Things Best Left Unspoken: Debunking the Myth of the Author in Somerset Maugham's *Cakes and Ale*

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Abstract:
Somerset Maugham's *Cakes and Ale: Or, the Skeleton in the Cupboard* (1930) is based on flashbacks concerning Edward Driffield, a recently deceased Victorian author, who is partly based on Thomas Hardy (1840-1928). Alroy Kear, a fictional representation of Hugh Walpole (1884-1941) and author of a planned account of Driffield's life, insists that everything should not be told in the biography, suggesting that some things may be better left unsaid. In a prefiguration of the self-reflexivity of postmodernism, the narrator, Ashenden – Maugham's own persona – expands on the value of the first-person narrative, raising questions of reliability. Thus, the representation of the three author-characters becomes a means to deconstruct the myth surrounding the figure of the writer. Indeed, the reader is led to question what makes the reputation and worth of an author, as Maugham proposes a critical assessment of the process of idealisation of the Victorian author figure, from the relatively brief temporal distance of some forty years.

Keywords: author figure, biofiction, biography, *Cakes and Ale*, Thomas Hardy, Somerset Maugham, reputation, unreliability, Victorian literature, Hugh Walpole.

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If we accept Bryony Stocker's definition that a historical novel should be set "in a time before the writer was born, and the writer [should] operate within a factual-led framework without seeking to distort the past with an alternative or pseudo history" (Stocker 2017: 78), then Somerset Maugham's *Cakes and Ale: Or the Skeleton in the Cupboard* (1930) does not qualify for this category. Nonetheless, the novel can arguably be regarded as one of the first neo-Victorian novels. Daniel Bormann defines such a novel as "a fictional text which creates meaning from the background of awareness of time as flowing and as poised uneasily between the *Victorian* past and the present" (Bormann 2002: 62, original emphasis). Indeed, 1930 is not so far removed

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from the Victorian era, but it comes after the advent of the Modernists and their aversion to the period, which makes the nostalgic dimension of the novel quite original for the time. *Cakes and Ale* corresponds to Kate Mitchell's definition of a "memory text" (Mitchell 2010: 29), as the novel incorporates an affective aspect. The narrator Ashenden, an author himself and Somerset Maugham's recurring persona, looks back on his childhood in the Victorian era and recalls his encounters with the recently deceased Edward Driffield, allegedly the "last of the Victorians" (Maugham 2000: 26) and a character loosely based on Thomas Hardy. The narrator's recollections are spurred by a conversation with Alroy Kear, a self-promoting second-rate writer commissioned to write the life of the "Grand Old Man of English Letters" by his widow (Maugham 2000: 96). But the biographer warns the narrator that "there's a certain amount that's better left unsaid" (Maugham 2000: 104), especially when it touches upon Driffield's first wife, "the skeleton in the cupboard", to quote the book's original subtitle. What Ashenden then does in *Cakes and Ale* is re-establish what is to be left unsaid in the fictional biography, thereafter leading the reader to question the authenticity of both the writer's public life and of the written word.

Inevitably, when first published in 1930, Maugham's novel caused some uproar, for the reader could recognise the figure of Thomas Hardy behind Driffield and of his second wife Florence behind Amy – younger than him, she devoted her life to adapt his public image to his celebrity – but also the figure of Hugh Walpole behind Alroy Kear. Although Maugham denied it at first, he eventually admitted the association in 1950. When it comes to biofiction, *Cakes and Ale* works on different levels. Firstly, the biography-to-be-written assumes a fictional cast due to the intended erasures or deletions in the life of the writer portrayed, implicitly undermining assumed differences between biography and biofiction in terms of facticity and license with the author-reader's pact. Secondly, the narrator's reminiscences of the fictional author's life, with the emphasis put on similarities with Thomas Hardy, also act as an "appropriated", specifically a "glossed" biofiction (Kohlke 2013: 4, 11), which deliberately plays on and with reader knowledge by disguising its historical subjects, however thinly. Finally, Maugham also fictionalises his own life in his work, which amounts to a third level of biofiction. Moreover, as Christian Gutleben and Marie-Luise Kohlke point out, biofiction becomes a kind of game:

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> One of the keenest challenges and pleasures afforded by all modes of biofiction […] is for readers to demonstrate their historical acumen (and as regards biofictional writer figures, their literary knowledge also) by playing the game of 'spot the difference': identifying what might be called 'interbiofictionalities', noting inconsistencies between real-life 'source' and reimagined subject/textualised life, and sifting repurposed biographical fact from outright fabrication. (Kohlke and Gutleben 2020: 10)

Thus, through the representation of these three author-figures, Maugham tries to debunk the myth surrounding the writer and the written text. Not everything should be taken at face value. Deliberately, the novel seems to call into question the reliability of both biofictional recreations and auto/biographical portrayals, to the extent that the reader is left to wonder what, if anything, can be trusted.

