The Biofiction of a Novel: Sheila Kohler's *Becoming Jane Eyre*

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Abstract
Sheila Kohler's *Becoming Jane Eyre* (2009) traces the composition process of Charlotte Brontë's best-known work. It could be regarded as an example of neo-Victorian biofiction of a literary celebrity and yet, it is perhaps better described as the biofiction of a novel. Kohler fictionalises Brontë's writing of *Jane Eyre* (1847) at a period of internal conflict in the author's life. The Victorian writer's sense of self-division correlates with Bertha's role as Jane's double. Kohler echoes this duality and suggests that Brontë modelled the madwoman on Humber, a nurse who looked after Mr. Brontë, and on her brother Branwell Brontë. If Bertha is Jane's double, Humber and Branwell are Charlotte's own doubles: respectively, they represent a repressed self, and a dark self that she will exorcise through the writing of *Jane Eyre*. Because of its focus on a Victorian novel (and a text of special significance), *Becoming Jane Eyre* can exemplify a less frequent variety of neo-Victorian biofiction, what I term 'biofiction of Victorian texts'.

Keywords: *Becoming Jane Eyre*, Bertha Mason, 'biofiction of Victorian texts', Branwell Brontë, Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, literary doubling, Sheila Kohler, neo-Victorian biofiction.

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On her website, the South-African writer Sheila Kohler associates her work with the consequences of apartheid; in her own words, her fiction results from the attempt to "delve into the mysteries of hate and anger, and of love and compassion, as well" (Kohler 2009-2014: n.p.). Although the terms of this declaration are broad enough to include her novel *Becoming Jane Eyre* (2009), they could also be put forward to exclude it as an exceptional – in the context of her production – metafictional exercise with a Victorian setting: the story of how the best-known novel by Charlotte Brontë (1816-1855) came to be and how it became a literary sensation. This article claims that *Becoming Jane Eyre* focuses on Brontë's life as she writes *Jane Eyre* under conditions of intense psychological conflict

objectified by Kohler as doubling, in order to produce a biofiction of the great Victorian novel, rather than its author.

1. *Becoming Jane Eyre*, Neo-Victorian Practices and Biofiction

Jane Eyre has been considered as an unfinished product containing "gaps, rifts and collisions", as "a work still in progress which stimulates new creative readings" and which "has perhaps generated more sequels than any other text in the English language" (Schaff 2007: 35). In a 1996 study of the cultural impact of *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* (1847), Patsy Stoneman discusses a number of twentieth-century novels that have these two works by the Brontës as their immediate referents. She outlines a method of classification, which takes into account the nature of the relationship between the original texts and their derivatives: "stories of what happened *before* the original text", "stories which are 'missed out' of the original", "stories of marginal figures", "stories which give a new perspective on known events", and even "texts which acknowledge the fictionality of the original and show us their effects in the real lives of later readers" (Stoneman 1996: 239, original emphasis).

Two decades later, all these stories, referred to as "sequels" or examples of "incremental literature" (Stoneman 1996: 239), have become naturally integrated into the field of neo-Victorianism. One of Stoneman's conclusions was that, in several of the works studied, "the Brontës provide an emblem against which to measure the present" (Stoneman 1996: 238). Similarly, after offering an overview of "rewritings" of *Jane Eyre*, Armelle Parey pinpoints that while invoking the literary past, these novels also "are undeniably informative about our present times and literature" (Parey 2008: 6). This potential to relate to – and bring into relation – two different historical realities is considered a key aspect of neo-Victorian texts. Arguably, *Becoming Jane Eyre* engages as much with the present-day fascinations of celebrity culture, author mythos, and *Jane Eyre*'s canonical status as with Brontë's text *per se*. As such, Kohler's approach seems to operate at "a critical interface between the present and past" (Kohlke 2008: 1), typical of neo-Victorian works.

Becoming Jane Eyre's dual temporal orientation goes hand in hand with what might be termed its 'supplementary' or 'complementary' stance, i.e. fictionally adding to what readers already know about Brontë's novel or influencing how they read it. Pertinently, Stoneman has noted that most

Brontë "sequels" have a revisionist political intention (Stoneman 1996: 240). In the last few years, this ideological dimension has become a major focus of interest for neo-Victorian scholars. In 2008, for instance, Mark Llewellyn defined neo-Victorianism's main objects of study as

> those works which are consciously set in the Victorian period [...] or which desire to re-write the historical narrative of that period by representing marginalised voices, new histories of sexuality, post-colonial viewpoints and other generally "different" versions of the Victorian. (Llewellyn 2008: 165)

Later in his discussion of the emerging field, Llewellyn suggests that neo-Victorian critics will also have to examine texts dealing with actual Victorians and/or iconic, nineteenth-century fictional characters (see Llewellyn 2008: 175). This interest in Victorian persons and characters, as well as Victorian settings, is obvious in *Becoming Jane Eyre*. Its status as a reaction to mainstream ideologies, on the other hand, is less evident. It would be more accurate to think of it as a personal response from a contemporary (female) writer to a precursor and an iconic work whose historical significance – in the contexts of Victorian fiction, English literature, and women's writing – is unquestionable. Thus considered, Kohler's novel also neatly slots into the catalogue of neo-Victorian texts exemplifying "processes of writing that act out the results of reading the Victorians and their literary productions" in the present (Llewellyn 2008: 168).

Jane Eyre's impact on its readers is widely attested, among many others by Kohler herself. In an interview, Kohler recalls how, as a child, having lost her father a few months earlier, she was awe-struck by the 'red room episode' in Charlotte Brontë's novel, when the young Jane is punished with confinement in the room where her uncle died and senses his presence; apart from recalling these effective images of spectrality, Kohler admits: "Like many woman, I believe, I do feel a special bond with the Brontë girls" (Kohler 2009: 229). This closely aligns with Cora Kaplan's description of Brontë's novel as "a Western monument which has moved generations of its mainly women readers to tears of desire and rage, as well as loss" (Kaplan 2007: 15). In Kohler's case, this personal connection with the work may well account for her fascination with the Brontë sisters' lives as well as their

works. Indeed, Kohler has admitted that she found the inspiration to write *Becoming Jane Eyre* in a line from Lyndall Gordon's biography *Charlotte Brontë: A Passionate Life* (1994):

> As Fritz von Hardenberg has said, "Novels arise from the shortcomings of history."[1] The line in Lyndall Gordon's book, "What happened as she sat with Papa in that darkened room in Boundary Street remains in shadow," inspired me to imagine what might have happened […]. (Kohler 2009: 229)

The "darkened room in Boundary Street" refers to the lodgings in Manchester where Charlotte Brontë and her father stayed following his cataract surgery in 1846, and where she began writing *Jane Eyre*, away from Haworth and her sisters. Kohler thus attributes her novel's origin to an obscure passage about a famous Victorian author's life recorded as biography. Indeed, Novalis' aphorism could be rephrased and expanded as follows: 'novels arise from the blanks, mysteries, misrepresentations and indeed shortcomings of other texts, fictional or not'. It is some of these disregarded aspects of both Charlotte's life and their likely shaping of her most iconic novel which *Becoming Jane Eyre* seeks to explore.

