Disparate Images:
Literary Heroism and the 'Work vs. Life' Topos in Contemporary Biofictions about Victorian Authors

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Abstract:
Contemporary biofictional representations of famous public figures, as any biographical undertaking, can variously be located between the two poles of hagiography and demythologisation. In the case of author fictions, such positionings are in part determined by the question of how the subject's life is depicted in relation to his/her work. This paper explores the ties between work and private life envisioned in neo-Victorian biofictions about Charles Dickens and Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Patricia K. Davis's novel *A Midnight Carol* (1999) and Laura Fish's novel *Strange Music* (2008) offer positive depictions of their biographees, which are grounded in a vision of a harmonious work-life correspondence. By contrast, Margaret Forster's acclaimed novel *Lady's Maid* (1990) and Sebastian Barry's drama *Andersen's English* (2010) represent a particular type of authorial 'dethroning' which centres on what we have called the 'work vs. life' topos: the chasm between the moral values conveyed through the historical author's works and his/her private conduct.

Keywords: author fiction, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Sebastian Barry, biofiction, Patricia Davis, Charles Dickens, Laura Fish, Margaret Forster, neo-Victorian.

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The frequently proclaimed 'rebirth of the author' has given rise to fictional re-writings of authors' lives in the past thirty years, which testify to an on-going fascination with authorship. Ostensibly providing a (fictional) glimpse into the author's private life, the genre of biofiction caters to the voyeuristic gaze of the public and their obsession with recovering the (historical) author's 'true' and 'authentic' self behind the mask of his/her renowned public persona. The advent of mass-market print culture in the nineteenth century led to the fetishisation and increasing commodification of the author as an exemplary or notorious figure who could easily be

reinvented as a national icon, appealing to the political, moral, and social conscience of his/her readership, a process that has continued into the present day. This growing preoccupation with authorship primarily hinges on a view of the author as an extension of his/her text, which can be traced back to the Romantic tradition of expressive genius that apotheosises the author as the inspired creator of a time-honoured literary masterpiece (see Bennett 2005: 55-71), a notion that persists even in the face of postmodernism's oft-proclaimed 'death of the author'. More precisely, as Wenche Ommundsen argues, readers' obsession with the author can be attributed to their desire for both identification and possession and their fascination with the "paradoxical relationship between the mundane reality of the living (or once living) writer and her/his ghostly (but no less real) reality" as an "appendage to a body of writing" (Ommundsen 2004: 56). It should not come as a surprise, therefore, that in today's increasingly "star-centred economy" (English 2005: 56), which has given rise to an intensely commodified "'meet-the-author' culture" (Todd 1996: 100), writers of biofiction are clearly aware and regularly take advantage of the reputational capital and 'star potential' of Victorian literary brand names that are shaped by, and evoke, the close association of the subject's life and work.

These "celebrity biofictions" (Kohlke 2013), akin to any biographical undertaking, can variously be located between the two poles of hagiography and demythologisation. Arguably, in the case of author fictions, such positionings are in part determined by the question of how the subject's life relates to his/her work. As author fictions lend themselves particularly well to self-projection (see Lusin 2010: 269), the author-biographers' depictions of their author-subjects are, moreover, frequently tied to the biographers' own ideological concerns.

In this article, we focus on the ties between work and private life envisioned in neo-Victorian biofictions about Charles Dickens and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, arguing that these ties lie at the centre of the contemporary authors' representations, and evaluations, of their historical subjects. We will first discuss Patricia K. Davis's *A Midnight Carol* (1999), a novel about the creation of Dickens's cult novella, and Laura Fish's *Strange Music* (2008), recounting Elizabeth Barrett Browning's beginnings as a political poet. The positive depiction of the biographee in both these novels will be shown to be grounded in a vision of a harmonious work-life correspondence. More weight will subsequently be given to the 'dethroning'

end of the biofiction spectrum in our analyses of two texts whose critique of their subjects rests on a perceived incongruity between life and literary work. Margaret Forster's acclaimed novel *Lady's Maid* (1990) unfolds through the perspective of Barrett Browning's personal maid Elizabeth Wilson, who is torn between admiration for her poet-mistress and indignation at her selfish disregard for her servant's economic and personal difficulties. Similarly, Sebastian Barry's *Andersen's English* (2010), another of the Irish author's memory plays, based on the historical encounter between Hans Christian Andersen and Charles Dickens, eventually reveals the cracks in the Danish author's idealised image of his celebrated host.

1. Celebrating Authorial Greatness

Drawing on author figures from a historical period that saw the rise of the celebrity author, contemporary reworkings of Victorian authors' lives can be considered a general revaluation of authorship and its central cultural position (see also Kirchknopf 2013: 65). In view of the apparent urge to revisit "that time of high humanism in which the 'man of letters' could be a hero" (Kaplan 2007: 8), it does not come as a surprise that one strand within neo-Victorian author fictions presents the author in a rather flattering light. This is exemplified by Patricia K. Davis's *A Midnight Carol* (1999) and Laura Fish's *Strange Music* (2008).

The remarkable abundance of literary, filmic, and popular cultural appropriations of, and critical interest in, the life and work of Charles Dickens presents a rich mine for studying the diverse contemporary engagements with the Victorian period. The defining feature common to these refashionings, as singled out by Andrea Kirchknopf, is their tendency to "utilize and often mix the author's biographical data with his novels" (Kirchknopf 2013: 171). Patricia K. Davis's purportedly "fact-based" novel *A Midnight Carol* affords an apposite example of this process that reflects the extent to which cultural memory has successfully preserved, and public imagination continues to be captured by, Dickens's image as the epitome of the high-minded values and ideals propagated in his works. The novel recounts Dickens's 1843 creation of "one of the greatest literary gifts ever given to the world: the magical *A Christmas Carol*" (novel blurb 1999).