As Kate Mitchell argues, the past is here "re-membered" (Mitchell 2010: 7), that is, reconstructed, reimagined around the three fictional author-figures. The questions of the boundaries between fiction and reality as well as the existence of such a notion as literary greatness are raised, culminating in an interrogation of the reliability of the written word.

1. Fictionalising Reality

As Ashenden looks back on his Victorian childhood, he tries to impart what life was like in a small Kentish seaside town at the time, a reminiscence drawn from Maugham's own experience, for he was orphaned at the age of ten and sent to live with his uncle, the vicar of Whitstable, which becomes Blackstable in the novel. Thus, the Victorian past is re-membered as it was perceived by a boy of fifteen. Humour is conveyed through the discrepancy between the adult's appreciation of society and the exaggerated vision of a teenager, which the narrator plays upon. For instance, when he dwells upon the idiosyncrasies of rural people, Ashenden compares the past and his present forty years later in the way omniscient narrators occasionally do in neo-Victorian novels, when they look back on the Victorian period from their own contemporary perspective:

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> The dullness of their lives was almost incredible. […] They were vain, pig-headed, and odd. It was a life that perhaps formed queer characters; people were not so like one another as now and they acquired a small celebrity by their own idiosyncrasies, but they were not easy to get on with. It may be that we are flippant and careless, but we accept one another without the old suspicion; our manners, rough and ready, are kindly; we are more prepared to give and take and we are not so crabbed. (Maugham 2000: 33)

The passage abounds in derogatory terms, first concerning the people in his youth ("dullness", "vain, pig-headed, and odd"), and later those of his adulthood ("flippant and careless", "rough"). Thus, despite the comparative forms that give the upper hand to his contemporaries, Maugham does not totally absolve them from all vices. Besides – but this may be anticipating postmodernist and existentialist concerns – the growing similarity between the population may be viewed as a loss of individuality. However, with self-derision, Ashenden includes himself in that outmoded priggishness, since he remarks several times on his attitude of superiority towards Driffield, the son of a bailiff (see Maugham 2000: 63) or Lord George, a coal merchant. Class-consciousness is also insisted on through the stress laid on the dropping of aitches by members of the lower classes, such as the maid, Mary-Ann. In point of fact, one gets the impression that what the narrator offers us is a caricature of Victorian society rather than a truthful representation. Nonetheless, even in a caricature, only what is perceptible can be exaggerated.

However, when the text touches upon Rosie Driffield's character, the centre of attention of the novel, the humorous tone is dropped. Although notably unfaithful to her husband and a former barmaid, Rosie is nonetheless depicted as a muse to Driffield and to her many lovers, including the narrator himself, who devotes his story to her. Her sexual liberation and honesty are extolled by the narrator even while her character is vilified by the others. She was based on the actress Sue Jones, whom Maugham met in 1906 and with whom he had a liaison for seven years, as Nicholas Shakespeare explains in his 2000 introduction to the novel. Sue Jones was "unembarrassable, openly and innocently sexual, unstifled by respectability or class" (Shakespeare 2000: xv) and had many lovers among the writer's friends. As Maugham tells

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us in his preface, he was haunted by her to the point of wanting to recreate her in fiction, which tends to concur with the idea that she was a sort of muse (Maugham 2000: 1).

Reality is thus the basis for the fictional world for Maugham, who acknowledges as much in *The Summing Up*:

> Sometimes an experience I have had has served as a theme […]; more often I have taken persons with whom I have been slightly or intimately acquainted and used them as the foundation for characters of my imagination. Fact and fiction are so intermingled in my work that now, looking back on it, I can hardly distinguish one from the other. (Maugham 1938: 1)

His characters are based on real-life persons, and more often than not on himself. In the preface, Maugham also claims that he had more to say on his past than he did in *Of Human Bondage*, so that he abandoned the character of Philip Carey in order to use a first-person narrator in *Cakes and Ale* (Maugham 2000: 2). Indeed, the autobiographical references are numerous, starting with the circumstances of his childhood in Whitstable and his years as a medical student in London.