Unlike other neo-Victorian texts, however, Kohler's novel is not an imitative exercise – except for its external structure, described below. Its direct and precise style and the extensive use of the simple present contrast with the chronological narration and descriptive detail of a prototypical *Bildungsroman*. Neither does the author choose to emulate the point of view of the Victorian classic: the original's first-person, which conveys Jane's own voice so powerfully, is replaced by a third-person narrative, with various characters – albeit mainly Charlotte – acting as focalisers. Kohler, therefore, appears to deviate from the essential characteristics of *Jane Eyre*. Nonetheless, she clearly draws on the nineteenth-century novel as well as on the life of its author, while the brisk rhythm of the narration seems intended to mirror the excitement that urged Charlotte Brontë to write her story in little less than a year. Kohler has also acknowledged her indebtedness to Charlotte Brontë's major biographers: Elizabeth Gaskell, Winifred Gérin and Lyndall Gordon (Kohler 2009: 226).[2] The novel at hand has a clear component of biofiction, specifically, the sub-genre that Marie-Luise Kohlke calls "celebrity biofiction", a modality that "speculates about the

inner lives, secret desires, traumas, and illicit pursuits of high-profile public figures, most often writers, poets and artists" (Kohlke 2013: 7).[3] Celebrity biofiction thrives on the less known facts of well-known lives and admits a certain degree of coherent invention (Kohlke 2013: 8). On being asked about her research prior to the writing, Kohler recalls J.M. Coetzee's advice not to "stay too close to the truth" and explains how she used her imagination to explore the more obscure areas of the literary celebrity's life (Kohler 2009: 230). Her novelist's approach to Charlotte Brontë's life is similar to Gordon's, in whose biography Kohler found inspiration: "the gaps invite some play of imaginative truth, and clues to such truth may be derived from careful reading of her [Brontë's] autobiographical works" (Gordon 1995: 89).

Yet, at the same time, *Becoming Jane Eyre* resists classification as a celebrity 'biofic'. Julia Novak and Sandra Mayer observe that most instances of this sub-genre "are shaped by, and evoke, the close association of the subject's life and work"; they consider biofictions that "revolve around the genesis of an important work", so that "as a canonical work comes into being, so does its creator" (Novak and Mayer 2014: 26, 31). This description is elucidative since, rather than the fictionalised biography of a historical figure (a novelist, in this case), Kohler in effect writes the biography of a novel. On the basic bi-directional assumption that novelists' lives inform their art and that their art can lead back to their lives, the writing process is re-imagined, so as to establish connections between events in Charlotte Brontë's life and plot events in *Jane Eyre*, between real people around the author and the characters she created.

Like most Victorian novels, *Becoming Jane Eyre* is structured in three 'volumes'. Their titles ('Manchester 1846', 'Haworth 1846-8' and 'London 1848-53') define three spatio-temporal stages in the 'life' of *Jane Eyre*: initial inspiration and planning, intensive writing and resolution, and publication and impact. It could be argued that Kaplan explores another stage of the novel's life in tracing its evolving critical reception, with special emphasis on twentieth-century feminist and postcolonial criticism (see Kaplan 2007: 15-36). Both these theoretical approaches have concerned themselves mainly with Bertha Rochester/Mason and her condition as Jane Eyre's double.[4] As is well known, the character fascinated Jean Rhys, whose *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), often put forward as a seminal neo-Victorian text, aspired to complete Bertha's life story, occasionally relying

on contrasts and parallelisms with Jane, and inevitably dealing with patriarchal and colonial oppression.

Kohler implicitly accepts the established assumption that Jane and Bertha are doubles. Further, her novel suggests that, in order to characterise the 'madwoman', the Victorian author took traits from real people that she had close or more superficial relationships with – in *Becoming Jane Eyre*, these characters are in turn presented as doubles of Charlotte Brontë. These Doppelgänger patterns have a decisive influence on the growth (and the 'life') of *Jane Eyre*, as re-imagined by Kohler.

2. Humber, or the Embodiment of Concealed Selves

Kohler's biofiction relies on Charlotte Brontë's biography and personality, but also on Bertha's role as Jane's double. Antithesis, polarity and duality are essential structuring principles of *Jane Eyre* (see Ballesteros 1998: 207-208), one among many nineteenth-century literary works that use the Doppelgänger motif, following "the unconscious impulse to lend imagery to a universal human problem – that of the relation of the self to the self" (Tucker 1971: xiv). What John Herdman calls the "not-I" may be "experienced as existing within the self", so that "the experience of self-division, or at least the potential for it, is almost an inseparable condition of consciousness"; this experience, the sense of "being beside oneself", is "occasioned by a moral and spiritual conflict" (Herdman 1990: 1, 2) – one evident in both Brontë's and Kohler's main protagonists. In the literature of doubling, conflict and division are typically represented by "separate characters who can be looked upon as differing aspects of a sundered whole" (Herdman 1990: 2), that is, as externalised aspects, extensions or even mirrors of the self.

During the months devoted to the writing of *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte Brontë was assailed by inner conflict. One of its sources, "as she sat with Mr Brontë in a darkened room" and "thought up *Jane Eyre*" (Gordon 2009: n.p.), was Brontë's lack of definition as a writer: the difficult coexistence of her commitment to 'truth' and her passionate imagination. Gérin draws attention to the fact that a returned manuscript of Brontë's first novel, *The Professor* – whose alleged weaknesses caused it to only appear posthumously in 1857 – was received by its author on the very morning of Mr Brontë's operation (Gérin 1967: 327). In "this time of care and depressing inquietude" (Gaskell 1975: 305), *Jane Eyre* begins to take shape.

It is in this context that Kohler's Charlotte meets a woman seemingly very different from her: the working-class nurse whom she employs to help her take care of her father. The woman remains anonymous, until Charlotte secretly names her "Humber" (Kohler 2009: 59). While this may simply be a familiar geographical name, its etymology can be traced back to the Latin word for 'shadow'.[5] The conceptual connection with doubling can be easily established: shadows "have always been seen as extensions of the personality" and "regarded as in some sense spiritual doubles [...] vital to the wholeness and integrity of the individual" (Herdman 1990: 2). In Kohler's realist biofiction, the symbolic connotations of the nurse's name and the fact that it has been imposed by Charlotte's imagination suggest that Humber is the protagonist's double – her shadow – in the concept's complementary as well as more antagonistic senses.