Unmistakably written in homage to Charles Dickens (or "Charley", as the main character is rather intimately referred to throughout the book), the novel plainly caters to a worldwide audience of Dickens devotees for

whom *A Christmas Carol* represents the most quintessentially Dickensian of all his works: a damning indictment of the greed, social inequality, and exploitation prevalent in an industrial society and an attempt to 'save' Christmas from Puritan austerity and to revive its Christian spirit of "love of one's fellow mortals manifest in benevolent acts" (Davis 1999: 118). As suggested by its subtitle, Davis's *Novel of How Charles Dickens Saved Christmas* presents Dickens as the man who turned a "workday like any other" into a major Christian family celebration (Davis 1999: 3). It focuses on the genesis of perhaps the most influential Christmas tale of all times (after the nativity story itself) in the autumn of 1843 amidst its author's heroic attempts to fend off preying creditors, thwart the devious designs of fraudulent publishers, and save a crippled street urchin from a severe miscarriage of justice. Indeed, the character of Dickens, at one point also described as the "father of *Oliver Twist*" (Davis 1999: 48), is essentially defined by his work,[1] and he fully lives up to the high standards of moral integrity that inform *A Christmas Carol*. Despite lingering bouts of self-doubt and financial worries, Dickens is portrayed as a doting father and loving husband, who, far from objecting to his fast-growing family, hails the "miracle of birth, new life, his babies fresh from God" (Davis 1999: 59), anxiously sitting by his wife's bedside when she is on the verge of suffering a miscarriage.

Above all, Davis's Dickens is an inveterate champion of the poor and downtrodden, perpetually drawing attention to their plight and ready to accost Prime Minister Robert Peel, who, he feels, "'ignores ignorance and want while they cling to me, invade my dreams!'" (Davis 1999: 26). In this context, the novel further mingles the author's life and work with the introduction of a purely Dickensian character: Ben Newborn, a surprisingly well read and educated orphan roaming the streets on an ill-fitting crutch. Possessing a heart of gold, like the forgiving Tiny Tim, Newborn alerts Dickens to the scheme plotted by his publishers to cheat him out of his earnings and, incidentally, is responsible for the huge success of *A Christmas Carol* by delivering a copy to the Prime Minister and his wife.

For Ina Schabert, *A Midnight Carol* would thus classify as a "biographical novel" rather than a "fictional biography", as "the historical facts are thoroughly assimilated to conventions of literary plot and literary character portrayal" (Schabert 1990: 31). Davis's novel creates a highly idealised image of Dickens that has been considerably airbrushed to make

the author's personal conduct neatly align with the moral values celebrated in one of his most famous works. The "fact-based" novel makes no mention of the author's resentment of his steadily growing family and his wife's depression (see Tomalin 2011: 151), and, characteristically, the only 'dark secret' in the author's life which Davis treats at length is Dickens's embarrassed concealment of his own impoverished childhood.[2]

On the surface, Laura Fish's 2008 novel *Strange Music* could not be more different from Davis's rather conventional Dickens romance. Featuring three distinct narrative strands, two of which are written in Jamaican Patois, the novel initially gives the impression of a postmodern patchwork of narrative fragments, as the three alternating stories seem barely connected. The novel is set in England and Jamaica around 1840, at a time when slavery had been nominally abolished and replaced by an 'apprenticeship system' that forced ex-slaves to remain on the plantation for a minimum pay and which increasingly caused social and political unrest. The three narrators are the as yet unmarried poet Elizabeth Barrett (later Browning), the Creole domestic maid Kaydia, and the black field worker Sheba, the latter two working on the Barretts's Cinnamon Hill estate in Jamaica. The two non-white women are fictional characters, representing the double plight of black women in Jamaican slave society, suffering sexual as well as economic exploitation.

Kaydia realises that Sam Barrett, one of Elizabeth Barrett's younger brothers who governs the estate, has taken a liking to her eleven-year-old daughter Mary Anne and becomes his mistress in order to shield her daughter from his advances. She becomes pregnant by Sam and finds out that her mother, too, was mistress to a Barrett and that she is thus directly related to the family. In the end, Kaydia loses everything: Sam Barrett dies without having provided for her in any way, and her lover Charles, father of Mary Ann, finds out about the affair and leaves her, taking their daughter with him. Sheba's lover Isaac is killed by Sam Barrett for beating him in a cane cutting competition, and Sheba herself is raped by white overseers (including Elizabeth's cousin Richard Barrett, it is suggested). She is driven near-mad with grief and mortified by her subsequent pregnancy, which eventually leads her to strangle her new-born light-skinned child.

Kaydia and Sheba briefly meet towards the end of the novel, while Elizabeth Barrett, who is confined to her sofa in Torquay by her chronic ill health, reaches out to them in thought. Like the other two narrative strands,

hers is written in the first person, constituting what Lucia Boldrini terms a "heterobiography" (Boldrini 2012: 1), that is, a fictional autobiography written by someone other than its subject. Barrett's narrative reflects a growing awareness of her family's implication in the atrocities committed by white plantation owners:

> I am an abolitionist. I belong to a family who have long been West Indian slave-holders, and if I believed in curses, I should be afraid. […] Bro read to me of a large West Indian proprietor examined by a committee of the House of Lords who could not name any overseer, driver, or other man in authority who did not keep an African mistress. Did my father's cousin commit murder? Was the victim a child or with child? Might the children have been his? (Fish 2009: 59)

This goes hand in hand with her development of an independent poetic voice. Towards the end of the novel, she begins to write her well-known abolitionist poem 'The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point'. The poem, which was eventually published in 1848 in the Boston anti-slavery journal *The Liberty Bell*, is included in Fish's book; it sympathetically dramatises the story of a female runaway-slave who, after being raped, commits infanticide out of despair, thus echoing Sheba's tale.

In an essay on her own novel, Fish points out that one of the functions of the novel's multiple perspectives is to explore the capacity of the writer to "imaginatively understand and have solidarity with those they do not directly know" (Fish 2006: 510). She regards Elizabeth Barrett's "presentation of a black female subjectivity" as an important political act and a great personal and artistic achievement (Fish 2006: 512) – a view that also emerges clearly from her novel. In what has been identified as a typically neo-Victorian move (see Kaplan 2007: 45), the well-known figure of Barrett and her canonical text are employed in *Strange Music* to utter a postcolonial critique of British imperialism, making a point about the common humanity of coloniser and colonised. In the process, *Strange Music* confirms Barrett's positive image as a person who stands for the values expressed in her work, a fierce critic of the social mores of Victorian society

(see Avery 2003a: 6-7), who has the imaginative power to feel, and the courage to speak out against, the injustice of slavery.

