'disappeared'' conflicted with his acknowledgement that 'in the text, in a way, I desire the author; I need his figure (which is neither his representation nor his projection) as he

⁸⁸⁵ Judith Kroll, *Chapters in a Mythology: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976), pp.1-2.

needs mine'.⁸⁸⁶ Barthes thus implicitly distinguished between the repressive figure of the historical author, and the contrasting figure of the implied author. It was the latter figure, assumedly, that he desired in the text. It is my contention that biofiction, by virtue of its intertextual engagement with its subjects' works, invokes the implied author of its source texts more often than the historical author. In so doing, it satisfies both 'the epistemological terms of [the author's] banishment' expounded in 'The Death of the Author' and 'the psychological demand for his return' implicit in Barthes's claim to 'desire the author' in the text.⁸⁸⁷ This enables what Fokkema calls 'a relocation and reconsideration of [the author's] function', banishing the historical author while reclaiming the version of the author that is implicit in the work.⁸⁸⁸

Admittedly, some moments in biofiction do, as Savu indicates, 'play upon the possibility of rereading their subjects' writings with relation to the pressures and peculiarities of their life stories'.⁸⁸⁹ It seems that this mode of engagement is implicated with biofiction's genesis in neo-Victorianism, a genre whose investment in recovering marginalised selves sits uneasily with postmodernism's troubling of subjectivity. Examples from the texts under consideration include, ambiguously, Tóibín's location of a scene from *What Maisie Knew* in James's boyhood, and Moses's passing reference to certain of the *Ariel* poems as 'accounts of [Hughes's] bastardies', 'the tally of his crimes' (258). This approach relies on the existence of the historical author, the 'extra textual, embodied subject' whose life represents a 'prequel or sequel to the work'.⁸⁹⁰ However, the texts I have discussed in this thesis predominantly adopt the opposite approach, reconstructing the life of the author on the basis of that author's work.

In the case of the more naïve biofictions, namely *The Open Door* and, to a lesser extent, *Felony*, this approach inevitably falls foul of the biographical fallacy, wherein

⁸⁸⁶ Cora Kaplan, p.71; Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, p.27.

⁸⁸⁷ Cora Kaplan, p.71.

⁸⁸⁸ Fokkema, p.39.

⁸⁸⁹ Savu, p.15.

⁸⁹⁰ Cora Kaplan, p.78.

‘the plots of putatively objective genres’ are lifted from the relevant text, and translated onto the author’s life.⁸⁹¹ This can lead to interpretations which are as reductive as those rejected by Barthes, a formula which we might express as “the text has been found, the life is ‘explained’ – victory to the novelist”. It is, perhaps, no coincidence that the novels concerning a marginalised author, Constance Fenimore Woolson, are those most heavily invested in recovering subjectivity through text; James, Woolf, and Plath, by comparison, are less obviously in need of having their identities confirmed. Accordingly, the majority of works considered here insist that the author-subject ‘can only be “known” through language and layers of representation’.⁸⁹² The best offer their readers modes of access to the implied, or emergent, author of their various sources, rather than facilitating ‘the return of the repressed subject author’ as Kaplan contends.⁸⁹³

Thus constituted, the author does not, as Nehamas writes in a different context, ‘constitute the repressive figure with which [...] Barthes [...] identified it’.⁸⁹⁴ To furnish a text with a historical author was, we remember, ‘to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing’, resulting in ‘victory’ on the part of the literary critic.⁸⁹⁵ Conversely, the focus on the implied author of biofiction’s manifold intertexts leads to a productive and open-ended emphasis on readerly interpretation, wherein interpretation is understood ‘not as an effort to place a text within a continually deepening context but as an attempt to place it within a perpetually broadening one’.⁸⁹⁶ In other words, biofiction invites interpretation not on the level of denotation but on that of connotation. One exemplification of this interpretative openness is the proliferation of references to James’s oeuvre in *The Typewriter’s Tale*, a text that signals explicitly only its engagement with ‘In the Cage’. Rather than assuming that each signifier has a ‘stable meaning’ or primary signified, Heyns invites the reader to explore ‘the secondary

⁸⁹¹ Franssen and Hoenselaars, p.24.

⁸⁹² Savu, p.48.

⁸⁹³ Cora Kaplan, p.40.

⁸⁹⁴ Nehamas, p.111.

⁸⁹⁵ Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, p.147.

⁸⁹⁶ Nehamas, p.104.

meanings' of his 'intertextual threads', and to thereby piece together their own image of James.⁸⁹⁷ Thus manifested, biofiction has a 'hermeneutic emphasis' and resistance to closure that, ultimately, satisfies Barthes's call for the focus of interpretation to be the reader rather than the author. It constructs its subjects in the form of a 'text [...] made of multiple writings'; since it is the reader who deciphers these references, it is s/he who becomes 'the place where [the text's] multiplicity is focused'.⁸⁹⁸ Ultimately, then, biofiction fragments the autonomous authorial voice, resulting in the multiplication of readerly possibilities.

⁸⁹⁷ Allen, pp.31, 84.

⁸⁹⁸ Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, p.148.

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