Beyond Biofiction:
Writers and Writing in Neo-Victorian Media

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Victorian authors feature prominently as characters in contemporary biofictions that re-imagine the lives of actual historical figures of the Long Nineteenth Century. As the genre of biofiction has garnered more attention in the last decade, notably with the creation of a book series dedicated to it – *Biofiction Studies*[1] – this special issue focuses on the representation of Victorian writers, challenging Roland Barthes's assertion regarding the death of the author and propounding the author's return as a character in fiction and other media.

Binding together biography and fiction, biographical fiction or biofiction as a scholarly subject per se is still comparatively new, only gathering momentum in the early 2010s. This lack of recognition was mainly due to the generic cross-over entailed by the form itself which was at first considered a subgenre of the historical novel (Lackey 2017: 6; Lackey 2019: 2) and is still at times subordinated to another genre altogether, namely that of biographies (Lackey 2017: 2). The recognition of biofiction as a genre in its own right, evolving from "bastard" to "hybrid" (Latham 2021: 8), pinpoints the paradoxes inherent to the form. This state of affairs might indeed result from the irreducible hybridity of the genre, which lends itself to various interpretations, as Cora Kaplan has it: "It implies that there is something stubbornly insoluble in what separates the two genres [biography and fiction] and that prevents them from being invisibly sutured; the join will always show" (Kaplan 2007: 65). Biofiction, maybe more than any other form of fiction, is thus ready to acknowledge this "join", embracing the idea that fiction is nourished by the extra-textual or the 'real'. The "join" between bio and fiction is arguably most apparent in biofictions of writers, which very often focus on the writer-at-work.

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A number of biofictions raise crucial epistemological questions – not just as to how we can know the past but also *how it is written* into collective knowledge and memory. In the 1990s, a few scholars already focused on the representation of authors as characters. Ansgar Nünning, for instance, proposed the useful category of "fictional metabiography", which embraces novels "concerned with the recording of history and the problems of biography" (Nünning 1999: 29). For Nünning, such texts not only convey an impression of the past but reflect on the act of representation itself:

> they highlight the process of biographical reconstruction and the protagonists' consciousness of the past rather than a historical world represented as such. Instead of focusing on and portraying the lives of real historical individuals on the diegetic level of the characters, fictional metabiographies are generally set in the present but concerned with the appropriation, reconstruction, and transmission of the biographee's life. Such novels typically explore how characters try to come to terms with the past. (Nünning 1999: 38)

It is easy to see how biofictions of writers epitomise Nünning's conception of fictional metabiographies since these texts necessarily entail a reflection on the writing of the protagonist as well as the protagonist-as-writer, very often including a *passage obligé*, namely, a writer-at-their-desk scene.[2] Neo-Victorian writers not only engage with the depicted nineteenth-century writer's own writing process but also reflect on their own relationships with their predecessors.

As Paul Franssen and Ton Hoenselaars note in their volume dedicated to the "Author as Character", this choice of topic might seem odd at first and less rewarding than stories focusing on politicians, soldiers or adventurers whose lives are more eventful (Franssen and Hoenselaars 1999b: 18). The critics identify this form as a paradoxical "postmodern phenomenon" since "the very postmodernism that proclaimed the death of the author and the demise of character delights in resurrecting historical authors as characters" (Franssen and Hoenselaars 1999b: 11). The appeal of the form thus stems from "the adventures of the mind", which allow for self-reflection: "pondering the life and works of often illustrious predecessors, the modern

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author tends to reflect on the genesis of literary works in general and his or her own in particular", also linking biofiction with "the *Künstlerroman*" (Franssen and Hoenselaars 1999b: 18). Aleid Fokkema goes as far as identifying the author as "[p]ostmodernism's stock character", before outlining his typical "properties":