By now, several parallels between Davis's *Midnight Carol* and Fish's *Strange Music* have emerged. Both texts revolve around the genesis of an important work, building on the popularity of, or re-kindling interest in, classic texts, and by extension, affirming their author subjects' central cultural status. As a canonical work comes into being, so does its creator: both novels trace the development – and 'making of' – an author and represent their subjects as embodiments of positive values, their characters clearly aligning with the views expressed in their works.

2. The Author 'De-Throned': A Neo-Victorian Paradigm

In contrast to the trend of affirming authors' images as well-loved literary stars, other contemporary biofictions amount to a demythologisation, or at least, a re-signification of their subjects' cultural iconicity. Ansgar Nünning's typology of biographical fiction includes an extra category of "revisionist fictional biography" for works opening up a new, and frequently critical, perspective on famous historical figures (Nünning 2005: 201). In *Postmortem Postmodernists*, Laura Savu discusses this tendency specifically with regard to biographical author fictions, which often function as both expressions of, and revisionist commentaries on, the cultural impact of canonical writers and their oeuvres, "engag[ing] in a double conversation with their subject's life, times, and works, on the one hand, and our own cultural moment, on the other" (Savu 2010: 13). Just like the positive fictional depictions of famous authors, their revisionist counterparts must be regarded as 'memory texts' that contribute to the posthumous reputation of their subjects, consolidating but, at the same time, revising their position within cultural memory.[3] The revisionist approach can take the form of a dethroning and ironising of artist subjects, presenting them as flawed human beings with all their faults and short-comings (see, e.g., Franssen and Hoenselaars 1999: 12). Thus, Martin Middeke detects a tendency towards ironic distancing in postmodern biofictions of Romantic artists' lives, where "artists are no longer unreachable heroes; rather they are debunked, ironicized, or dethroned to textual trickster figures, anti-heroes, or, more realistically, to human beings who have common desires" (Middeke 1999: 10)[4] – often of the baser sort. In fact, as Marie-Luise Kohlke has observed, neo-Victorian biofiction engages in hagiography less frequently than it

"highlights tensions and discrepancies between public and private personas, with transgressive desires providing a frequent focal or fissure point" (Kohlke 2013: 7). In their portrayal of the authors' (failed) personal relationships and negative impact on the lives of others, of their intimate thoughts and hidden vices, these texts also raise poignant questions with regard to the moral responsibility of artists and introduce the contemporary author's own ideological concerns. Frequently credited with "exposing past iniquities" and raising "important questions of social justice" (Kohlke 2008: 5, 10), the bulk of neo-Victorian fiction centres upon subjects that are reassessed from the contemporary perspectives of feminism, queer theory, Marxism or postcolonial theory. As Margaret Foster's *Lady's Maid* (1990) and Sebastian Barry's drama *Andersen's English* (2010) amply demonstrate, biofictions of historical authors' lives foreground the life/work relationship as a salient criterion for a re-assessment of the subjects' public images and the authenticity of the ethical stances assumed and defended in their works.

"The life of Lily Wilson is extremely obscure, and thus cries aloud for the services of a biographer" (Woolf 1977: 154), Virginia Woolf remarks in a footnote to *Flush* (1933), her famous imaginative biography of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's cocker spaniel. Elizabeth Wilson, who according to Woolf was a typical specimen of "the inscrutable, the all-but-silent, the all-but-invisible servant maids of history" (Woolf 1977: 160), aided Elizabeth Barrett in her legendary elopement with Robert Browning in 1846, at great personal risk, and continued to serve her in Italy for many years as lady's maid, seamstress, housekeeper, and also as nursemaid to the Brownings's son Robert Wiedemann, nicknamed 'Pen'. Responding to Woolf's call,[5] Margaret Forster published her novel *Lady's Maid* in 1990, following up her own award-winning biography of Elizabeth Barrett Browning with a fictional treatment of the Brownings's elopement and subsequent married life in Italy, from the perspective of the 'silent' maid.

While Forster's *Elizabeth Barrett Browning* biography explicitly aims, among other things, to stimulate interest in a neglected poet's work (see Forster 1988: xvi)[6] – a goal that it shares with Woolf's *Flush* (see Cumberland 1996: 196) – Forster's novel blatantly follows a different agenda. It exposes the discrepancy between Barrett Browning's self-image as "poetic *vates*" (Avery 2003b: 99), champion of the "downtrodden and marginalised, […] women, the working classes, children, slaves" (Avery 2003a: 6), and the poet's treatment of her own maid.

> Miss Elizabeth laughed out loud at something in a magazine she was reading. 'Why Wilson, do listen to what this gentleman says of my poems: "This poet had done better to confine herself to those romantic ballads and sonnets which are so becoming to the female pen instead of straying in a subject very near to politics about which she can know nothing". '[…] I suppose he means I ought not to write about suffering and injustice and should not include the "Cry of the Children" and such like.'
>
> 'Oh, if *that* is politics, miss, then indeed the gentleman is wrong for I cried at it and thought it very true. […] "They look up with their pale and sunken faces and their looks are sad to see" –'
>
> 'Why, Wilson – you can recite from it.' (Forster 1991: 53, original emphasis)

Lady's Maid depicts Barrett as a woman poet proud to step beyond the thematic confines of her 'proper sphere', who repeatedly declares it her duty to "speak out" against social injustice. 'The Cry of the Children' is one of Barrett's best-known Condition-of-England poems, first published in *Blackwood's Magazine* in 1843, which denounces the systematic exploitation of child labourers in factories. Another mention of Barrett's ostensible social responsibility occurs in a conversation Wilson has with her fellow servant Timothy, in which she "turned the talk to the subject of the Corn Laws and Miss Elizabeth's wish to write for the Anti-Corn Law League" (Forster 1991: 97). In 1845 Barrett had indeed intended to write a piece for the League to condemn the economic hardships caused by an artificially high price of bread, but she was eventually dissuaded by her father and brothers from pursuing this project.