In 'Nurse', the eighth chapter of the first volume of *Becoming Jane Eyre*, Humber becomes the narrative's focaliser. She begins by doubting Charlotte's ability to manage the practical aspects of the situation:

> What the nurse worries about, as she sits by the old man's side with her sewing, is the provisions. [...] Do these people realize how much food will be necessary for their sojourn together over several weeks? she thinks, watching the daughter enter the room and take up her seat in the alcove with her notebook. (Kohler 2009: 51)

Implicitly, the more practical Humber suspects Charlotte of being incompetent of properly planning and managing the household. Here Kohler appears to draw on Gaskell's narration of the momentous Manchester episode, which reproduces the letters that Brontë wrote from Boundary Street to Ellen Nussey, her lifelong friend and correspondent. Four days before the father's operation (21 August 1846), Charlotte confesses her anxiety regarding the amount of food she will have to buy for herself, her father and the nurse, describing herself as "excessively ignorant" and "puzzled in managing about provisions", particularly "in the way of meat"; above all, she worries about "not having things good enough" for the nurse due to arrive (Brontë qtd. in Gaskell 1975: 302).

In a subsequent letter, after the operation (August 26, 1846), Brontë sounds considerably relieved: the cataract has been successfully extracted

and her arrangements seem to be in accordance with Nussey's more practical sense of things. The nurse, still unnamed as in the previous letter, is mentioned again. Although efficient, she seems to inspire uneasiness and suspicion in her employer, with Charlotte hoping that the doctor will "soon allow me to dispense with the nurse" altogether, finding her "somewhat too obsequious; and not, I should think, to be much trusted" (Brontë qtd. in Gaskell 1975: 303).

In this way, the fictional nurse's thoughts tally with the real Brontë's fears regarding the logistics of the stay, which she confides to Nussey. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson consider letters as a genre of autobiographical life narrative; when the writers are famous authors, the ambiguous nature of their correspondence becomes manifest: private documents become public, as well as an ideal source for the study of self-representation (Smith and Watson 2001: 196). Gaskell draws on letters to plan and document her biography, and to portray the biographed subject, whose voice is reproduced. In what is essentially a metafictional narrative, Kohler uses these letters quite differently: the fleeting references to the nurse allow her to flesh out Humber, who kindles Charlotte's imagination when Jane's story 'is born'. Kohler's biography of *Jane Eyre* begins in Manchester, acknowledging the actual existence of an inconspicuous nurse, but making her presence and character consequential.

Reading between the lines of Brontë's correspondence allows Kohler to construct Charlotte and Humber as antithetical characters: one example is Charlotte's aforementioned hesitant housekeeping, as opposed to Humber's confidence in that department. This contrast underlies certain details, such as the association of the writer with "her notebook" and the nurse with "her sewing" (Kohler 2009: 51), in the lines quoted above. Brontë's letters are also the basis for imagining the mutual distrust that must have tainted the two women's first impression of each other. The narrator, this time from Charlotte's perspective, notes that the nurse "is competent, if annoyingly officious", but that Mr Brontë's daughter cannot help disliking "the large, hard-faced woman" who intrudes on her peace and quiet, as she writes in the half-light (Kohler 2009: 6). One of Humber's first thoughts is similarly derogatory, as she reflects on how Charlotte's clothes betray her lack of worldly sophistication: "The daughter's dress – with the old-fashioned gigot sleeves, the grey fichu, the petticoats without a flounce or a wave, the way the dress hangs on her body, though neat enough – looks out

of date and dowdy" (Kohler 2009: 55).[6] It is evident to the nurse that Miss Brontë is not the domestic type and, for her counterpart who is, the earnestness with which she writes becomes incomprehensible and somewhat irritating: "The daughter goes on scribbling in her book without lifting her head. *What would a spinster like her have to say?*"; "The daughter turns […] and plunges her nose back into her writing book. *Who do you think you are, dearie?*" (Kohler 2009: 55, 56; original emphasis). These lines further exemplify Charlotte's self-division, made apparent to the reader by the observations of her externalised alter-ego. Her intellectual self (the promising ambitious writer) vies with her domestic self (the dutiful daughter, the exemplary Victorian young woman); in Kohler's biofiction, the latter role becomes increasingly identified with Humber and essential to her characterisation.

Kohler's use of italics, conveying the nurse's thoughts as well as an impression of her spontaneous speech, characterise her as a down-to-earth woman. She does not hesitate in thinking of Charlotte as a spinster, herself being the doting mother of three girls (like the three Brontë sisters, interestingly) and a widow who misses the intimacy with her late husband (see Kohler 2009: 52).[7] Alien to the middle-aged Charlotte, the experiences of motherhood and marital love, of course, involve physical contact. The fond memories of her husband do not prevent Humber from revelling in sensual thoughts of a groom for whom she feels attraction that seems mutual (see Kohler 2009: 56). Even expressing a sense of guilt that does not ring genuine, the nurse feels free to enjoy her sexuality: "She wakes in the night, unable to sleep. 'Forgive me, God. Just to let me sleep', she whispers, and places her hand between her thighs, strokes gently, crosses her legs on her hand. She groans with relief" (Kohler 2009: 57). Humber's physicality seems intended to dramatically contrast Charlotte's cerebral life through her writing.

As Herdman remarks, characters and their doubles represent "dualities" and "polarities" that tend to convey "contrast or opposition" as well as "complementarity" (Herdman 1990: 1), as in the case of Humber and Charlotte's sexuality. Charlotte's manifests itself as mental, rather than physical activity. Through a flash-back inserted before Charlotte's departure from Manchester having outlined the first two volumes of *Jane Eyre*, Kohler's protagonist returns to the miserable time when the young and inexperienced Brontë taught at Roe Head School. After a hard day, the girl

is resting in the quiet of the dormitory and daydreaming: "she lay there deliciously lost in an erotic fantasy of Zamorna, her young duke and demon, coming to her, plumed and sabred, bare chest heaving, hair dishevelled, fiery eye kindling her desire" (Kohler 2009: 79-80). Arthur Augustus Adrian Wellesley, the Duke of Zamorna, was Charlotte Brontë's major contribution to the Angrian writings, the literary project to which the eldest sister and her brother Branwell were devoted in their adolescence. Zamorna was imagined as a son of the Duke of Wellington, with additional unequivocal traits of the Byronic hero; like his father, he was Brontë's romantic ideal, which she would later impress on the character of Rochester.