> he is, nearly exclusively, a man (Emily Dickinson and Edith Wharton, [...] are little else than figureheads, not portrayed for their writing). He is shaped by and concerned with his writing, to such an extent that this writing, involving both inspiration and the question of representation, becomes the theme of the narrative. Finally, he shows at least two faces as he occupies both a subject position in the system (or chaos) of writing and effectively produces text as a person, even when little else may be known about him. (Fokkema 1999: 39, 48-49)

Interestingly, Fokkema's point concerning the gender of the author as character is no longer as clear-cut as contemporary fiction now makes more room for characters previously deemed minor like women and Indigenous people. As shall be seen in the present issue, most of the neo-Victorian texts discussed feature female writers and engage with their writing process. Following the evolution of literary criticism that initially focused on figures like Charles Dickens and Charles Darwin,[3] even male writers, when they now appear, are no longer eminent figures but tend to be depicted as somewhat out of the norm.

Biofictions of writers have also become more and more popular, some of them picking the interest of literature prizes (Colm Toibin's *The Master* was shortlisted for the Booker Prize) as well as attracting critical interest. This special issue aims to further explore neo-Victorian representations of writers and writing, in biofiction and beyond, from new and innovative angles. Why are we so keen on biofictions, especially of Victorian writing figures? Certainly, this fascination is in part due to the immersive encounters these neo-Victorian narratives create, allowing readers to 'get to know' more about the writing process and the wo/man behind great works. Bearing in mind that every representation of the past bears the imprint of the present while contributing to the general public's understanding of Victorian times, it is also essential to ask: who is remembered and what is remembered, obliterated or

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mis-remembered about them and what accounts for such policies of differential remembrance and forgetting? How are writers' lives re-presented/re-visioned? What present-day agendas does such re-presentation serve? These are important questions because biofiction competes with biographies and history books in building or rebuilding the cultural memory of the past, especially when conveyed through popular media like TV series, all the more so as contextualisation is not always provided.

The interest of this special issue thus partly lies in the exploration of the celebrity mode defined by Marie-Luise Kohlke which "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). For Kohlke, depictions of celebrity figures, follow two trends: on the one hand, they offer a "what if plot", and on the other hand, they fill in the gaps in a celebrity's life (Kohlke 2013: 8). Celebrity biofictions more often than not tend to dig in the "trope of the posthumous" (Kohlke 2013: 7),[4] mining writers' cultural afterlives (see Kohlke and Gutleben 2020b: 25). Julia Novak and Sandra Mayer go as far as to argue that this "rebirth of the author" finds its root in the "commodification of the author", which had already started in the nineteenth century (Novak and Mayer 2014: 25). Neo-Victorian biofictions of writers thus seem to feed readers' "desire for both identification and possession" (Novak and Mayer 2014: 26), building on writers' cultural capital and at the same time enhancing our culture's view of writers as stars and pop culture icons (as, for instance, in the case of J.K. Rowling, Stephen King or G.R.R. Martin). Writer figures, especially those who lived an exceptional life, going against the grain of conventional nineteenth-century life and standards, loom large in neo-Victorian biofictions because they constitute figures who are well-known to the general audience through their works and lives, all the more so as the nineteenth-century is the golden age of the novel as can be seen in the profusion of biofictions that feature Dickens or Oscar Wilde.[5] However, some other 'greats' like George Eliot figure far less frequently, though Patricia Duncker's *Sophie and the Sybil* (2015), discussed in this issue, has sought to rectify this neglect.

Novels may serve readers' curiosity about the circumstances of writing, lesser-known aspects of authors' private lives or their involvement in public affairs. Indeed, as Kaplan has it, "[i]t seems that readers do require an extra-textual, embodied subject, a life that can represent a kind of prequel or

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sequel to the work, something, anyhow, supplementary to it" (Kaplan 2007: 77-78). Marc Foster's film *Finding Neverland* (2004), based on Alan Knee's play *The Man Who Was Peter Pan* (1998), thus narrates the background for the creation of Peter Pan and his world. Here, biofiction extends the narrative world created by J. M. Barrie and gives the viewer a chance to re-enter Peter Pan's world through a different door. Charles Dickens is another case in point as the Inimitable's life has been the subject of a string of novels that challenge the writer's work by portraying him as a sort of thief of others' stories[6] or else question Dickens's integrity.