Forster's novel relies on such references to Barrett Browning's work and the social commitment it reflects to expose the cruel irony of the poet's attitude towards Lily Wilson. Thus, Wilson, who has personal experience of the poverty decried in her mistress's poetry, as her mother and sisters are "eking out a perilous existence in Sheffield" (Forster 1991: 277), is consistently underpaid by her employers, although her duties by far exceed those of an ordinary lady's maid.[7] The novel shows Wilson developing an awareness of, and a critical attitude towards, inequalities based on social

class even during her days in Nr 50 Wimpole Street, the legendary home of the Barrett family. After Flush is stolen by dog snatchers and then safely returned to Barrett – in what constitutes not only a parallel to historical records but also a significant reference to Woolf's earlier fictional biography – the poet has Wilson feed him breast of chicken for a week so as to help the dog forget his suffering. At this point Forster's Wilson remembers, indignantly, how a doctor once prescribed breast of chicken to cure her sister Fanny's stomach ailment and how the family had struggled severely to procure the costly meat. When the Barrett's manservant Timothy remarks that Flush has a good life for a dog, Wilson retorts, "'He has a good life for anyone, […] he is warm and well fed and safe, […] and there are many out there tonight as would settle for that.'" (Forster 1991: 71). She proceeds to enquire whether Timothy is familiar with Barrett Browning's poem concerning the "poor children starving and cold", commenting ironically that for all the verse's beauty, she "cannot help thinking, when I read it, as I did again last night, […] of Flush eating breast of chicken." (Forster 1991: 71).

When after many years of loyal service, Wilson finally broaches the subject of her salary, Barrett Browning blocks her demand for a pay rise using emotional blackmail:

> 'I had thought you loved us more than this request would seem to indicate, dear, and even that you felt yourself amply rewarded in love if not guineas, for indeed we do love you, greatly, and think of you as a friend more than a servant.' (Forster 1991: 305)

The fictional Barrett Browning's repeated proclamations of her 'friendship' with her maid are based on historical records, such as letters to Mary Russell Mitford, in which she criticises her society's obsession with class distinctions and boasts to have "a fine madness for turning servants into friends" (Barrett Browning qtd. in Forster 1988: 124-125). Barrett Browning's use of the term 'madness' is perhaps not insignificant here. It communicates a view of herself as eccentric and extravagant when it comes to her relations with servants, which are, consequently, represented as out-of-the-ordinary.

The critique implied in *Lady's Maid* of the poet's inability to live up to her own standards hinges not only on Barrett Browning's professed disregard for class hierarchies, but also on her astute awareness of gender inequalities, as evidenced in much of her poetry. Since the late twentieth century, the poet has often been represented as a sort of proto-feminist. Her work has been noted for its "modern sexual politics" (Leighton 1992: 82) and "disruptive feminist argument" (Taylor 1993: 4), as well as for its positive female energy, drawing on gendered imagery to promote the empowerment of women and female solidarity (see Avery 2003a: 14, Avery 2003b: 100-109). Poems such as 'Lady Geraldine's Courtship' (1844) and, of course, Barrett Browning's epic *Aurora Leigh* (1856) have received attention from feminist scholars for their depiction of women's "intellectual curiosity and self-agency" (Avery 2003b: 106) and their critique of women's subjugation (see Zonana 1996: 55).

Forster's novel continuously raises Barrett Browning's concern with gender inequalities, for example when Minnie, the housekeeper, chats with Wilson about their mistress's view on marriage upon the wedding of Barrett Browning's former lady's maid: "she says to me once when Crow married, marriage is servitude, Minnie, and make no mistake, lifelong subjection to a man, that is all" (Forster 1991: 40). There is, of course, a certain irony in a lady's derision of marriage-as-servitude to a *servant*, of which Forster's Elizabeth Barrett appears to be oblivious. The poet sees herself as a courageous champion of poor women, as becomes clear once more when she enlightens Wilson years later about the figure of the much-wronged Marian, who is a victim of rape in *Aurora Leigh*: "'It is a story of a poor girl then, ma'am?' Mrs Browning smiled. 'Among other things, Wilson. It tells a sorry tale of life for some women and will be vilified for it.'" (Forster 1991: 392-393).[8] Barrett Browning evokes the Victorian celebration of a female sensibility that demands the "exclusion of money, sex, power" from women's "poetic consciousness" (Leighton 1992: 3). The poet's amused anticipation of her critics' judgement again serves to reveal her pride in transcending her 'proper sphere'. When in *Lady's Maid* Barrett Browning discusses Elizabeth Gaskell's newly published *Mary Barton* (1848) with Wilson, she explicitly declares "her concern for all the poor and exploited women in the world", musing, "'I have had a mind for years to speak out myself […]. There *is* injustice for women in the world and we, who are so fortunate, must not forget it' (Forster 1991: 276, original emphasis). This

statement, which implicates Wilson in the group of 'fortunate women' by the first person plural, is shown to be doubly ironic as Barrett Browning suppresses Wilson both as a servant *and* a woman. When Wilson marries the Brownings's Italian manservant, Ferdinando Romagnoli, and gives birth to her first son, Oreste, the Brownings force her to choose between her position with their family, which enables her to be with her husband, and her own child. In the words of Forster's Robert Browning: "Do not look so stricken, Wilson. You must see the problem, surely. How can you care for my wife, who needs so much care, and for my son if you have a baby of your own? It is not possible" (Forster 1991: 360). Wilson decides to leave baby Oreste with her sister in England, and a good part of the tension in the remaining narrative derives from her frustrated attempts at a reunion with her son.

Critics have frequently noted Forster's "strong commitment to speak about class", sometimes attributing it to the author's own working-class origins (Robbins 2004: 224). As Forster revealed in an interview, "All servants grab my attention" (Forster qtd. in [Anon.] 1990: 11), and this interest in the 'downstairs' perspective is palpable throughout *Lady's Maid*. She concludes her fictional biography with a disillusioned Wilson who thinks back on the deceased Elizabeth Barrett Browning as "a woman who had pulled back from true friendship with her maid, while being proud to think she offered it" (Forster 1991: 532). The novel thus measures Barrett Browning's private life against the ideology espoused in her work, finding the poet to fall short of her own ideals in more ways than one.