But far from Ashenden being the only character based on himself, the two other male protagonists also draw partly from his own personality. As he states in the preface, Alroy Kear "was a composite portrait: I took […] a great deal from myself. […] For all the characters that we create are but copies of ourselves" (Maugham 2000: 3). R. Barton Palmer expands on this, arguing that both Kear and Driffield were, to a certain extent, based on Maugham, on top of being caricatures of Hardy and Walpole, for, "like Kear, Maugham at the time was conscious of his public and anxious to increase both his reputation and the sale of his books" (Palmer 1981: 57). Moreover, Palmer adds,

> [i]f Kear suggests what Maugham was at the time, Edward Driffield suggests what he imagined he might become. A novelist of modest talents who becomes the grand old man of British letters through the promotion of others and, chiefly, through his longevity. (Palmer 1981: 57)

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Therefore, all the novelist-characters represent some part of Maugham's own personality. This concurs with Kohlke and Gutleben's perception of the hybridity of the biofictional character:

> the biofictional subject is always an amalgam of archive and imagination, in part drawn from another's life and in part from the writer's own. Hence biofictional representation and remediation always produces a hybrid, composite, historical Self-and-Other. (Kohlke and Gutleben 2020: 7)

The central character in the novel whose biography is to be written is indeed a hybrid character, composed of Maugham's own personality, but also Thomas Hardy's.

Notwithstanding the author's initial denial, Driffield is undeniably mostly based on the Victorian writer. As J. B. Priestley states in his review of the book,

> [i]f Maugham did not intend his readers to be reminded of Hardy, then he acted with strange stupidity, (and a less stupid man than Somerset Maugham never set pen to paper) when he set to work to create the figure of Edward Driffield. There are far too many coincidences of fact. (Priestley 1987: 266)

Driffield's riding a bicycle in the English countryside, dressed in knickerbockers, his writing about lower-class characters, his melodramatic plots, the argument over his burial in Westminster Abbey, all of these point to the novelist who had died two years before. However, in his own review, Evelyn Waugh defends Maugham by emphasising the fact that there are more differences than resemblances in the character: "to anyone who knows the details of Hardy's life, it will be immediately apparent that the dissimilarities tend to outweigh any apparent similarities" (Waugh 1987: 188). Robert Calder contends, as Maugham himself had, that elements from Driffield's life can be taken from the lives of other writers, like Joseph Conrad and his running away to sea or H. G. Wells and his writing about Kent (Calder 1973: 174). Maugham himself indicates George Meredith and Anatole France as further influences in the preface. Therefore, Driffield is a composite

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character, made up of elements from fiction and reality, through which the reader has to navigate.

This confusion is further enhanced by Driffield's representation through other characters. Calder indicates that "the portrait of Driffield is diffused by narrative technique; since he is only seen second- or third-hand, there is an ambiguity and haziness about his character which tends to blur the outlines" (Calder 1973: 174). Indeed, one may argue that the description of the man depends on who is speaking about him. Ashenden's view is that of a boy, then of a young man. Kear and his second wife are intent on painting an advantageous portrait of him as a talented writer, while his first wife Rosie reveals an inadequate husband and a wounded father.

In 1950, Maugham finally admitted having taken Walpole as a model for Kear. He explains the process of creation of a character thus:

> No author can create a character out of nothing. He must have a model to give him a starting point; but then his imagination builds him up, adding a trait here, a trait there, which his model did not possess, and when he has finished with him, the complete character he presents to the reader has little in him of the person who had offered the first suggestion. (Maugham qtd. in Calder 1973: 178)[1]

If Maugham here confirms the necessity of having a real-life source, he also contends that the character loses its reality to become entirely fictional by the end of the creation. This equates with Kohlke and Gutleben's idea that "[b]iofiction becomes as much an *undoing* as a recreation of the subject" (Kohlke and Gutleben 2020: 34, original emphasis). Kear is therefore neither a true portrait of Walpole nor a completely fictional character, but Walpole's reaction when it was published – he supposedly suffered sleeplessness and crying fits on first reading the novel (Shakespeare 2000: xii) – tends to prove that the original source was not completely erased in the recreation.