In her 'Roe Head Journal', kept during her teaching period at the school that she had also attended as a child, the real-life Brontë recorded a visionary experience comparable to the one narrated by Kohler. In the middle of a lesson, the young woman sees the majestic figure whom she idolises:

> Never shall I, Charlotte Brontë, forget what a voice of wild & wailing music now came thrillingly to my mind's – almost to my body's – ear; nor how distinctly I, sitting in the schoolroom at Roe Head, saw the Duke of Zamorna [...] I was quite gone. I had really utterly forgot where I was and all the gloom & cheerlessness of my situation. I felt myself breathing quick and short as I beheld the Duke lifting up his sable crest which undulated as the plume of a hearse waves to the wind [...]. (Brontë 2001: 422)

The teacher's ecstasy, however, is interrupted by an impertinent student, as Brontë confides to her diary. Like writers' letters, their diaries or personal journals become means of self-representation, autobiographical records often standing in a middle ground between the private and the public personas; further, with each new entry, an identifiable narrative voice is incrementally constructed (see Smith and Watson 2001: 193). Drawing on Brontë's diary, Kohler evokes her romantic phantasy, setting it against Humber's sexual relief and hinting at a parallelism with Jane and Bertha respectively – their opposition and complementarity will be at the heart of *Jane Eyre*, whose development is being traced. In *Becoming Jane Eyre*, the Roe Head experience is linked to a disheartening biographical event: the

vision of Charlotte's object of desire (Zamorna) vanishes when someone brings a letter from one of the great poets of the day, Robert Southey (Kohler 2009: 80). Brontë had sent Southey a selection of her poems in 1836 and was eager to know his opinion. In his response, Southey acknowledges that the young poet "evidently posses[es] & in no inconsiderable degree what Wordsworth calls 'the faculty of Verse'", but he famously and crushingly decrees that "[l]iterature cannot be the business of a woman's life" (qtd. in Smith 2007: 10, fn. 2).

Southey's admonition was intended to cause the addressee to discontinue a practice deemed inappropriate in a woman. Therefore, it befits Kohler's narration that its immediate effect should be to bring the girl's literary/erotic fantasy (aptly equated to her dreams of a career in literature) to an abrupt halt. Charlotte's sexual urge, as suggested above, does not trespass the boundaries of her imagination; Humber's, on the other hand, can be the stimulus for physical action. The coincidence of sexual repression and sexual desire in Charlotte (the latter satisfied by the double in lieu of the protagonist) causes another rift in the novelist's self. In his letter, Southey had alerted Brontë that "daydreams" like hers are "likely to induce a distempered state of mind" (qtd. in Smith 2007: 10, fn. 2). Jane Eyre's proto-feminism also met with alarmed censure. As Adrienne Rich argues, implicitly equating women's quest for equality with women's rights to both professional and sexual satisfaction, "Jane's sense of herself as a woman – as equal to and with the same needs as a man – is next door to insanity in England in the 1840s" (Rich 1979: 98).

If Jane and Brontë's determination is 'mad' by Victorian standards, the nurse's sexual behaviour is only one among many aspects of characterisation reminiscent of Rochester's mad wife.[8] Bertha's alleged sexual appetite would have blemished her own and her husband's reputation: "the nineteenth-century loose woman might have sexual feelings, but the nineteenth-century *wife* did not and must not" (Rich 1975: 99-100, original emphasis). Among the typical symptoms displayed by 'maniacs', the psychologist James Cowles Prichard (1786-1848) euphemistically mentions "shameless habits" (Prichard qtd. in Shuttleworth 1996: 276-277, fn. 41). Rochester is disgusted by Bertha's sexual 'depravity', which probably includes masturbation, condemned by Victorian morality and considered pernicious by Victorian medicine:

> The forms of Bertha's unchastity are unclear; evidently she displayed too avid a sexual appetite towards Rochester himself, but it is also possible, as no other partners are specified, that he is [...] referring also to the "vice" of masturbation which was widely treated as a major cause of insanity, in women as well as men. (Shuttleworth 1996: 167)

Female masturbation was also a reason for special concern in Victorian mental institutions, where "psychiatrists wondered whether these [sexual] manifestations were the pathological result of organic disturbance or the revelations of a salacity natural to women but kept under control in daily life" (Showalter 1993: 58). Focusing on female sexuality, the physiologist Thomas Laycock (1812-1876) considered masturbation as a more extended practice among lower-class women; this would imply a further level of degradation for Bertha, since she could not be excused on the grounds of humble origins (see Shuttleworth 1996: 167), as in the case of Humber.

It would seem that, in presenting a nineteenth-century hired nurse masturbating, Kohler is echoing the classist prejudice attached to the Victorian condemnation of unrepressed female sexuality. Yet the novelist makes Humber's social status ambiguous: though evidently not a lady, her services have been required by several eminent Manchester families (see Kohler 2009: 55), assigning her more of a boundary role akin to that of a governess. Charlotte's social identity is equally heterogeneous: she is an educated woman who belongs to a family esteemed in Haworth, but her privileges end there. Humber is piqued by what she perceives as a sense of superiority in her employer, necessarily rooted in something other than class, wealth or beauty. The nurse has had marginal access to upper-class life – in the same way as a governess like Charlotte Brontë, Anne Brontë or Jane Eyre would have had, with the difference that Humber is proud of this opportunity. It could be argued that her status as a nurse is similar to that of a servant entrusted with greater responsibility, such as Grace Poole. In Brontë's novel, until the central mystery is unveiled, Grace replaces, precedes and masks Bertha, as the unsettling laughter, the thumping noises, the unjustifiable actions are indulgently attributed to the madwoman's guardian, which shocks and confuses Jane. In their analysis of *Jane Eyre*, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar specifically draw attention to a trait uniting these three female characters: "that Grace is as companionless as Bertha or

Jane herself is undeniably true" (Gilbert and Gubar 1984: 351). Humber and Charlotte, a widow and a single woman respectively, are in the same situation. Here their doubleness depends on similarity rather than opposition.

Humber may share traits with Charlotte, Grace or Jane, but Kohler also presents her as the novelist's source of inspiration, as the idea of Bertha begins to take shape in her mind. We are given clues from the first chapter, when we read that the nurse sleeps in a room on the third-floor, from which unexpected noises come; later, Charlotte thinks of her laughter as a distinctive defining trait (Kohler 2009: 6, 61). The nurse's lack of inhibitions also extends beyond Victorian restrictions on female sexuality to other transgressive behaviours demonstrating a striking freedom, which shock the introverted Charlotte:

> She [Humber] goes into the basement kitchen and takes the lamb bone from its dish in a cupboard […] She takes the bone in both hands and gnaws at it, ravenously. […] She is grinding on a delicious piece of gristle with her good back teeth when the kitchen door swings open and someone stands staring at her [...]. (Kohler 2009: 58)

This "someone" is of course Charlotte, who could not sleep either and, like the governess at Thornfield Hall, heard noises in the quiet of the night in a strange house. Humber's gnawing the bone reminds the reader of Bertha's animalised portrayal: the madwoman fiercely bites her brother's shoulder and later, her husband's cheek (Brontë 2001: 181, 250). The scene in Kohler's novel could be considered to dramatise the relationship between the two women, as they stand facing each other, their differences more obvious than ever, much as when Bertha finally stands before Jane and Rochester contrasts, for those present, the two women to whom his fate is linked: "clear eyes" versus "red balls", "face" versus "mask", "form" versus "bulk" (Brontë 2001: 251).