In June 1858, Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote to a friend with undisguised contempt about Charles Dickens's vigorous defence of his separation from Catherine, his wife and mother of his ten children. What scandalised Barrett Browning most of all appears to have been Dickens's ill-judged public statements on the front pages of his periodical, *Household Words*, and other British newspapers at the time:

> what a crime, for a man to use his genius as a cudgel against his near kin, even against the woman he promised to protect tenderly with life and heart – taking advantage of his hold with the public to turn public opinion against her. I call it dreadful. (Barrett Browning qtd. in Tomalin 2011: 300).

In a striking conflation of public and private spheres that antagonised many long-standing admirers, friends and associates, Dickens accused Catherine of mental instability, intellectual weaknesses, and neglect of her children (Tomalin 2011: 298-299; Ackroyd 2002: 128-129), while clearly anxious to stay in control of his public image as the celebrated "novelist of family life" (Ackroyd 2002: 127).

Focusing on the domestic drama unfolding in the Dickens household, Sebastian Barry's 2010 two-act play, *Andersen's English,* may be considered symptomatic of a trend manifest in contemporary (biofictional) appropriations of Charles Dickens that foreground the flawed relationships and broken families that haunted Dickens's work and personal life, thereby constructing a 'fallen Dickens' who resonates with twenty-first-century cultural concerns" (Boyce and Rousselot 2012: 6). In line with Anne-Marie Vukelic's fictionalised autobiography of Catherine Dickens, *Far Above Rubies* (2010), and Gaynor Arnold's novel *Girl in a Blue Dress* (2008), whose homodiegetic narrator is closely modelled on Dickens's ill-treated wife, *Andersen's English* throws a spotlight on the Victorian author's troubled domestic situation that reveals a crucial gap between his fiction and the lived reality of his private life. The play's feminist concerns mingle with a markedly postcolonial perspective, which casts the 'Other' Dickens as the focal point for reassessing Britain's imperial and colonial past, as also exemplified by further biofictional treatments of the iconic writer, such as Peter Carey's *Jack Maggs* (1997) and Richard Flanagan's *Wanting* (2009).

In *Andersen's English*, the incipient breakup of the Dickens family is illuminated through a "literary-historical nugget" (Fricker 2010: n.p.), which only takes up a short paragraph in Claire Tomalin's massive recent Dickens biography: Hans Christian Andersen's five-week visit to Gad's Hill Place, the Dickens family home in Kent, in the early summer of 1857, which the Danish author was to describe as a "highlight in my life", while the Dickens family came to perceive him as "a bony bore [who] [...] stayed on and on" (Dickens qtd. in Bredsdorff 1956: 48; 115). As indicated by its title, Barry's memory play, with its frame of Andersen looking back on the fateful events after reading about Dickens's death in 1870, presents Andersen as an unsuspecting witness to the "great family storm brewing" around him (Barry 2010: 10). In retrospect, he blames his poor knowledge of English for his failure to notice the cracks and fissures in the polished façade of the

picture-perfect Victorian family idyll of picnics and piano evenings, concealing the unhappiness and emotional tensions simmering underneath:

> It seemed like a paradise of human hearts. I suppose I was dimly aware of mysteries. But I did not suspect trouble so great, no, no. I wrote about my stay among them shortly after, and it seemed natural to describe them as happy. For [...] their world there was sublime. (Barry 2010: 10)[9]

At the time he may have had a vague notion of unresolved conflicts blighting the domestic bliss at Gad's Hill Place, and yet he realises that he "sensed not enough. Such it is to have no language. So are the passions of intimates hidden from the stranger" (Barry 2010: 10). It is exactly through these submerged passions, merely glimpsed and uncomprehended by the guileless outsider, that Barry's biofiction reveals the gaping chasm between Dickens's public and private personas. Communication, however, fails not only between the eccentric foreigner and the Dickens family, but is also fraught with difficulties between Dickens and his own wife and children. Language is thus exposed as a deceptive mask covering up the harsh realities of human suffering and distress, which becomes particularly obvious when Andersen bids farewell to Catherine Dickens, wishing her "all happiness, in your life [...] and in your perfect and holy marriage", and Catherine retorts, with a bitter edge of irony, "Now, truly, your English is perfected" (Barry 2010: 81).

The play's central theme of failed intercultural and intra-familial communication evidently springs from a larger project of demythologising an English "secular saint" and literary giant (Spencer 2010: 25), whose posthumous fame and national iconicity are highlighted most strikingly by the use of his portrait on the ten pound note between 1992 and 2003 (John 2010a: 157). While *Andersen's English* succeeds in exposing the marked contrast between Dickens's private conduct and the moral values propagated in his works, it primarily introduces this 'work vs. life' topos implicitly and evidently relies on the audience's familiarity with Dickens as a revered cultural icon and author of such universally and perennially well-loved literary classics as *A Christmas Carol*. Dickens's writings are explicitly referred to in the play when Dickens explains the cosy home-and-hearth ideology of *Household Words* to Andersen: "*Household Words*, Andersen,

where things familial find their most ardent defenders, where the poetry of the hearth is set forth. A man, a woman and their offspring, gathered in a peaceful group in this eternal England" (Barry 2010: 21). In the light of Dickens's cruel treatment of those closest to him, his lofty elaborations assume a hollow and deliberately deceptive ring that reveals them to be empty propaganda.