Thus, one of the roles of writers in neo-Victorian biofictions seems to be to highlight the constructedness of Victorian writers' personas. For instance, Dickens's image as the representative of the ideal united family, a defender of the poor and mistreated, was partly fabricated by the author himself as well as by his relatives and friends. However, both biofictions and recent discoveries have shown that this idealised portrait falls far short of the truth, especially concerning his relationships with his wife Catherine and the actress Ellen Ternan.[7] Thus, such works seem to partake of the "punishing and disciplining" of the Victorians that Kohlke and Christian Gutleben identify (Kohlke and Gutleben 2020b: 27).

Yet this demythologising process may also be liberating, as in the case of women writers such as the Brontë sisters or Emily Dickinson, as becomes clear from the articles in this issue. The aim of such biofictions is not necessarily to disparage, but to give new insight into such figures. Likewise, neo-Victorian biofiction may bring marginalised subjects back into cultural consciousness, as when Julian Barnes's *Arthur & George* (2005) describes Arthur Conan Doyle's support for George Edalji, a clerk of Indian origin accused of mutilating horses and an evident victim of racism.

Kohlke and Gutleben's image of the palimpsestic subject seems relevant to these changes of perspective. Noting that biofiction "subjects […] are never homogenous", they describe them instead as "multi-layered palimpsests of creative superimpositions upon the biographical traces of historical referents, with said traces being overwritten and reworked but never wholly effaced" (Kohlke and Gutleben 2020b: 8). When dealing with writers, their fiction provides another layer in the palimpsestic game as neo-Victorian writers copy the style or rework some elements from the Victorian fiction into the contemporary text. It may not be surprising, then, that neo-Victorian biofictions seem to trope the traditional view that an author's life might

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explain her/his fiction and vice versa, thereby tapping into the lingering "view of the author as an extension of his/her text" (Novak and Mayer 2014: 26). This might also be related to the fact that the Victorian novel is very much concerned with life-writing in the wider sense, as testified by the importance of the *Bildungsroman*, as in the case of Dickens's *David Copperfield* (1850), which is often read as a fictional autobiography.

If, however, the attraction for Victorian authors' lives is fully exploited, readers are not merely spoon-fed well-known and comforting stories but rather presented with narratives that challenge their pre-established views of an author. Here, the ethical motives of the neo-Victorian author may be questioned since, as Kohlke and Gutleben put it, there always seems to be "motives of consumption" that produce either a sort of "empathic connection with the past" (i.e., an "immersive experience of nineteenth-century life") or, more problematically, a form of "voyeuristic curiosity" (Kohlke and Gutleben 2020b: 26). Past lives, and in particular past authors' lives, seem to have become commodities, as digging up dark and/or salacious secrets about them seems to be quite marketable.[8]

The debate on the ethical dimension of biofiction is far from closed. If for some such as Kohlke and Lucia Boldrini, biofiction is ethically problematic, it seems less so for others like Monica Latham or Michael Lackey. The latter denounces the over-reliance on biographical/ historical accuracy in academic critiques of the genre (see Lackey 2022: 82). In particular, he attacks the idea defended by Boldrini according to which the biographical subject would be misrepresented or displaced (see Lackey 2022: 84). According to Lackey, the ethical issue does not stand: the problem concerns the nature of the contract established with the reader which differs in biography, where "the author implicitly establishes a certain kind of truth contract with readers", whereas in biofiction, because it is fiction, "readers give authors more latitude" (Lackey 2022: 1). This is symptomatic of another issue noted by Novak and Mayer: contrary to most twentieth-century literary criticism, "contemporary biofiction [...] often relies on an author's work to *evaluate* his or her life" (Novak and Mayer 2014: 45, added emphasis), in effect resorting to biographical criticism. They observe that this reveals a new take on literature, according to which a writer's work and life should be in accordance (see Novak and Mayer 2014: 45), lest they be accused of moral hypocrisy. This ethical approach may lead to a somewhat censorious attitude by both scholars and writers. This special issue does not claim to bring closure

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on this debate: some of our authors question the ethical 'righteousness' of choices made in the fictional representation of historical authors (see Braid and Gutowska), while others claim that the dead cannot be libelled (see Duncker).