Moreover, one gets the impression that the recollections of Driffield appertaining to Hardy's life are drawn more from photos or what is public knowledge of the man than from any real intimacy with the author. For instance, Driffield's description corresponds to a photo showing Hardy wearing knickerbockers and with his bicycle, while that of Ashenden and Driffield's meeting in the old man's house some six years before corresponds

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to the paintings and pictures of Hardy's later years and the depiction of such a visit by the poet Siegfried Sassoon according to Shakespeare (Shakespeare 2000: x). This is consistent with the narrator's confusion about the reality of memories, as Ashenden indicates:

> One thing that surprised me was that even at that far distance I could remember distinctly what people looked like […] but only with vagueness what they wore. […] [I]f I recalled it at all it was not from life but from pictures and photographs that I had seen much later. (Maugham 2000: 96)

The passage highlights inconsistencies in the memorial process ("I could remember distinctly" vs. "with vagueness"; "if I recalled it at all") and in the perception of reality ("not from life but from pictures"). In much the same way, when he tries to remember Rosie as she was in London, Ashenden admits that he remembers Rosie not as he had seen her but as Hillier had painted her (Maugham 2000: 132). Once again, real life is opposed to artistic recreation, which creates a *mise en abyme*, and art dominates reality.

In fact, the narrator directly addresses the question of how memory functions in the novel. His reminiscences offer a structure for the novel, which is composed of flashbacks. At different stages in the novel, it may be an atmosphere, a smell, or a discussion that triggers his mind to wander back into the past and takes the reader with him. Yet, the endless repetitions of "I do not know" when considering the society of past time points to the impossibility of remembering or knowing the past for certain, as the postmodernists have been keen on asserting. Although the recollection acquires a different reality from that of the present, the narrator insists that it is, nonetheless, distinctly delineated, like "a scene in a play" or "a landscape painted in oils" (Maugham 2000: 32). The metaphor of the theatrical world points to the fictionalising of the past, while the allusion to painting tends to evoke the fixedness of the recollection. Such artistic comparisons imply that the past is idealised, which questions the authenticity – or objectivity – of the recollection.

Thus, there is more than a fictionalised version of Hardy at stake. The past assessed here relates to the literary world at the turn of the century, to consider how a writer may be recognised as a "Grand old man of English letters" in spite of his second-rate prose. Although allegedly the best paid

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writer of the 1930s, Maugham was never considered as one of the grand names of literature because of the simplicity of his style. He was aware of this as, in *The Summing Up*, he writes: "In my twenties the critics said I was brutal, in my thirties they said I was flippant, in my forties they said I was cynical, in my fifties they said I was competent, and now in my sixties they say I am superficial" (Maugham 1938: 152). The isocolon strikes a note of irony while the sentence structure in itself emphasises the opposition between "they" and "I", marking Maugham's contempt for the critics. This may be a reason why, in the novel, his narrator denigrates beauty, claiming that "beauty is a bit of a bore" (Maugham 2000: 93). Yet he may have hoped to become, due to longevity, a Driffield in his own time. Besides, Palmer remarks that

> [t]he conflict between Willie Ashenden, the artist committed to truth who scorns social hypocrisy, and Alroy Kear, the writer who assiduously and unscrupulously pursues popularity, reflects the struggle in Maugham's own self. (Palmer 1981: 62)

As a result, under its humorous tone, the novel conducts a serious investigation into authors' reputations and their literary worth.

2. Calling Literary Greatness into Question

The controversy over Hugh Walpole and Thomas Hardy has tended to obscure the aim of the novel, which is to satirise the literary world and its artificiality. Maugham's first attack is on the type represented by Alroy Kear, who gains his reputation from lecturing about other authors and through self-promotion. As Ashenden notes: "I could think of no one among my contemporaries who had achieved so considerable a position on so little talent" (Maugham 2000: 9). Moreover, Ashenden praises the versatility of Kear's opinions, which always coincided to those *en vogue* at the time (Maugham 2000: 16), while the narrator himself poses as his opposite and denounces the tendency of people to follow the general critical opinion. He thus explains that when he was a boy, he found Thomas Carlyle or George Meredith unreadable but persuaded himself that he should like them, and now they are not valued anymore. On the contrary, what he liked by instinct when he was young, he still likes forty years later, as do the critics (Maugham 2000: 28). Therefore, when he says that he did not like Driffield's books, except for

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The Cup of Life – the only one he would have liked to have written himself – he questions Kear's assumption that Driffield was and continues to be acclaimed after his death as "one of the greatest novelists of our day. The last of the Victorians. He was an enormous figure. His novels have as good a chance of surviving as any that have been written in the last hundred years" (Maugham 2000: 26). Almost immediately, Ashenden qualifies and contests this assumption, since fame can be ephemeral (Maugham 2000: 26). The point here is not to criticise Thomas Hardy's worth as some have believed (see Maugham 2000: ix), but to shed light on the inauthenticity of the critics' valuation of a work.