The play is clearly influenced by recent scholarly evaluations of Dickens as a "consummate spin doctor" who knew how to manipulate his public image (John 2010b: 245), presenting the author as a restless and struggling, but in the end ruthless operator who egotistically directs the lives of those around him. Dickens's domineering self-centred need to create his own public and private fictions is illustrated, for example, by the following exchange with his daughter Kate:

Dickens	[...] Be my daughter. Be more like your sister Mamie, gentle and true. Do not torment me.
Kate	I do not wish to be *authored* by you.
	He starts to move away
	You are bringing away the light, Papa.
Dickens	Then follow after me, child.
	(Barry 2010: 50, original emphasis)

Barry's portrayal of Dickens is clearly informed by historians' and literary critics' assessments of the author as someone who was particularly adept in "constructing discursive selves for himself, narrative alter egos in fiction as in life" (Demoor 2004: 4), and who performed them with remarkable skill and theatrical talent (see Ackroyd 2002: 44). Not only was he successful in combining his talents as a writer with "the instincts of a media mogul", actively manufacturing his public image as one of the first literary celebrities in the dawning age of mass media culture, but, as Juliet John writes in her impressive study *Dickens and Mass Culture*, he

> ruthlessly 'managed' public knowledge of his life – especially his affair with Ellen Ternan – in order to maintain the familiar and indeed familial image of 'Dickens', which seemed to weather even his public and unpleasant separation from his wife. (John 2010b: 50)

Not least in view of Dickens's life-long close and passionately maintained ties with the world of theatre and acting, the genre of drama appears particularly appropriate for the purpose of exposing and highlighting the author's highly manipulative preoccupation with performance and control or, as Barry's Dickens puts it, his compulsive need to be the "stage manager of my own fate" (Barry 2010: 66). As much is poignantly emphasised by the metadramatic representation of the family's younger children as puppets (see Barry 2010: 19), as well as Dickens's depiction as overbearing director-cum-leading-actor in an amateur production of Wilkie Collins's melodrama *The Frozen Deep*.

Thus, the man whose fiction and journalism take up the cause of the poor and disadvantaged by drawing attention to the pressing social issues of the day, the philanthropist who initiated a charitable venture for 'fallen women' willing to 'reform' their lives (see Ackroyd 2002: 89; Tomalin 2011: 180), is shown to be a dictatorial and self-centred patriarch who has no qualms about sending off his 16-year-old son Walter to fight in the British Army in India against his will. Several biographers have recorded Dickens's resentment of the financial burden of having seven sons to raise and educate (see, e.g., Tomalin 2011: 233; Nayder 2011: 69; Kaplan 1988: 158; Slater 1983: 121-122). In line with this biographical detail, Barry's Dickens matter-of-factly informs his son that he "cannot provision my army of seven boys for ever [...]. Think of the others away at school in France. They come up behind you like a tide", before savagely telling his wife to be "thankful there is a great Empire to mop up these sons" (Barry 2010: 11, 30). It is immediately after they have seen off Walter that Dickens cruelly delivers his final blow to the grief-stricken Catherine by confronting her with his unilateral decision that she must permanently live apart from her husband and children (Barry 2010: 78-79). The play thus highlights the stark contrast between the stony rigour and downright brutal indifference he displays in his conduct towards his dependants and the sympathy and kindness that characterise his relations with his friends, as he is shown to invest considerable energy and efforts into reviving *The Frozen Deep* for the benefit of raising money for the family of his recently deceased friend Douglas Jerrold.

In *Andersen's English*, Sebastian Barry stays true to his trademark mission of dealing, as Fintan O'Toole has remarked, with "history's leftovers, men and women defeated and discarded by their times" (O'Toole

1997: vii). In this case, his project of lending a voice to neglected and disempowered figures, whose stories he "append[s] [...] to the received historical record as an imaginative and subtly revisionist addendum" (Cummings 2000: 293), ties in not only with the agenda of neo-Victorian fiction more generally, but specifically takes up trends in recent Dickens scholarship to recover Catherine Dickens née Hogarth from the "self-serving fiction" of her husband's (mis)representations (Nayder 2011: 1). As Lillian Nayder has established in *The Other Dickens*, her 2011 biography of Catherine Hogarth, most early treatments of Charles Dickens's life uncritically adopt their subject's biased perspective of his wife's limitations, and it seems indicative of the author's fortuitous self-mythologising activities that Claire Tomalin falls into the same trap as her predecessors when she characterises the author's wife as follows:

> Kind looks and gentle manner she doubtless had, and a wish to please – what she lacked was the strength of character needed to hold her own against her husband's powerful will. She was incapable of establishing and defending any values of her own, of making her own safe situation from which she should rule within the home, let alone taking up any other interest. So little of her personality appears in any eyewitness account of the Dickens household that it seems fair to say there was not much more there to describe [...]. (Tomalin 2011: 66)

The sympathies in Barry's play clearly lie with the great Victorian writer's long-suffering wife, who after two decades of virtually uninterrupted pregnancies – "I have crawled from childbirth to childbirth" – has not only lost her youthful agility but has been forced to surrender all control over matters of household management to her sister Georgina, "noble Georgie" (Barry 2010: 31, 15), who idolises her famous brother-in-law and loyally stands by him after the separation from his wife. Soon to be replaced in Dickens's affections by an eighteen-year-old actress, Catherine has been reduced to a mere appendage to her genius husband, who proceeds to shape her public image in much the same way as he determines the fate of his fictional creations. In the light of the play's conspicuous focus on isolated and voiceless outsider figures, it comes as no surprise that Catherine, the

unloved wife, and Andersen, the unwelcome house guest with his eccentric habits whom Dickens finds "a spectacular nuisance of a man", should be represented as like-minded souls – "Mr and Mrs Andersen", as Dickens at one point jokingly refers to them (Barry 2010: 65, 44).[10] Just like Forster's *Lady's Maid*, *Andersen's English* participates in both neo-Victorian sub-genres of "celebrity biofiction" and "biofiction of marginalised subjects", thus combining the mission of recovering 'lost' lives with a pronounced interest in the alternative perspectives that such an objective might offer on the well-researched lives of famed individuals (see Kohlke 2013: 9-11).