Charlotte looks at Humber, who embodies the concealed selves of her dual personality. The nurse is the writer's Doppelgänger or, in Herdman's words, her 'not-I': confidently domestic, sexually unrepressed, socially proud. Curiously, it is after the kitchen encounter that the women begin to tolerate each other, helped by the nurse's own glimpse of

Charlotte's covert ferocity earlier on: "even in the dim light, the nurse sees a momentary flash, a spark of smouldering fire in the large, luminous eyes behind the glasses, which surprises her. *Perhaps not as mild and meek as one might think at first glance*" (Kohler 2009: 55-56, original emphasis). As Humber sits with Brontë in the kitchen, she discovers another hidden facet: "in the soft light, her pretty hair down, her eyes bright, the nurse finds herself thinking she [Charlotte] looks almost beautiful" (Kohler 2009: 58). The following day, Charlotte imagines Humber as a potential reader of the story she longs to tell, and when the writer and her father prepare to depart and the nurse takes her leave of Charlotte, the latter "thinks she might miss this Humber" (Kohler 2009: 78). As Herdman notes, "sympathy between individuals" is a possible expression of duality (Herdman 1990: 1), just as was the women's initial antipathy. Back in Haworth, Charlotte's novel and its mysterious character will continue to grow.

3. Branwell, or the Dark Double Exorcised

Later in *Becoming Jane Eyre*, when Emily and Anne receive Thomas Newby's proposal to publish their respective novels, *Wuthering Heights* (1847) and *Agnes Grey* (1847), excluding Charlotte's *The Professor*, Emily's inclination to accept stings the rejected author, unaccustomed to sense selfish ambition in her sister. This darker side of Emily, the tone in her voice, remind Charlotte of her own Manchester double, Humber (Kohler 2009: 139). Although the nurse is not characterised as ambitious, she dismisses her employer's writing as a sign of arrogance (Kohler 2009: 55, 56). Humber and Emily are fleetingly identified: their attitudes of covert or subtle rejection, to which Charlotte's vulnerability is peculiarly sensitive, are reflected by the similarity in their voices.

Kohler's portrayal of Emily Brontë as a practical and self-sufficient woman is markedly different from that of Charlotte, her protagonist. In chapter seventeen ('Waiting'), the three sisters sit up at night, expecting their brother to return drunk and riotous. The narrator chooses Emily as focaliser, giving readers access to her thoughts, as she reflects on her siblings' suffering. She knows of her older sister's sick infatuation with their Brussels teacher (the married Constantin Héger), of her overemotional letters to him, of his heartbreaking detachment. She also knows of Branwell's involvement with the adulterous Mrs Robinson (the mother of the children he and Anne instructed at Thorp Green), of his naïve resolution

to marry the lady after her ill husband's death, of his anxiety at not receiving news or encouragement from her. Emily tries to discern the reasons for Charlotte's harshness towards Branwell in his present situation, and can only conjecture that her stern disapproval is the result of painful identification: "Does she [Charlotte] see in her brother's *mad desire* a dreadful *mirror image* of her own incoherent pleas to her Master?" (Kohler 2009: 116, added emphasis).

As previously mentioned, brother and sister joined in collaborative writing of the Angrian tales, a reflection not only of their mutual understanding, but of their shared reading and literary preferences. Earlier, as a child, Charlotte had formed a special bond with Branwell:

> Closest to her in age was Branwell [...] *passionate* and *uncontrolled*, *violent* in nursery games, but so inventive in his wilfulness, so avid a reader, so quick a learner that, despite the fifteen months separating them, Charlotte soon recognized in him *her mental equal*. (Gérin 1967: 20, added emphasis)

Their closeness grew even stronger as a result of the deaths of the eldest siblings, Maria and Elizabeth, who had been Charlotte's role models. Relationships among the remaining children altered. As Gérin notes, "Anne found a champion in Emily and Branwell in Charlotte, who was for many years to come *his alter ego*" (Gérin 1967: 20, original emphasis). Branwell looked up to his sister, their temperaments and imaginations uniquely compatible.

The Thorp Green scandal (Branwell's affair with Mrs. Robinson) dealt the death blow to Charlotte's devotion for Branwell. The fact that he wrote an apologetic letter to his sister in order to break the news, before even their father learnt of his dismissal and its cause (Gérin 1967: 295), is indicative of special consideration. Charlotte's disappointment in Branwell was proportional to the affection she had felt for him, and she was his harshest judge; her self-sacrifice in breaking away from Monsieur Héger was the yardstick by which she measured her brother's weakness:

> He had ignominiously yielded [...] to the very temptation it had been her Purgatory to resist. She had come through the

> purifying flame too recently herself to have much pity left for those who, like her brother, had fallen by the wayside. (Gérin 1967: 296)

As in the case of her sexualised shadow Humber, Branwell as Charlotte's double thus reflects the writer's simultaneous repression of and desperate urge to yield to her own desires.

The 'birth' of *Jane Eyre* coincides with Charlotte's romantic disillusionment, her concern over Mr Brontë's near-total blindness – a shadow cast over the family's wellbeing and economic survival – and her frustration with *The Professor*. Back in Haworth, Charlotte continues to work on the novel, but has to deal with another source of distress, namely Branwell's crises, marking his progressive degradation. Not surprisingly, all these factors caused intense emotional conflict which, as explained above, often results in a sense of self-division. Kohler presents the reader with the novelist's dilemma: devoting all her energies to saving Branwell – with the only guarantee of reviving her own sorrow – or to making *Jane Eyre* a powerful story. As this story grows, Charlotte no longer counts on Branwell; instead, she now shares her passion for writing with Emily and Anne. In a sense, the choice between her brother and her novel is in fact the choice between her brother and her sisters:

> By now, sisters and brother had become opposites, scarcely knowing each other, Branwell an invalid bent on his own self-destruction, cared for in the father's bedroom, and the sisters left to find some way of salvaging themselves, creating their future while witnessing the daily horror of Branwell's suicidal alcoholism and opium addiction. (Adams 1978: 157)

For Kohler's Charlotte the choice is clear: to detach herself from her brother's derangement, she must exorcise Branwell as her dark double in order to retain her own sanity and achieve self-realisation as a writer.

She will use his madness for creative purposes, however, together with the memory of her emotional breakdown when, alone at the Pensionnat in Brussels during a holiday, she pined for Monsieur Héger. She was torn between a dream of fulfilled love and a presentiment of loneliness, between

acceptance and anger, "losing all that was good in herself and all that was human. Only animal rage – a passion stronger than any religious feeling, a desire to destroy, a hatefulness, remained" (Kohler 2009: 156). Recalled as the reaction to unrequited love or experienced as the effect of intoxication, this familiar rage will become essential to Bertha's temperament, not totally alien to that of her creator in biofictional form:

> As she sits at the table with Anne and her mad-eyed brother, she summons up for her book the madness of the wife confined in the attic. It is Branwell's madness and also her own. Bertha, the foreigner, the woman from afar, comes close to her now, possessed with the desire to hurt, to destroy, and with the preternatural ingenuity and energy to carry out her hateful desires. (Kohler 2009: 156).