For the intertextual game to work and for readers' interest to be raised, it seems that authors turned characters must be well-known.[9] Part of the interest as well as readerly pleasure derives from the visible remodelling of the already known: either by throwing a new light on well-known facts or by bringing attention to little known aspects of the life depicted. This does not preclude further neo-Victorian biofictions from 'recovering' forgotten writers of the period, e.g. non-white writers or women, as was the case, in a different medium, for the pioneering but forgotten filmmaker Alice Guy-Blaché on whom a documentary was released in 2018.[10]

When considering Victorian writers at the centre of biofiction, one might also think of biofiction as a form of narrative expansion on a source-text or a 'source-figure' that offers readers or viewers the pleasure of recognition when re-encountering fictional characters as well as (re)discovering authors. To the above-mentioned *Finding Neverland*, one might add the example of Duncker's *Sophie and the Sybil*, in which the reader recognises Gwendolen from the opening of George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* (1876) behind the protagonist Sophie gambling at the Kursaal in Bad Homburg, Germany (see Duncker 2015: 76).[11] The presence of writers in neo-Victorian fiction may thus serve the purpose of prolonging the reading experience of specific Victorian texts as well as providing proximity with beloved authors. Similarly, *The Vanished Bride* (2019) by Bella Ellis, whose penname itself is a homage to Emily Brontë aka Ellis Bell, depicts the Brontë sisters at Haworth in 1845 and imagines the context for the invention and realisation of their future works and characters. Ellis's novel thus introduces a Robert Chester, a Bluebeard-like dark and violent husband haunted by the ghostly presence of the first wife he locked up in the attic, who is clearly meant to prefigure Edward Rochester in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847).

The importance of the reception of writers' portraits in biofiction cannot be denied. Because these biofictions return to well-known figures, at least some readers will be familiar with the life and work of the writer turned character. However, for new or younger readers, biofiction novels may also serve as the first 'entry point' into a writer's life and work and may therefore fundamentally shape the audience's impression of these writers. Today, neo-

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Victorian biofiction truly offers a complement to literary biography in that it offers an alternative archive (see Yebra 2013: 48; Franssen and Hoenselaars 1999b: 18-19). Latham insists that biofiction bestows "poetic licence" on "authors to go off the beaten track and give the reader a different image of the subject from the ones contained in biographies" (Latham 2021: 4). As such, biofiction covers a wider territory and has a greater potential than biography (which is limited by historical facts) (see Latham 2021: 4). Latham asserts that there is, in effect, no such thing as "responsibility to historical truth-telling" for authors of biofictions (Latham 2021: 5). This calls for close scrutiny, especially regarding the way canonical figures are being conveyed to young readers and the possible ethical problems that might arise from such mediation. Hence neo-Victorian biofiction always operates under a tension between recovering and undoing past figures, so that the depicted past does not so much reveal a historical 'truth' as uncover our own projection of desires (see Kohlke and Gutleben 2020b: 34-35). This speaks directly to Michel Foucault's notion of "the author function":

> these aspects of an individual which we designate as making him an author are only a projection, in more or less psychologising terms, of the operations that we force texts to undergo, the connections that we make, the traits that we establish as pertinent, the continuities that we recognize, or the exclusions that we practice. (Foucault 2010: 110)

The writers we encounter in neo-Victorian biofictions, even if based on real-life figures, are first and foremost constructions that address our contemporary concerns. Biofiction thereby also reflects the development of cultural studies with an interest in trauma, queer, and feminist issues that inform so many neo-Victorian novels and take pride of place in this special issue.