Maugham therefore needed to introduce a writer who was neither mediocre nor a genius – indeed, though he admits to finding Driffield's novels boring, he praises their sincerity and their life-like quality (see Maugham 2000: 91) – in order to expose the process of creation of a "Grand Old Man of Letters". Leslie Marchand thus observes in the *New York Times*:

> Driffield is only the peg upon which the author hangs his cloak of mordant irony while depicting the rise of a literary personality. Mr Maugham's mellowed cynicism has almost allied itself with humour in his daring exposure of the manner in which mediocrity becomes crowned as genius. (Marchand 1987: 190)

Marchand underlines the main subject of the novel and illustrates his point by alluding to the following paragraph, which satirises the importance of longevity in the achievement of fame:

> When he was a young fellow in the sixties […] his position in the world of letters was only respectable […]. He celebrated his seventieth birthday […] and it grew evident that there had lived among us all these years a great novelist and none of us had suspected it. […] At seventy-five everyone agreed that Edward Driffield had genius. At eighty he was the Grand Old Man of English Letters. This position he held till his death. (Maugham 2000: 95)

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The auxesis in the expressions qualifying the writer corresponds to the increase in age, and the hyperbolic terms are designed to mimic the inflated tone sometimes used by critics.

Yet the satire does not stop there. The publicity surrounding the writer's life is dwelt upon. Both Mrs Barton Trafford, a patroness of the arts, based upon Mrs Colvin, and Driffield's second wife Amy, are described as indefatigable promoters of the writer's career (Maugham 2000: 164). Trafford took him under her wings after his first wife's departure. Amy marries him and transforms him into a respectable writer who has the perfect look and house for his station in life. Moreover, even before his death, she ensures his posterity by taking notes about his past during their conversations. All these facts about Driffield's widow are usually brought to the fore during dialogue sections, and the narrator refrains from intervening, whereas he devotes whole sections of the novel to his reflections. Readers are therefore invited to form their own opinion. At one point, Kear describes the wonders of ingenuity Amy has had to develop to have everything changed in the house – which more resembles a museum than a home – especially Driffield's writing-desk, on which he had written his novels and to which he was attached (Maugham 2000: 178). One cannot but be struck by the irony: the lack of feelings is that of Driffield's wife, not Driffield's.

As for Trafford, the narrator speaks from his own reminiscences but insists on her kind intentions to such an extent that her hypocrisy is implied. Prior to her patronage of Driffield, she takes under her protection a young poet who is acclaimed for his first volume, makes him famous, makes him leave his wife, but when he is criticised for his later works, "she dropped him with infinite gentleness […] she dropped him with so much tact, with such sensibility, that Jasper Gibbons perhaps hardly knew he was dropped. But there was no doubt about it" (Maugham 2000: 127). The hyperboles concerning her kindness coupled with the adverbs "perhaps hardly", are designed to mimic the insincerity of the woman, while the passage from the active to the passive form of the verb "dropped" turns the attention away from her towards her protégé. The finality of the next sentence establishes a return to honesty and reality through its directness.

The artificiality of the literary world is also satirised by contrast. As Calder argues, "Mrs Barton Trafford is the perfect foil for Mrs Hudson, just as Amy Driffield is the foil for Rosie" (Calder 1973: 185). Indeed, the literary gatherings, which Ashenden joins on Saturday afternoons, are confronted

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with Mrs Hudson and her boarding house where Ashenden lived as a medical student. The landlady's genuine affection for her boarders creates a sharp contrast with the fake kindness of the literary set. In the same way, Rosie's honesty and sincerity, which sometimes shocked the young narrator's Victorian mind, is set in opposition to Amy Driffield's conventionality and desire to conceal the idiosyncrasies of her husband, even when he was alive.