Charlotte's "desire to destroy" remained private and repressed, as opposed to Bertha's aggressive or pyromaniac impulses, and to Branwell's "madness", notorious and disruptive in the context of Haworth's quiet life. The relationship between brother and sister as one of duality, as well as Branwell's connections with Bertha, are further evidenced by an episode in *Becoming Jane Eyre* that parallels Charlotte's discovery of the nurse in the kitchen. In both scenes, the protagonist becomes powerfully aware of a remote affinity under the surface of seeming contrast, but here the moment of recognition is more clearly experienced. Alone with her brother during their childhood, Charlotte realises that

> he resembles her in a strange way. They are both slight of build, nearsighted, delicate, but her brother is bright and beautiful with his red hair, freckles, and brilliant blue eyes. She thinks of him as some exotic and colourful tropical bird: a bright plumed parrot. (Kohler 2009: 128-129) [9]

Herdman explains that an "obvious natural phenomenon suggesting doubleness is that of physical resemblance between individuals, particularly family likeness" (Herdman 1990: 2). Charlotte's comparison brings to mind a memorable image in *Wide Sargasso Sea*: the parrot Coco with its wings on fire, as a result of the riot at the Coulibri estate, plummets to his death – Mr

Mason, Antoinette's stepfather, having clipped the bird's wings, so that Coco is unable to fly away from the burning house (see Rhys 1968: 35-36). In Rhys's text, Mr Mason thus prefigures Rochester, and Coco can be identified with Bertha, foreshadowing her fiery death in Brontë's novel. In her biofiction, Kohler explores the events, experiences and memories in Charlotte's life inasmuch as they lead to the creation of *Jane Eyre*, suggesting that Branwell inspires aspects of the fictional Bertha and that Brontë transmutes life into art, so that her art in turn comes to reflect her own life. Yet arguably Kohler borrows not just from Brontë's novel, but also from *Jane Eyre*'s later adaptations and re-visions. While Rhys thus creates a prior life story for Brontë's madwoman in the attic, Kohler creates a prior life story of the novel that contains her, engaging with what might be termed the 'extended life' or literary afterlife of *Jane Eyre*. Kohler's biofiction thus does not simply blend biographical fact with her own fiction, but also with Brontë's own and later writers' fictions, producing a palimpsest effect, in typically neo-Victorian fashion (see Llewellyn 2008: 170).

Kohler does not specifically acknowledge the influence of Rhys's novel as a source, as she does with the biographies of Charlotte Brontë or Brontë's private writings (see Kohler 2009: 226). Gaskell writes about Branwell's beauty: she compares the only brother with his sisters and describes him as an attractive young man. The second half of Gaskell's description relies on physiognomy, so popular in Victorian times, to account for the subject's weakness of character, detectable in his mouth and chin:

> He and his sister Charlotte were both slight and small of stature […] Branwell's profile […] would be generally esteemed very handsome; the forehead is massive, the eye well set, and the expression of it fine and intellectual; the nose too is good; but there are coarse lines about the mouth, and the lips, though of handsome shape, are loose and thick, indicating self-indulgence, while the slightly retreating chin conveys an idea of weakness of will. (Gaskell 1967: 197-198)

Earlier in her biography, Gaskell also offers a portrait of Charlotte. This is altogether less flattering, her facial traits bearing no resemblance to her

brother's. Disregarding individual imperfections, however, the global effect could be pleasing to the eye. Her lineaments

> were plain, large, and ill set; but, unless you began to catalogue them, you were hardly aware of the fact, for the eyes and power of the countenance over-balanced every physical defect; the crooked mouth and the large nose were forgotten, and the whole face arrested the attention, and presently attracted all those whom she herself would have cared to attract. (Gaskell 1967: 124)

Branwell's resemblance to his sister does not exclude contrast. The physical features that Kohler selects to characterise Branwell – some shared by Charlotte and others seemingly improved versions of hers – do not recall Bertha, as described by Jane and Rochester: "a big woman", with "dark grizzled hair", "red balls" for eyes, and a "tall, dark and majestic" stature (Brontë 2001: 250, 251, 260). But Branwell is "exotic" (Kohler 2009: 128), like the mysterious woman brought from the West Indies who will fly to her death from the roof of Thornfield. Charlotte would more readily identify with 'plain Jane', who is compared by Rochester – when she cannot bring herself to accept that he is marrying Blanche Ingram and she will have to leave Thornfield – to "a wild, frantic bird that is rending its own plumage in desperation" (Brontë 2001: 216).

Rochester's simile conveys Jane's desperate anger, the same mad frustration that Charlotte felt in Brussels. In Kohler's novel, Charlotte's madness and her brother's are of a kind. At points he is presented as a genuine 'madman in the attic'. In the extract below, the Reverend Patrick Brontë, as the narrative's focaliser, expresses his anxiety over his son's condition:

> Last night he had sat up until late [...] listening to the shouting and cries, the beating on the upstairs door, the screams coming from the locked bedroom where the boy had been confined upstairs. He thinks of it as a kind of madness that comes upon his son [...]. (Kohler 2009: 181)

Noises from the confined Branwell can be heard by the distressed father, who had had such high expectations of his only son. But Branwell's "madness" not only unsettles family life: like Bertha's, it looms as a threat to the safety of those living under the same roof. The members of the household have not forgotten the night Branwell set fire to his bed, a fearful warning that still worse things could happen. The event is retold in Gordon's biography of Charlotte Brontë (Gordon 2009: n.p.), where it also serves the purpose of characterising Emily, who dealt with the situation, seemingly unperturbed. Indeed at one point, Kohler's Emily explicitly links Branwell's action with Charlotte's literary imagination: "Since the incident of the fire, her father sleeps in the narrow bed with her brother to watch over him as he sleeps. Is he afraid he might take his own life and theirs too, like the mad wife in Charlotte's new book?" (Kohler 2009: 122).

Emily thinks of the climax in her sister's novel, which Charlotte has been working on and reading to her and Anne in the evening peace only intermittently broken by their brother. Kohler's readers are invited to infer that the fire caused by Branwell inspired another climactic moment in *Jane Eyre*, when Bertha sets fire to Rochester's bed and Jane saves him. This turning point results in the governess and her indebted master establishing a more intimate relationship, as well as foreshadowing the later burning down of Thornfield Hall. The destruction of the house and its collateral effects on Rochester (blindness and amputation) constitute a "via purgativa" that he must go through in order to be worthy of Jane (Ballesteros 1998: 244). Bertha's setting fire to her prison has symbolic implications and ironically, it becomes a prerequisite for the fulfilment of the protagonists' happiness. In *Becoming Jane Eyre*, this "glorious moment of freedom" also symbolises the exorcism of the demons that have long tortured the novelist: "Charlotte's mind has freed itself in the writing of this book [...]. It will be the mad wife, Charlotte's own craziness, that will perish in the torching of Thornfield" (Kohler 2009: 158). Bertha embodies Charlotte's as much as Jane's mad frustration, and this state of mind, both in the writer and her protagonist, are finally sacrificed along with the women's demented double. With this decision, *Jane Eyre* is fully outlined and Charlotte unburdens herself: novel and author progress in parallel.