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If the neo-Victorian novel is often considered to have taken off with John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969), Julie Depriester's study draws attention to the fact that the challenge to the Victorian canon started much earlier than is generally acknowledged. Indeed, Depriester focuses on

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Somerset Maugham, a writer who receives little attention in today's critical discourse, and considers his novel *Cakes and Ale* (1930) in terms of neo-Victorian demystification as it evokes the distortion of an author's biography and purports to rectify this. In this "glossed biofiction" (Kohlke 2013: 11),[12] the fictional author, Edward Driffield is based on Thomas Hardy, whose initial biographer, along with Hardy's second wife, was highly selective about the events in the subject's life and notably the role of Hardy's first wife. The novel thus raises the issue of the fabrication of the past. Depriester examines how the lines between fiction and reality are blurred in Maugham's novel, which also reflects on what is deemed to be literary greatness and questions the reality of the written word.

The Brontë sisters feature among the most popular Victorian writers, whose works have recently provided the basis of a number of rewritings and narrative expansions such as prequels, sequels, and coquels that often focus on the female Brontë family members and commonly insist on their proto-feminism. Several articles in this issue focus on the different ways of re-imagining the famous sisters, from a material approach (Sheerman) to graphic novels (Juko) and young adult fiction female sleuths (Moore).

Lucy Sheerman shifts the interest from a rewriting of the Brontës' classic texts to a focus on writing as both material texture and as encapsulated in objects possessed by the three sisters. To do so she examines two works, Catherine Lowell's novel *The Madwoman Upstairs* (2016) and a non-fiction book by Deborah Lutz, *The Brontë Cabinet: Three Lives in Nine Objects* (2015). Sheerman's article illustrates how writers-at-their-desk scenes can become a central topic introducing a meta-reflexive pause into the novels. She underscores how such works tap into our fascination with the lives and works of the Brontës and how fanfiction and literary criticism can become closely related.

Maria Juko explores how neo-Victorian biofictions often trope the old idea that an author's life might explain her/his fiction and vice versa, through the case studies of Isabel Greenberg's graphic novel *Glass Town – The Imaginary World of the Brontës* (2020) and Bella Ellis's Brontë Sisters Mystery series. The graphic novel draws on the Brontës' juvenilia, while *The Vanished Bride* (2019) and *The Diabolical Bones* (2020) – the first two instalments of Ellis's series – re-imagine the sisters as amateur detectives. Juko offers criticism on these recent works that have yet to receive scholarly attention and considers their idiosyncratic take on the sisters' lives,

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demonstrating how these texts combine biofiction with different genres in order to challenge nineteenth-century views on women and offer proto-feminist representations of women as writers.

Feminism and gender equity increasingly find their way into fiction targeting younger readers, as in the case of Nancy Springer's Enola Holmes series (2006-2021) and Jordan Stratford's Wollstonecraft Detective series (2015-2018), which are analysed by Tara Moore. Her article broadens the scope and potential of neo-Victorian scholarship by engaging with a still comparatively under-studied subgenre, Young Adult neo-Victorian fiction. In these novels too the writer is re-imagined as a detective, allowing Moore to show how detection may be used as a vehicle for neo-Victorian concerns, such as advocating for gender equality.

Interest in the fictionalisation of writers is not limited to textual fictions but also extends to fictions on screen that have popularised nineteenth-century writers. In doing so, however, they may exacerbate certain well-known traits at the expense of more truthful complexity, thereby leading to potential misrepresentations.