Though well-known for giving such gatherings in the Villa Mauresque, Maugham himself recognises the necessity for the writer to keep in touch with reality. In *The Summing Up*, he admits:

> Ever since I left St. Thomas's Hospital I had lived with people who attached value to culture. I had come to think that there was nothing in the world more important than art. […] [O]n the surface my life was varied and exciting; but beneath it was narrow. […] Culture is a mask that hides [men's] faces. (Maugham 1938: 135)

The reflection on his own past life finds parallels in the novel, where the two worlds of culture and real life are presented.

The idea of a mask is also present, as readers witness the evolution of the character of Driffield. When Ashenden meets him as a young boy and the writer teaches him to ride a bicycle, the older man is very straightforward and natural, singing bawdy songs, speaking freely of his small jobs. But already in London, the narrator can discern "an invisible barrier that existed between him and the people he chaffed and joked with" (Maugham 2000: 150). A certain restraint has settled in. And finally, at their last meeting six years earlier, Driffield winks twice to acknowledge their former link, a wink which the others, including his second wife, fail to notice. This concurs with Maugham's own wonder at the way people entertain a passion for the celebrated, while

> [t]he celebrated develop a technique to deal with the person they come across. They show the world a mask, often an impressive one, but take care to conceal their real selves. They play the part that is expected from them and with practice learn to play it very well, but you are stupid if you think that this

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> public performance of theirs corresponds with the man within. (Maugham 1938: 5)

Driffield is the personification in the novel of what Maugham himself practiced in his life. Donna Rifkind sums up the aim of the novel thus: "Maugham's chief satirical objective in *Cakes and Ale* was to expose the absurdly wide margin between the public's fantasy of an exalted writer's life and the vulgar, even pathetic details of that writer's existence" (Rifkind 1990: 533). The fact that the narrator exaggerates the pathos relating to Driffield's late years and the tragedy he lived through only enhances this discrepancy between public and private life.

Yet it comes at a price to the writer's works for the integration of Driffield into the literary world comes at the cost of his talent. His best novels are written in his youth, culminating with *The Cup of Life*, which he publishes shortly before Rosie leaves him, and are based on a terrible event in his own life, as we learn at the end of the novel. As he becomes increasingly estranged from real life, his novels lose their vividness of description and he finally ceases to write altogether, the irony being that the less he writes the more his reputation increases. All those events that made Driffield a good writer are to be expurgated from his official biography.

3. Questioning the Reliability of the Written Word

As Ashenden's uncle and aunt, Mr Galloway and Mrs Hayforth, discuss Driffield's novels and its lower-class characters, Mrs Hayforth exclaims, "We all know that there are coarse and wicked and vicious people in the world, but I don't see what good it does to write about them" (Maugham 2000: 80-81). This sets the tone and to some extent justifies Mrs Driffield's endeavour to write her husband's biography according to conventional standards. This sanitising of his life therefore interrogates the truthfulness of biographies. As a matter of fact, Maugham himself destroyed all his personal letters and unpublished manuscripts and made a provision in his will that no official biography should be authorised. What he perhaps feared most was the revelation of his homosexuality. In the same way, Kear explains that he intends to write "a sort of intimate life, with a lot of those little details that make people feel warm inside" (Maugham 2000: 98). Yet Kear cannot speak overtly of Driffield's lack of hygiene or his going to the pub to talk to lower-class people. Therefore, he has to excise the biography to make it conform to

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the public notions of a great writer: "I don't think that side of him was the most significant. I don't want to say anything that's untrue, but I do think there's a certain amount that's better left unsaid" (Maugham 2000: 104). This passage is an epitome of euphemistic language, which betrays the duplicity of the speaker. What Kear proposes to offer the readers is no more than a rewriting of Driffield's life that amounts to biofiction, if one adheres to the etymology of the compound word.