Arguably, then, Kohler's novel proposes that Bertha's 'craziness' is, at least in part, Branwell's but also Charlotte's own. Kohler's Charlotte projects this strangely familiar 'dark side' of her brother's personality,

distressing as well as attractive, onto a memorable character. From childhood, she has identified Branwell as her double, and she is now aware that the menacing facet in him is also inherent in herself, if only in latent form: "he is what she would be if she dared: her secret double. Her admiration and adoration will now coexist with her lucidity, her knowledge of the dark side of his nature and hers" (Kohler 2009: 133). With a more reckless spirit, Kohler's Charlotte might have been as bold and free as her brother.

Before the 'dark side' took control of him, Branwell had promising prospects as a poet and artist. His well-known group portrait of the three sisters can strike viewers familiar with the lives of the Brontës as a pictorial expression of their changing attachments.[10] The painting was first alluded to by Gaskell:

> It was a group of his sisters, life size, three-quarters' length; [...]. The picture was divided, almost in the middle, by a great pillar. On the side of the column which was lighted by the sun, stood Charlotte, in the womanly dress of that day of gigot sleeves and large collars. On the deeply shadowed side, was Emily, and Anne's gentle face resting on her shoulder. [...] I remember looking on those two sad, earnest, shadowed faces, and wondering whether I could trace the mysterious expression which is said to foretell an early death. I had some fond superstitious hope that the column divided their fates from hers, who stood apart in the canvas, as in life she survived. I liked to see that the bright side of the pillar was towards *her* – that the light in the picture fell on *her* [...]. (Gaskell 1967: 155, original emphasis)

The sisters' dresses are almost identical – only the colour changes – and their hands meet at a central point at the bottom, where a couple of books lie on a writing desk. As Gaskell notes, Emily and Anne sit on the left hand side of the canvas and their resemblance is obvious. On the right hand side, separated from her sisters, Charlotte sits alone: her features and expression are different, and so are her coiffure and posture. What Gaskell did not know when she saw the painting was that another figure, which time would eventually unveil, stood behind the dividing column. As explained on the

website of the National Portrait Gallery, where the painting is now displayed, the artist initially intended to include himself: "In the centre of the group a male figure, previously concealed by a painted pillar, can now be discerned; it is almost certainly a self-portrait of the artist, their brother Branwell Brontë" (National Portrait Gallery 2016: n.p.).

Gaskell interprets the column as separating Charlotte from her sisters, but also in terms of light and shadow, of survival from untimely death; it singles out and protects the author of *Jane Eyre*. Branwell's later appearance is harder to fit into this symbolism; if anything, he might be read as *foreshadowing* Charlotte's own early death. In any case, the painting's composition seems to objectify a number of ideas developed in Kohler's biofictional metafiction: the affinity between Emily and Anne, the affinity between Branwell and Charlotte and their subsequent distancing, the sisters' union in writing and, more importantly, Branwell's role as Charlotte's double – in the painting he becomes a literal shadow behind her.

In Kohler's story, witnessing Branwell's psychological and moral collapse distresses Charlotte but, at the same time, it helps her to construct Bertha, akin to the writer's encounter with Humber. Just as the madwoman serves as the key to the denouement of *Jane Eyre* and, arguably, contributes significantly to its permanent appeal, the madman serves as the key of the novel's generation in *Becoming Jane Eyre*. Branwell died in 1848, less than a year after his sister's novel had begun its public life among readers, critics, and later artists.

4. A Novel's Life and Neo-Victorian Biofiction

In the group portrait discussed above, Branwell has become a shadow by his sister's side. The name that Kohler's Charlotte gave to the nurse, Humber, may also mean 'shadow', as earlier noted. The entity given to Humber in *Becoming Jane Eyre* has something of the approach taken by "biofiction of marginalised characters", one of the sub-genres of biofiction proposed by Kohlke, who mentions yet a more specific modality, the "biofiction of servants" (Kohlke 2013: 10).[11] The nurse, however, remains a secondary character, and Kohler's novel, unlike other clearer examples of this neo-Victorian trend, does not engage politically with exposing social marginalisation. Instead, *Becoming Jane Eyre* is closer to celebrity biofiction, although it focuses primarily on the life of a novel, rather than that of its author.[12] The author's life is explored, but always as a source of

experiences that the text will eventually accommodate, repurpose, transform, and contain.

The fact that the novel is given such prominence is indicative of its special status. Kaplan has called *Jane Eyre* a "cult text", an "iconic cultural artefact", a "cultural emblem" and an "ur-text" (Kaplan 2007: 17, 28). It continues to be a reference point, because the issues it raises (feminist and, to a lesser extent, colonial) are still relevant and much debated. What is more, it can be thought of as a traumatic narrative that invites an affective response, as a Freudian "mnemic symbol", endlessly returned to in order to deal with the trauma at its core (Kaplan 2007: 15-16). Kohler, however, returns to Brontë's novel without an urgent political or revisionist intention – feminist, postcolonial, or otherwise. She chooses to tell the story of an emblematic text that grew out of its author's inner struggle, at a time when she was divided between failure and success, vocation and duty, desire and repression, infatuation and heartache, reason and passion. In *Becoming Jane Eyre*, the terms of these oppositions conflict within Charlotte, and some of them are dominant in her doubles.

Humber and Branwell are Charlotte's shadows, as well as the models for the character of Bertha. *Becoming Jane Eyre* relies on Kohler's (and previously Brontë's) readers' knowledge of *Jane Eyre* and the context in which it was written, so that they can recognise aspects of Bertha mirrored in Humber and Branwell and, in so doing, identify these two characters as sources of inspiration for Charlotte's creative mind at work. In this respect, Kohler's novel is typically neo-Victorian: "much neo-Victorianism winks knowingly at the reader who can recognize the allusion to other texts, and plays on the margins with a self-reflective and metafictional stance" (Llewellyn 2010: 28). It is also recognisably postmodern, in the sense of inviting readers to act as virtual co-producers of the text – or perhaps more accurately *texts*, namely of both *Jane Eyre* and *Becoming Jane Eyre*. For readers' recognition of the blend of biographical and fictional allusion simultaneously becomes a recognition of the doubling technique which produces Kohler's biofiction of a novel.

Humber's physical appearance contrasts sharply with Charlotte's and becomes recognisable in the writing of Bertha; so do the nurse's sensuality and spontaneity although, because of the choice of an external narrator, only readers – not Charlotte herself – witness some of these doubling manifestations. On the other hand, Branwell's psychological

disorder, prompting violent and dangerous behaviour, reminds his sister of her own passionate and self-destructive reaction to Monsieur Héger's rejection, and it too finds its way into the madwoman's characterisation. Humber and Branwell are to Charlotte what Bertha is to Jane: doubles in whom transgressive desires and impulses are given free rein. If Bertha is Jane's double, Humber and Branwell are Charlotte's secret selves. It is easy to identify the novelist with her heroine because of the women's common integrity, sense of justice, resourcefulness and courage. Thackeray famously annoyed Charlotte Brontë by introducing her to his mother as "Jane Eyre" (Orel 1997: 98-99). The identification can be made extensive to the text itself: in discussing *Jane Eyre*, "the distinctions between work, character and writer are frequently blurred" (Kaplan 2007: 17).[13] But Kohler's Charlotte is as much Jane as she is Bertha, who finally stands for repression and potentiality at the same time.