Barbara Braid and Ana Gutowska mainly engage with two screen biofictions of Emily Dickinson, Madeleine Olnek's *Wild Nights with Emily* (2018) and the Apple TV+ series *Dickinson* (2019-2021, created by Alena Smith). They underscore the process of demythologising the American poet so as to allow for her inscription within queer heritage. Their discussion of the distinction between biofiction (a form of appropriation) and biopic (a form of adaptation) leads them to the conclusion that biofiction can constitute an alternative form of archive, which can resist heteronormative narratives. Focusing on queer heritage and queer humour, Braid and Gutowska demonstrate that neo-Victorian biofiction aligns with a post/anti-heritage movement, distancing itself from the nostalgic stance of heritage films. Tackling issues around biomythography, the critics remind us that biofiction is also a limited form, which may lead to new myths that will call for their own demythologisations, a potential subject for further studies.

For her part, Amanda Farage examines Rupert Everett's *The Happy Prince* (2018), which superimposes different periods in Oscar Wilde's life within the frame of his story 'The Happy Prince' (1888). Rather than stressing what is commonly known about Wilde and his status as a (fallen) literary icon, Everett's biofiction, Farage argues, stresses the humanity of the well-known writer. After foregrounding Everett's interpretation of Wilde's tale in his film,

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the critic focuses specifically on the visual and aural representation of Wilde onscreen, before developing the parasocial relationship Everett entertains with the writer.

Biofiction in this issue extends beyond the limits of history as it includes characters born in the pages of a book with no grounding in the real world. It is a common feature of neo-Victorian fictions to use marginalised characters as protagonists, recounting their lives in a form which recalls the biofictional mode. Thus, this special issue at times evades the constraints of the 'bio' and its innate historical dimension as it also includes imaginary Victorian amateur writers. The use of the term biofiction to refer to such texts might be considered as pushing the boundaries too far, but broader, more expansive definitions of biofiction render this approach acceptable. One such definition is the one posited by Alexandre Gefen, for whom biofictions are "literary fictions shaped like biography (telling either the life of an imaginary character or the imaginary life of a real character)" (Gefen 2005: 305, own translation).[13] This allows a widening of the scope of biofictional studies. The significance of this departure from famous figures is at least two-fold: it lays the emphasis on the significance and effects of the act of writing as well as drawing attention to 'Other' or subaltern voices.

While A. S. Byatt's ground-breaking *Possession: A Romance* (1990) famously invents the lives and works of two Victorian poets, Randolph Ash and Christabel LaMotte, subsequent novels like Jane Harris's *The Observations* (2006) and Alison Case's *Nelly Dean: A Return to Wuthering Heights* (2016) are made up of the narratives of servants turned occasional writers. The choice of these particular writers illustrates the neo-Victorian interest for the "micro-pasts" (Kohlke and Gutleben 2020b: 43), for untold stories and minor figures of the past empowered through 'life-writing'. The amateur writers in these two novels both purport not to provide a work of fiction but rather testimonies or autobiofictional narratives, throwing light on their narrators' class and lives, with both texts transforming into "healing narratives" (see Henke 1998: 17).

Focusing on Bessy Buckley, a servant and former child prostitute, now the author of a sort of memoir in *The Observations*, Rosario Arias shows how the act of writing is coupled with an ethics of care: the protagonist, who is a victim of abuse and herself the perpetrator of damage on her mistress, eventually develops a caring relationship with her employer as she grows from reading to writing. Arias thus shows that through the act of writing,

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Bessy works through her childhood trauma and therefore is granted a form of agency which redistributes the balance of power between master and servant.[14]

Isabelle Roblin's close analysis of a so-far under-studied novel, Case's *Nelly Dean* – a coquel to *Wuthering Heights* (1847) – enables her to demonstrate how this text offers a singular addition to the neo-Victorian corpus, and the ways in which it differs from other rewritings of Emily Brontë's novel. Her article also examines how Case plays with the codes of the epistolary novel to provide a new narrative for the marginal character of Nelly Dean. As such, Roblin is able to show how the novel taps into neo-Victorian tropes revolving around the reclaiming of marginalised voices, albeit here a fictional one. The article engages in a dialogue with studies on biofiction so as to go 'beyond biofiction' into autobiofictional narrative.