However, Rosie Driffield complicates matters in this rewriting, for Kear admits that Driffield wrote his best novels when he was married to her. As Amy insists that Rosie exerted a bad influence on him, Kear will have to resort to subtle allusions rather than speak the truth about the writer's first wife. Here fiction meets reality, as Rifkind explains:

> That same year, 1928, [Florence Hardy] rushed into publication a first volume of the autobiography, changing Hardy's first-person narrative into the third person and claiming that the book was actually her own biography of her husband. […] [S]he deleted nearly all of her husband's affectionate references to his first wife, Emma, and made some lengthy additions of her own. (Rifkind 1990: 536)

Like Driffield's second wife, who wants to erase all traces of Rosie, Florence Hardy changed her husband's biography to suit her purposes. Maugham could not have been aware of this, since it only became public knowledge years later, but it proves the validity of the example he sets in his novel. Ironically, what Kear wanted to suppress from the biography becomes the main motive for writing *Cakes and Ale*. Indeed, Ashenden makes it clear that he is writing a novel, which is to be published. As such, it may enter the category of the neo-Victorian novel as defined by Heilmann and Llewellyn: "texts [which] must in some respect be *self-consciously engaged with the act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision concerning the Victorians*" (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 4, original emphasis). Indeed, one is led to rediscover the life of Driffield in the late-Victorian period *and* revise the account provided by his biographer and his second wife.

Metafictional passages also abound. Ashenden addresses the reader and establishes a relationship with him by making fun of himself, for instance when he writes: "The reader cannot have failed to observe that I accepted the

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conventions of my class as if they were the laws of Nature" (Maugham 2000: 87). The same applies to instances when he appeals to the reader to remember what he cannot have read: "The cultured reader of these pages will remember the leading article in the *Literary Supplement* of *The Times* which appeared at the moment of Driffield's death" (Maugham 2000: 91). In a self-reflexive passage reminiscent of Chapter Thirteen of John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969),[2] the narrator digresses upon the use of first-person narration and its drawbacks, appealing to the readers sympathy by presenting himself as "a plain damn fool" (Maugham 2000: 140). Once again, readers feel closer to the narrator as it seems to them that he is writing the complete truth, including self-deprecating passages, and the book can thus be contrasted with the official future biography of Driffield.

Moreover, as an author-figure, Ashenden digresses on the art of writing, often attacking the insubstantiality of words. His reading of works on the art of fiction tackles that very idea:

> I read *The Craft of Fiction* by Mr Percy Lubbock, from which I learned that the only way to write novels was like Henry James; […] then I read *The Structure of the Novel* by Mr Edwin Muir, from which I learned nothing at all. (Maugham 2000: 140)

The structure of the sentence, where the isocolon proves needless and only intensifies the idea of uselessness carried by the words, culminates with the revelation that Ashenden learned nothing at all, pointing to the emptiness of such works. On the contrary, he demonstrates his ability to use his art in a novel to convey meaning.

Besides, he adds that, as a novelist, he may not reveal everything about his characters, but just what he deems essential, and the reader is thus warned that he may not learn everything he wants (Maugham 2000: 140-141). This is exactly what he does with Driffield, and he admits as much at the end of the novel. Looking at photographs of the Victorian novelist, Ashenden muses upon the fact that what Driffield presented to the world was only a façade and that who he really was cannot be fathomed, nor rendered into words, and he ends on an ironical note:

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> I am conscious that in what I have written of him I have not presented a living man, standing on his feet, rounded with comprehensible motives and logical activities; I have not tried to: I am glad to leave that to the abler pen of Alroy Kear. (Maugham 2000: 180)

In this passage, Ashenden confesses that his presentation of Driffield is only partial, for two reasons. The first is that Driffield hid his real self behind a mask of conventions, and the real Driffield is certainly better described at the beginning, as we have seen. The second reason is that, the novel being a first-person narrative, the presentation of the characters can only be partial, because the narrator cannot enter their thoughts. Driffield, being dead, is only perceived through reminiscences and the biased descriptions of his friends and relations. Yet, when Ashenden chats with the owner of the pub to which Driffield used to escape, the landlord's recollection differs strikingly from that of the Victorian writer's widow:

> He was a funny old fellow. No side, you know; they tell me they thought a rare lot of him in London, and when he died the papers were full of him; but you'd never have known it to talk to him. He might have been just nobody, like you and me. (Maugham 2000: 170).

The bartender opposes the vision given to the world represented by "they" and "the papers" with what Driffield was in real life: "nobody". The simile "like you and me" adds a touch of humour, since the narrator is included and his own stature is thus also debunked.