Notably, it has been suggested by theatre critics reviewing the play's première production that the programmatic mission of pushing an iconic writer, considered to be a "symbol of Englishness" (Sierz 2010: 18), off his lofty pedestal might be informed by Sebastian Barry's Irishness. As Charles Spencer writes in the *Daily Telegraph*: "The possibly unworthy thought occurs that a chippy Irish author is seeking revenge on a revered English novelist" (Spencer 2010: 25). While Spencer's portrait of a vengeful Barry is certainly exaggerated, there is indeed a marked Irish element in the play that finds its most striking expression in the recital of Thomas Moore songs as a musical backdrop to the action on stage and in the character of Aggie, the Irish housemaid – another outsider who, incidentally, is not based on a historical individual. She is constructed as one of the few truly compassionate and humane characters in the play, the only one who dares defy Dickens when he finds out she is pregnant by his son Walt and wants to get her conveniently dispatched to his asylum for fallen women (see Barry 2010: 49). Aggie, we learn, has lost all her family during the Great Famine and, as Charlotte Boyce observes, Dickens's "decision to cast Aggie out of his home [...] tacitly recalls the evictions that exacerbated Irish distress during the Famine, suggesting a disquieting continuity between past and present" (Boyce 2012: 172). Despite her own tragic experience, Aggie curiously turns a blind eye to the harsh realities of nineteenth-century Ireland by picturing the country as an idealised haven of refuge that will kindly welcome back, and give shelter to, its lost daughter when she proudly rejects Dickens's 'offer' and stubbornly proclaims: "I am not a fallen woman. I am an Irish girl of sixteen years and I will go back to Ireland, sir, and see what my people can do for me" (Barry 2010: 80). Indeed, her desperate wish for individual and national empowerment outweighs the prospect of hardship and ostracism suffered by allegedly 'fallen' women and

unmarried mothers in Catholic Ireland, and eventually she shares the fate of millions of her countrymen and women in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Joining her son, named Walt just like his father, after his successful army career in India, she emigrates to North America, where she dies "an old old woman", as the audience learns in what appears to be a narrative 'postscript' to the events related in the play, provided by the main female characters Catherine, Georgie, Aggie, and Ellen Ternan (Barry 2010: 86). The latter, Dickens's future mistress, briefly turns up as a visitor at Gad's Hill, and during their brief meeting her Irish ancestry is prominently underlined when Dickens flatteringly remarks: "Ah, Irish, the Irish, a noble race, a race of renown in the theatrical arts, Boucicault, yes?" (Barry 2010: 74). Such intercultural encounters, as well as the glimpses into Dickens's family dynamics, unmask the full extent of the author's double standard. He evidently glories in the pose of the enlightened and liberal cultural intermediary, while at the same time his conduct towards Aggie represents a private act of imperialist domination that involves the denial of his own grandchild, conveniently ignoring the fact that it will be half English.

All of these elements, combined with the fictionalised Dickens's continued forceful celebration of the English character and its muscular manliness,[11] undeniably hint at Barry's postcolonial perspective, which aims at exploring, and coming to terms with, the complex historical entanglement of England and Ireland. By way of addressing the power imbalance in English-Irish relations on the level of individual identities and personal relationships, the play's revisionist project clearly entails a forceful act of writing back to dominant English culture and its quintessential literary hero, Charles Dickens. Barry's mission of dethroning one of the all-time favourite giants of English literature thus unites a variety of social, political, cultural, and ethical dimensions that speak to the needs of contemporary audiences to redress the injuries of the past and to account for the imperfections of revered cultural icons. The play challenges and revises prevailing narratives of Dickens's life that have become deeply ingrained in cultural memory, but are shown to be crucially at odds with the philanthropic image of the author fashioned through his work.

3. The 'Work vs. Life' Topos and/as Biographical Criticism

In what Cora Kaplan interprets as a triumphant reaction against "a past whose power over the present had been broken", the majority of neo-

Victorian fiction clearly reflects the concerns of the late-twentieth- and early-twenty-first-century "political moment", most frequently affected by the "social movements around gender, race and sexuality" (Kaplan 2007: 86, 45). As has been shown, Forster's and Barry's biofictions of Barrett Browning and Dickens are no exception to the tendency of contemporary writers to convey their own specific ideological agendas in their fictional representations of nineteenth-century authors. Uneasily positioned between heroism and personal failure, progressiveness and conservatism, these two giants of Victorian literature seem both remote and eerily familiar, thus irresistibly lending themselves to being "ritually resuscitated, murdered, mourned and praised" (Kaplan 2007: 79).

It has been argued that contemporary writers' fascination with authors' lives springs from their particular interest in their historical predecessors as pillars of the literary profession (see, e.g., Franssen and Hoenselaars 1999: 12), even if it is just for the purpose of tearing them down, or – in Anne-Marie Priest's words – of "master[ing] the master" (Priest 2007: 304). If this should be the case, Forster's and Barry's 'dethronings' of their 'master subjects' take on the particular and rather intricate form of what we have termed the 'work vs. life' topos, centring on the chasm between the moral values conveyed through the historical authors' works and their private conduct. Margaret Forster's novel *Lady's Maid* is coloured by a distinct Marxist perspective, striving to recover the story of Elizabeth Wilson, through which Elizabeth Barrett Browning emerges as an egotistical employer whose lack of empathy appears surprising in the light of the liberal values projected in her poetry. *Andersen's English* sets out to debunk one of the most celebrated authors in the English language – the purported novelist of family life – deconstructing Dickens's ostensibly harmonious family relations from a feminist angle and introducing a distinctly Irish element to dismantle the author's status as an icon of Englishness and philanthropy through a postcolonial perspective. Interestingly, as neo-Victorian works, they thus display a moral preoccupation which, in fact, they share with Victorian literature (see Hadley 2010: 34), as they pillory the violation of Victorian values by writers who set themselves up as the beacons of moral rectitude.

The connection between an author's life and work that Barry's and Forster's texts forge in their moral evaluation of the 'private author' can also be felt in biofictions that depict their subjects in a thoroughly positive light,

as in the examples of *A Midnight Carol* and *Strange Music*. Davis's and Fish's author-protagonists are not only the moral heroes of these narratives; they also specifically emerge as embodiments of the positive values inscribed in the historical authors' literary output. Although these novels further demonstrate the pervasiveness of the life-work connection as a literary trope in author fictions, the association of private life and work comes more distinctly to the fore, certainly, where contemporary authors diagnose – and critically comment upon – a divergence between them.