Studies of neo-Victorian biofictions have, so far, limited themselves to the study of the effect of such narratives on their biofictional object/subject, leading Kohlke to develop her typology of biofictional narratives (see Kohlke 2013), or emphasised the ethical interrogations such narratives raise (see Kohlke and Gutleben 2020b). In contrast, little attention has been paid to the authors of biofictions and their relationship to their subject, an aspect on which the last part of this special issue aims to shed a light.

Lana Dalley shows how writers of biofictions are calling for new ways of reading and analysing texts. Dalley vouches for the value of experiential criticism, using Annette R. Federico's *My Victorian Novel: Critical Essays in the Personal Voice* (2020) and Nell Stevens's *The Victorian and the Romantic: A Memoir, a Love Story and a Friendship across Time* (2018) to exemplify how such criticism can add value to feminist writings and enact a continuum between women of the past and our own contemporary concerns. The article shows how Stevens's book goes well beyond 'standard' neo-Victorian biofiction by invoking an imaginary friendship that provides both a 'recovery' of feelings that may have existed in the interstitial spaces of Elizabeth Gaskell's history, and a 'pairing' between the Victorian and contemporary woman writer that imbues those feelings with present-day relevance. In particular, the article leads us to reconsider well-trodden tropes and assumptions within neo-Victorian studies, especially concerning readers, as it pays attention to readers' emotional response to texts, thereby reinscribing experience in critical works. As Dalley shows, this sheds light on

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the reasons why Victorian figures and texts, especially female writers and their works, keep on fascinating us.

Georges Letissier takes on the perilous challenge of delving into the afterlife of one of the most prominent Victorian writers, George Eliot, whose re-imagining within neo-Victorian biofictions is still, surprisingly, sparse.[15] Focusing on Rebecca Mead's *Road to Middlemarch* (2014), Duncker's *Sophie and the Sibyl* and Kathy O'Shaughnessy's *In Love with George Eliot. A Novel* (2019), the article is interested in the three writers' metaliterary comments on the art of (bio)fiction. Letissier convincingly uses the kaleidoscopic trope as a structural device to dive into the grammar of the texts under study, while uncovering the relation between life and fiction in Eliot's own works and the impact of Eliot's fiction on the three neo-Victorian writers. Letissier's study of the process of turning Eliot into a (counterfactual) character is compelling, situating biofiction as a form of hybrid neo-characterisation. Ultimately, the article demonstrates that Eliot's ideal of sympathy is still relevant today, especially when thinking about the role of reading.

Last but not least, Patricia Duncker, herself author of two neo-Victorian biofictions – *James Miranda Barry* (1999) and *Sophie and the Sibyl* (2015) – has her say on the issue of critical ethics in neo-Victorian biofiction. This essay offers an important contribution to neo-Victorian studies, engaging with the way we critically read neo-Victorian texts and aiming to uncover what celebrity biofictions have to say not only about the major figures they deal with (here Henry James and Lewis Caroll) but also about the women sacrificed to/for the male writers' fame by focusing on the neglected Constance Woolson in Colm Toibin's *The Master* (2004)[16] and the treatment of Alice in Kate Roiphe's *Still She Haunts Me* (2001). Starting with the author's personal experience as a (neo-Victorian) novelist, the essay moves on to a reflection on the key tension between history, biography and fiction, leading to the conclusion that one main difference between biographies and biofictions is the reading contract and expectations the latter creates. In particular, Duncker considers the evolution of neo-Victorian studies, writing back to what she deems the growth of a political correctness and an ethical turn.