Finally, as an autodiegetic narrator, Ashenden repeatedly chooses what to tell or not. Yet he does not hide this fact from the reader, as when he prefers to state bluntly that Kear was an unscrupulous man rather than elaborating, because

> it would take so long to put the matter more delicately, and would need so subtle an adjustment of hints, half-tones, and allusions, playful or tender, that such being at bottom the fact, I think it as well to leave it at that. (Maugham 2000: 15)

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By denying the use of such rhetorical elements as Alroy Kear employs – the words "delicately", "subtle", "allusions" are those the reader will find later in the novel to describe the intended biography – the narrator positions himself as the opposite of Kear and therefore the purveyor of honest and direct facts. But he misleads the reader in some way, for, as the blatant irony underlying some descriptive passages proves, he is also capable of practicing double entendre. Besides, one cannot be sure of what he tells and to what extent he tells the truth, since he keeps information to himself and only releases it when he chooses, keeping the reader on tenterhooks. Evelyn Waugh greatly admired this aspect of Maugham's narrator in his review: "he is a master for creating the appetite for information, of withholding it until the right moment, and then providing it surprisingly" (Waugh 1987: 189). Indeed, the opening of the last chapter makes the reader wonder to what extent Ashenden has chosen to reveal his recollections in full:

> I mused upon what I should say. Do they not tell us that style is the art of omission? If that is so I should certainly write a very pretty piece, and it seemed almost a pity that Roy should use it only as material. I chuckled when I reflected what a bombshell I could throw if I chose. […] They thought Rosie was dead; they erred; Rosie was very much alive. (Maugham 2000: 184)

This self-reflexive passage is focused on the narrator's musing on his own writing. The "they" of the rhetorical question is derogatory and recalls the books on the art of writing discussed previously. But this is also a game with the reader as he delays the revelation and increases the tension with hyperboles such as "a very pretty piece" or "a bombshell". The culmination comes all the starker, and the contrast dead vs. alive is established in the parallel structure of the last sentence.

The last chapter is then devoted to Ashenden and Rosie's encounter in Yonkers, New York, where a now fat and powdered Rosie finally discloses the real-life event that lay behind *The Cup of Life*, proving that, in the end, a work of fiction may be more reliable than a biography to get to know an author. This was certainly a point that Maugham wanted to make for he acknowledges in *The Summing Up*: "I have put the whole of my life into my books […]. There are few subjects within the compass of my interests that I

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have not lightly, or seriously touched upon" (Maugham 1938: 6). Indeed, he concludes the novel by dwelling upon the advantage of the novelist over any other profession in being able to pour his thoughts and emotions out on paper, arranging them into a story, so as to exorcise them. Therein lies his freedom (see Maugham 2000: 195-196).

Thus, the reader is invited to read in this same novel the thoughts and emotions of Maugham himself, and as Palmer states, the text is more authentic because of that: "*Cakes and Ale*, like *Of Human Bondage*, […] avoids inauthenticity because it draws on Maugham's experience" (Palmer 1981: 56). Like Driffield who exorcises the loss of his child through *The Cup of Life*, Maugham may be purging his misgivings about the literary world through *Cakes and Ale*.

4. Conclusion: Truth behind Fiction

The reader has been warned on several occasions not to confuse fiction and reality, for as a young boy, Ashenden tends to believe that life was what he read (see Maugham 2000: 61). He even prefers to believe in fiction since fiction constitutes a refuge: "She was not at all the type of the wicked woman I had read of in novels. […] I came to the conclusion that what Mary-Ann had told me was a pack of lies" (Maugham 2000: 65). Mary-Ann happens to be right, however, though to the end, Ashenden defends Rosie. She may have been promiscuous, but she remains more sincere and authentic than all the other characters who live a life of appearance.

Thus, through his use of three authorial figures in the novel, Maugham raises a whole set of questions about the authenticity of the writer's life and art. More than revelations about fictitious or real-life writers, however, it seems that what the novel shows is who the real Maugham was. At least, this is what is intimated at the end of the novel. Indeed, one can find most of the themes alluded to in a light and humorous manner in the novel in his autobiographical work *The Summing Up* as well. Whatever the stir the novel caused upon publication, because of the obvious links to real-life writers, Mrs Hudson eventually sums up the aim of the satire behind its didacticism: "Well, it would be a bad world if you didn't get a good laugh now and then" (Maugham 2000: 115).

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Notes

1. Calder here quotes from his own preface to the Modern Library edition of *Cakes and Ale* (1950).
2. Although the narrator does not discuss the use of first-person narrative, he apostrophises the reader and admits he has been writing in the manner of a Victorian omniscient narrator.

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