Such a critical juxtaposition of biography and literary oeuvre ultimately raises questions not only about the moral responsibility of the artist. It also probes the value of biographical criticism in literary studies more generally. As Andrea Kirchknopf has observed, in their engagement with the writing process and literary history, biographical fictions about authors constitute a "joint interpretive site" for fiction and literary criticism (Kirchknopf 2013: 11). While for the larger part of the twentieth century literary criticism has witnessed a move away from tracing biographical elements in literary works, contemporary biofiction, conversely, often relies on an author's work to evaluate his or her life. In a sense, Forster and Barry can thus be said to practice a reverse form of biographical criticism in their biofictions. As they hold up their subjects' relationships with others for scrutiny, their protagonists' actions seem morally objectionable, to be sure. What makes these subjects' actions truly remarkable though, and thus worthy of being fictionalised, these writers seem to suggest, is that the historical authors acted counter to the ideals and principles reflected in their literary works. They are found guilty of an ethical inconsistency specifically committed by authors. Literature, in this sense, is understood by the contemporary authors as a statement of authorial and personal intention, and consequently, as a biographical 'speech act' – to use J. L. Austin's term (see Austin 1962) – with real-world implications. The literary work is held to constitute a promise to which its subject is bound and against which his or her life can be measured. Reading what Wayne Booth has termed the "implied author" of a text as an extension of its historical maker (Booth 1983: 431), Forster and Barry thus seem to insist on the inseparability of life and work – on an author's real-life commitment to his/her text. As per Boldrini's provocative query, "can Pound be a good poet, since he was fascist?", the age-old question to what extent the "validity of an individual's words" depends on the "moral stature" of the writer is often posed as

undecidable by literary critics (Boldrini 2012: 131). Contemporary neo-Victorian authors of revisionist biofiction, however, appear to have inverted the question, instead asking how far the moral stature of writers and their cultural memory should depend on their words.

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Notes

1. Hinting at the privileged position occupied by *A Christmas Carol* within Dickens's oeuvre, the novel suggests that Dickens might have named the novella after himself, with 'Carol' as the Latin version of his own Christian name, or even that of King Charles I, the martyred victim of Oliver Cromwell, who is characterised as "the man who stole Christmas! […] He banished it all as papist flummery unfit for the Puritan soul!" (Davis 1999: 62).
2. In an interview, Davis notes admiringly: "So there he was, bravely championing the rights of the downtrodden while fearing all the time exposure of his own shame. This represents for me moral courage and uncommon altruism, attributes that made Dickens not just greatly gifted but great" (Perry 2000: n.p.).
3. See, in particular, Kate Mitchell's work, where she discusses neo-Victorian fiction as a subgenre of historical fiction and a form of "memory texts" and evaluates "their investment in historical recollection as an act in the present" (Mitchell 2010: 4).
4. Similarly, Daniel Meyer-Dinkgräfe, in his study on biographical plays about famous artists, concludes that the frequent depiction of the protagonists' lives as conflict-ridden serves to "decrease any admiring distance spectators may have, prior to watching the performance, towards the artist character" (Meyer-Dinkgräfe 2005: 57).
5. In many ways, Woolf's *Flush* can be regarded as a precursor to Forster's novel – another neo-Victorian biographical work about Elizabeth Barrett Browning. For a discussion of *Lady's Maid* as a sequel to Woolf's fictional dog biography, see Cumberland 1996.

6. In conjunction with the biography Forster also edited a selection of Barrett Browning's poetry, "in which her development as a poet can be traced and some of her finest forgotten poems read" (Forster 1988: xvi): *Selected Poems of Elizabeth Barrett Browning* (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988).
7. While Forster's novel condemns the Brownings's selfishness in rather forceful terms, her biography *Elizabeth Barrett Browning* expresses its criticism in a more moderate tone: "There is no escaping the fact that she was underpaid. Nor was it as though Wilson performed her duties grudgingly or did not give satisfaction. Elizabeth continually congratulated herself on her own luck in having her. […] The Brownings were not by any means rich but another two if not four guineas a year for such a maid would not have been beyond their means" (Forster 1988: 273). While Forster's biography expresses its criticism of the Brownings's selfishness in moderate terms, the novel makes its point more forcibly.
8. *Aurora Leigh* has often been read in a biographical light, as a reflection of "the drama of Barrett Browning's own imaginative emancipation" (Leighton 1992: 88). The eponymous heroine of Barrett Browning's epic poem learns to respect the working-class Marian and supports her through her difficulties. Readers of Forster's novel who are familiar with *Aurora Leigh* may thus feel called upon to compare Aurora's relation with Marian to Barrett Browning's with Wilson.
9. Dickens's successfully authored domestic fiction of a "paradise of human hearts" is also reflected by the photograph appearing on the cover of the published play, which presents the famous author as a benign *pater familias* surrounded by his doting daughters Mary and Kate. Towards the end of her life, Kate would recall that "nothing could surpass the misery and unhappiness of our home" (qtd. in Tomalin 2011: 415). The image is also alluded to in Dickens's final lines in *Andersen's English* after he has coolly informed his wife of her imminent banishment from the family home: "I will sit out in the garden with my book, and Mamie will sit near me, quietly talking. We will be English folk in England – the happiest people on earth in the happiest country" (Barry 2010: 83).
10. It is worth noting that in the play's original production Andersen's outsider status is underscored by the casting of a black actor (Sierz 2010: 18).
11. Commenting on his role as the heroically self-sacrificing English explorer, Richard Wardour in *The Frozen Deep*, Dickens proclaims: "There is something noble and essential in the English character, in the English soul, that cannot drop to such depths [as cannibalism]. Even forced into the very pit

> of suffering [...] something at last rises up, and forbids dark conduct, and so such a man is redeemed by his – Englishness" (Barry 2010: 59). Dickens's robust, down-to-earth Englishness is thrown into sharp relief by the effeminate European decadence of Andersen, who, in his teary sentimentality and childlike eccentricity, represents the very antithesis of stereotypical conceptions of English national character. Paradoxically, however it is the non-English Andersen who proves the more likeable and sympathetic of the two men

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