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Notes

1. The editors for this series published by Bloomsbury are Lucia Boldrini, Michael Lackey, and Monica Latham. Following miscellaneous articles or chapters on the topic like Cora Kaplan's *Victoriana* (2007), Louisa Hadley's *Neo-Victorianism and Historical Narrative* (2010,) and Lena Steveker's 'Eminent Victorians' (2014), Kohlke and Gutleben's 2020 edited collection, *Neo-Victorian Biofiction: Reimagining Nineteenth-Century Historical Subjects*, was the first volume to specifically consider the role of biofiction in the proliferation of neo-Victorianism (see Kohlke and Gutleben 2020b: 4). Mention must also be made of Bethany Layne's edited collection on writers in biofiction, published in 2020.
2. Unsurprisingly, Nünning presents Peter Ackroyd's *Chatterton* (1987) as an epitome of this subgenre. More generally speaking, Ackroyd's work is marked by a reflection on historiography and biography, especially in his *London: A Biography* (2000), which blurs both genres.
3. See Kaplan's 'Coda: The Firm of Charles and Charles – Authorship, Science and Neo-Victorian Masculinities' (2014).
4. The phrase was first coined by Laura Savu in 2009 (qtd.in Gefter Wondrich 2020: 108).
5. The latter, for instance, is the main focus of Peter Ackroyd's *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* (1983) or Gyles Brandeth's Wilde murder series, initiated with *The Candlelight Murders* (2008).
6. This is the case in Peter Carey's *Jack Maggs* (1997) and Joseph O'Connor's *Star of the Sea* (2002). The same criticism is levelled at George Eliot in Patricia Duncker's *Sophie and the Sibyl* (2015), when the young woman accuses the writer: "you have written me into the opening pages of your new book – a thing you had no right to do. I accuse you of stealing one moment of my life and of distorting the facts" (Duncker 2015: 227-228).
7. The marital breakdown is explored in C. E. Bechhofer Roberts's *This Side Idolatry* (1928) or Gaynor Arnold's *Girl in a Blue Dress* (2008), while Dickens's relation with Ternan appears in such novels as Richard Flanagan's *Wanting* (2008). Other biofictions featuring Dickens include Dan Simmons's Gothic novel *Drood* (2009), Mathew Pearl's *The Last Dickens* (2009), and J. C. Briggs's detective novels in the Charles Dickens Investigation Series (2014–). For studies on biofictions of Charles Dickens, see Letissier 2004; the 2012 special issue of *Neo-Victorian Studies* on *The Other Dickens: Neo-Victorian*

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Appropriation and Adaptation of *Neo-Victorian Studies*; Kaplan 2014; Wadoux 2019; and Bell 2020.

8. Biofiction offers the vicarious experience of reading or viewing the world of the rich and famous – the example of the TV series *Victoria* (2016-2019) that lets the viewer into the intimacy of the British monarch and her family comes to mind. This simulated intimacy may be akin to what Blakey Vermeule calls “gossip literature”, i.e. “any insightful or exposing tale about other people in which the insight doesn’t necessarily put the other people in the best light” (Vermeule 2010: 7).
9. For Paul Franssen and Ton Hoenselaars there might be an exception for “lesser writers”, “if their lives were or could be made to appear romantic” (Franssen and Hoenselaars 1999b: 11).
10. Guy-Blaché was active from 1896 to 1906; she was the first female film director.
11. The reference is emphasised by the use of the incipit of *Daniel Deronda* by Duncker: “Was she beautiful, or not beautiful?” (Duncker 2015: 76).
12. *Cakes and Ale* also is a case of “indirect biofiction, in which the referent is not the central character but is seen from the outside, through her/his words/actions, and inadvertent self-revelations recorded by one or more fictional protagonists” (Kohlke and Gutleben 2020b: 9-10).
13. In French, Alexandre Gefen defines biofictions as “fictions littéraires de forme biographique (vie d’un personnage imaginaire ou vie imaginaire d’un personnage réel)” (Gefen 2005 : 305).
14. According to Lackey, biofiction is about agency, which appears in three different forms “relating to the author, the biographical subject, and the reader” (Lackey 2022: 13).
15. One notable exception is Laura Savu Walker’s chapter, ‘The Silence and the Roar: Resonant Encounters with George Eliot’, in *Neo-Victorian Biofiction.*
16. Constance is also the heroine of Emma Tennant’s *Felony* (2002) that focuses on Henry James’s poor treatment of his friend.

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