An early psychoanalytic approach to Charlotte Brontë noted her dual personality, combining ambitious and retiring instincts (see Dooley 1920: 244). Bertha's madness can be thought of as the distortion of the positive qualities shared by Jane Eyre and Charlotte Brontë; it also correlates with the latter's literary ambition. For some Victorians, such aspirations in a young woman would have been considered as a threat to her sanity, as shown in Southey's letter, quoted above. Fear of censure seems to have been the main reason why the Brontës published incognito. In *Becoming Jane Eyre*, Charlotte's use of a pseudonym inevitably results in a sense of her own doubleness. The two sides of her divided identity (the successful published author and the parson's daughter, leading a conventional life in an as yet obscure village) resist integration. After *Jane Eyre* has brought fame to Currer Bell, Charlotte visits the editor George Smith in London and has to make herself known to him as the writer behind the pen-name:

> *Do I dare to go in and tell George Smith I am the one who has written this book?* [...] Can she say, 'Reader, my name is Charlotte Brontë and I am the author of *Jane Eyre*'? She remembers that moment in the dark room in Manchester catching a glimpse of a face in the mirror and wondering who it was. (Kohler 2009*:* 193-194, original emphasis)

This last sentence echoes the sentence in Gordon's biography that both intrigued and inspired Kohler.[14] Currer Bell and Charlotte Brontë have finally become one to enjoy the success of a book both autobiographical and prophetic, and to look forward to a career in literature. Charlotte Brontë gave life to *Jane Eyre*, and the novel gave its author a new life. Kohler's title suggests that, for her protagonist, writing *Jane Eyre* has amounted to becoming Jane Eyre, a heroine who ends the novel unburdened by internal conflict.

Nineteenth-century literature has a tendency to channel self-division (associated with traumatic experiences) and socio-historical tensions through duality, as the connection between Jane and Bertha exemplifies. Kohler probes primarily into Brontë's novel, appropriating its use of the double theme, and into the Victorian author's life, amply documented in biographies, letters and diaries. The scope is narrowed, however, to the years during which *Jane Eyre* was planned, written, published, and initially received. We are offered, therefore, a fictionalised account of the novel's life – a novel whose special significance has already been highlighted. It is because of this that the study of Kohler's novel can contribute to a better definition of the conceptual scheme of such a productive genre as neo-Victorian biofiction. *Becoming Jane Eyre* and similar texts constitute a mode obviously related to 'celebrity biofiction' yet different in its focus: a variety that could legitimately be labelled 'biofiction of Victorian texts'.

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Notes

1. The quotation derives from 'Fragmente und Studien' (1799-1800) by Fritz von Hardenberg, the German Romantic poet Novalis (1772-1801).
2. These will be, therefore, the three biographical sources referred to. Other biographies are Margot Peters' *Unquiet Soul: A Biography of Charlotte Brontë* (1975), Helen Moglen's *Charlotte Brontë: The Self Conceived* (1976) and Rebecca Fraser's *The Brontës: Charlotte Brontë and her Family* (1990).
3. Kohlke distinguishes three basic modes of biofiction: "celebrity biofiction", "biofiction of marginalised subjects" and "appropriated biofiction" (Kohlke 2013: 4).
4. Reading madness as a form of proto-feminist revolt against patriarchal oppression and social injustice, for instance, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar famously argue that "Bertha [...] is Jane's truest and darkest double: she is the angry aspect of the orphan child, the ferocious secret self Jane has been trying to repress ever since her days at Gateshead" (Gilbert and Gubar 1984: 360). Similarly, Firdous Azim regards Bertha as representative both of the gendered and colonial subaltern: "Bertha Mason occupies the position of the obliterated and repressed Other, necessary for the emergence of the central coherent and unified female subject [Jane] and the narrative of her development and growth" (Azim 1993: 175) – implicitly a white, Anglocentric subject.
5. 'Humber' is the name of a river or estuary, a natural boundary between the English counties of Yorkshire and Lincolnshire. 'Yorkshire and the Humber' is the name of the region where Haworth is located.
6. Images of Charlotte Brontë's actual dresses are available at the 'Picture Library' section of *The Brontë Society & The Brontë Parsonage Museum* web site; see http://www.bronte.org.uk/museum-and-library/picture-library (accessed 29 September 2014).
7. Kohler's narrative briefly suggests a connection between Bertha and Maria Branwell. In the final stages of her disease, the Brontës' mother behaves as a madwoman (Kohler 2009: 11-12).
8. Humber is physically characterised as a "large woman" (see quotation above), which connects to Rochester's description of his first wife as "tall, dark and majestic" (Brontë 2001: 260), there being perhaps a pinch of irony. Jane is famously "plain, and little" (Brontë 2001: 216), which coincides with Charlotte Brontë's vision of herself.
9. Like Branwell, Humber is "redheaded" (Kohler 2009: 6).

10. The portrait is reproduced, with a brief description, at the website of the National Portrait Gallery; see http://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mw00797/The-Bront-Sisters-Anne-Bront-Emily-Bront-Charlotte-Bront (accessed 29 September 2014).
11. Kohler's narrator briefly adopts the point of view of the historical Tabitha Aykroyd ('Tabby'), a beloved servant at the Haworth Parsonage. Tabby is aware of the influence of her folk legends and storytelling on the Brontës, and recognises herself in the various servants and housekeepers appearing in their novels (see Kohler 2009: 104-108).
12. Other neo-Victorian texts drawing on the novelist's life conform more clearly to the characteristics of 'celebrity biofiction'; see, for example, Syrie James's *The Secret Diaries of Charlotte Brontë* (2009), or Juliet Gael's *Romancing Miss Brontë* (2010).
13. Interestingly, *Jane Eyre* was initially published as an "autobiography edited by Currer Bell" (Brontë 2001: n.p.), which also blurs the distinctions between character and author, and between author and editor.
14. It also recalls the episodes in Brontë's novel where Jane is aware of her divided self. When, as a child, she is locked in the red room at Gateshead, she faces the mirror and is frightened by her own reflection, taken for the shape of a "spirit", a "phantom", a "fairy" or an "imp" (Brontë 2001: 11). Later, shortly before her frustrated wedding, Jane Eyre dissociates herself from "one Jane Rochester, a person whom as yet I knew not", and in her wedding dress, she looks at herself in the mirror: "I saw a robed and veiled figure, so unlike my usual self that it seemed almost the image of a stranger" (Brontë 2001: 234, 244).

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